

First Person Reviewer

A collage artist's take
on being part of a
works-on-paper
exhibition

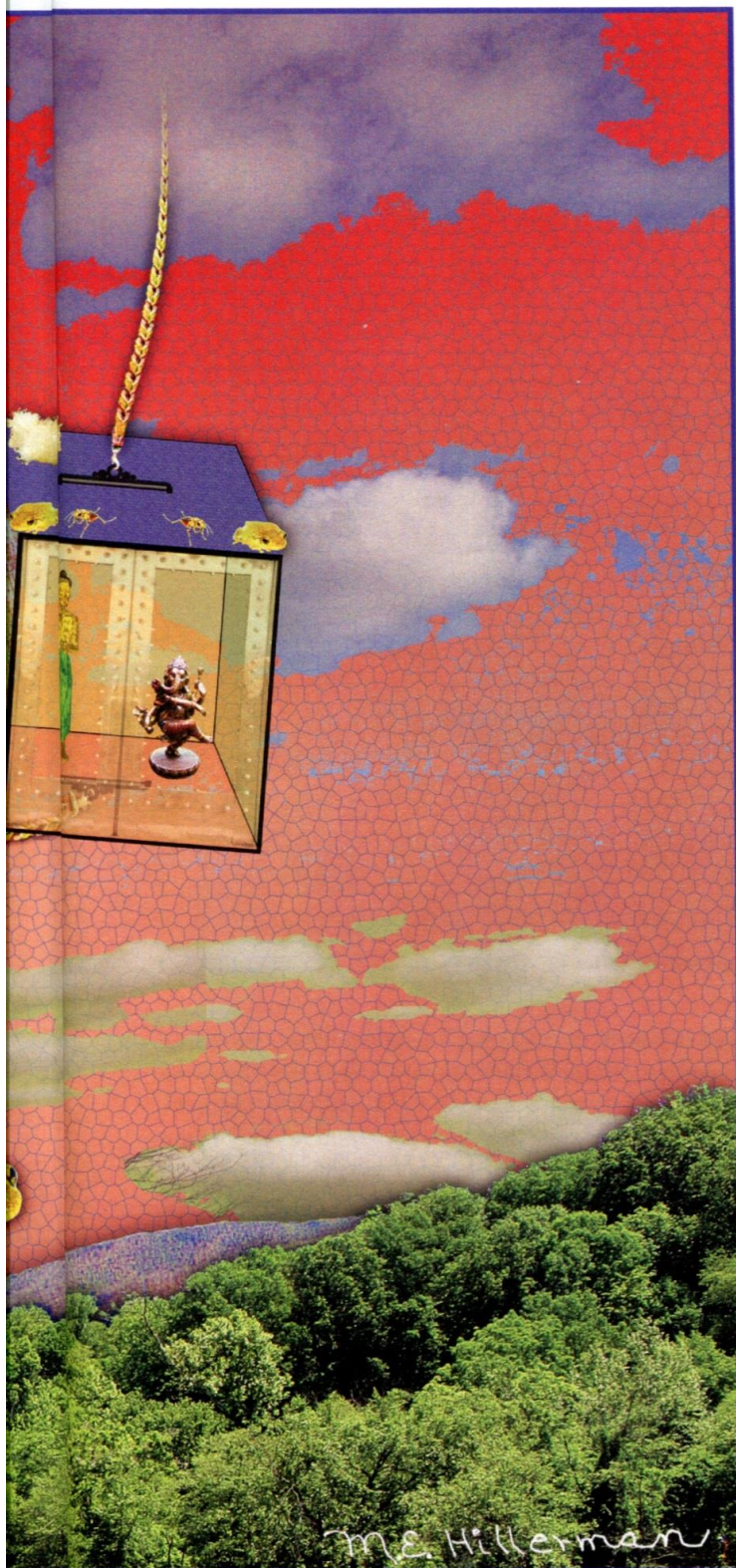
Paper Works
Upstream Gallery
Dobbs Ferry, New York
June 27 – July 28, 2013

by Laura Tringali Holmes

I came across the call for Upstream Gallery's first ever Paper Works show, a juried exhibition, in an online arts list and answered it for two reasons. First was the gallery location. Upstream is in one of New York City's wealthiest suburbs, and while my small works have moved with various degrees of briskness at local galleries and art fairs, my larger décollaged works can still be a challenging sell, especially since I now charge what I consider a fair price. Venues that can draw a diverse constituency are therefore appealing. Adding to the attraction, Upstream is an hour's drive from my home. Any juried exhibition is a business gamble, but if I'm going

to come out in the red, I like to contain bleeding at the front end, which includes keeping an eye on the gas tank. An enlightened jury-fee structure was the second reason

Living in My Box
by Michael Hillerman
17"x22"
photographs &
fabricated digital
objects
2013





I was drawn to Upstream's call. Upstream's policy is to charge a hanging fee on work that makes it through the jury pool, but the act of pool-swimming itself is free. On principle, I now avoid "pay to play" calls, where the check is cashed whether or not the work is chosen. While Upstream is a cooperative gallery, meaning it's managed and staffed by member artists, this exhibition was for non-members only, conceived by the curators to extend the gallery's scope and broaden its outreach into the community. Because the call for the show specifically welcomed collage along with the usual suspects of printmaking and drawing, I decided it could be a good fit for my work. When I found out that four of my six submissions were accepted for exhibition, I happily came on board.

I arrived at the gallery early on receiving day, but the action was already energetic. After being accepted, I

had emailed the curators about my desire to document my gallery experience, and they kindly gave me carte blanche to hang around and watch the proceedings. Collage seemed to be showing up in roughly the same proportions that it would eventually be exhibited—about one in every three frames. As self-defined not-necessarily-paper collage practitioners, curators Mitchell Goldberg (paper/plastic/glass) and Luis Perelman (metal) share a liberal interpretation of what constitutes collage. Their goal with the exhibition was to display the widest possible array of work, coming from all artistic traditions, using paper as the common denominator. In my experience, this attitude typically bodes well for a collage artist. I have participated in a few too many juried shows where curators think they want collage, but collage nonetheless winds up relegated to the outer perimeters or even the upper



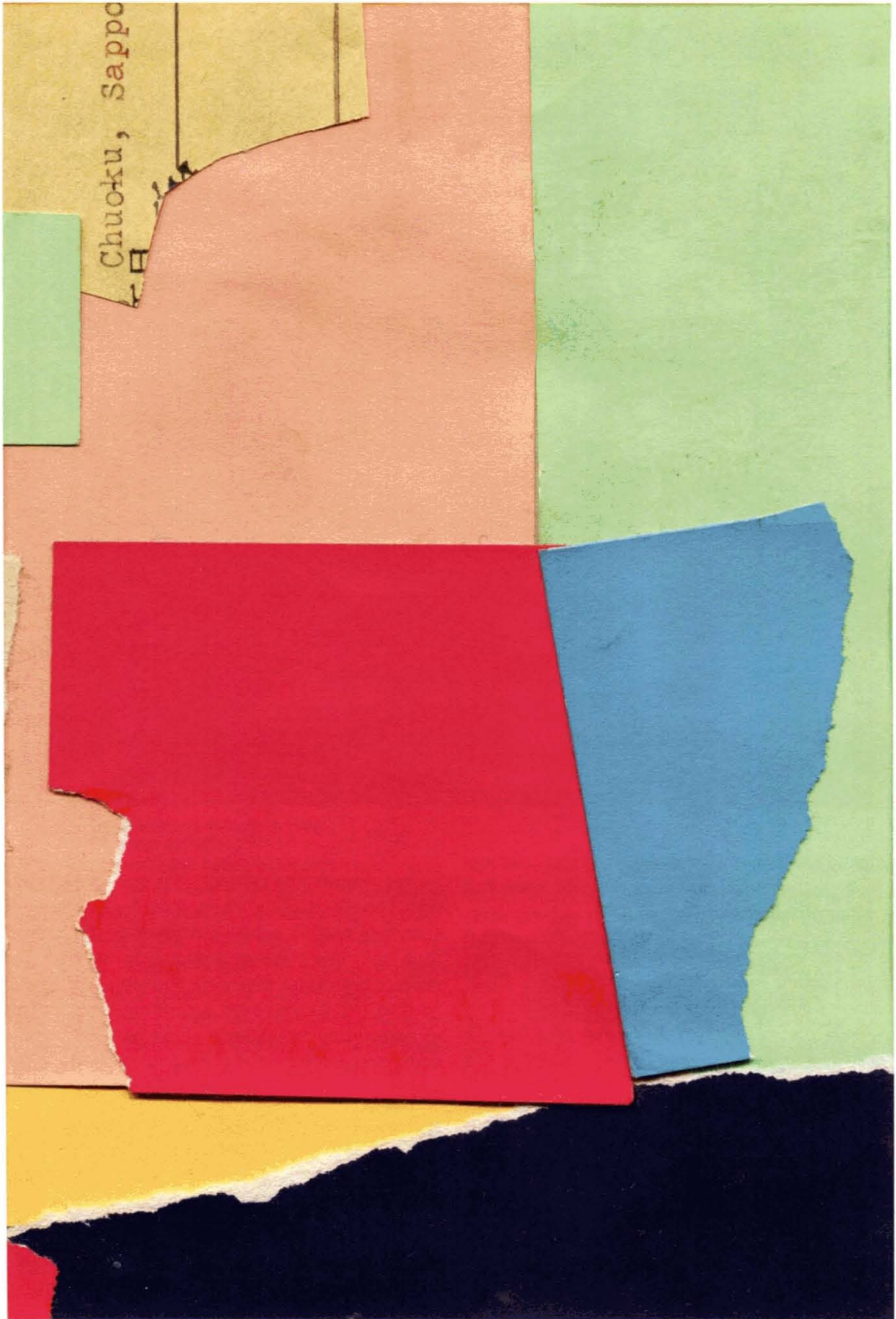
Birds of Paradise by Emma Zakarevicius
5.5"x15"; collage on paper; 2012

perimeters. I remember a small piece of mine that was hung so high that proper viewing required stilts, but that is a story for another day.

As the pieces came through the door during receiving, Goldberg and Perelman seemed optimistic about how collage would work with the drawings, prints, and mixed-media pieces that had also been accepted. To me, the array appeared challenging and, days later, my collagist's heart sank when I opened the reception evite to discover that a large drawing of a nude male torso was the image chosen to define the show. But a follow-up evite was more inclusive: Of the twelve images, six featured collage, including one of my pieces. And at the opening reception, I found myself delighted both by the vitality of the collage styles represented and the thoughtful way in which the work was hung, with attention paid to texture and context as well as, at times,

expressiveness and content. The opening was packed, with people shuffling along shoulder to shoulder, the sequence of work seeming to draw people in a logical loop from one piece or grouping to the next. Did the viewers even know they were looking at collage? It was hard to tell. I know from occasional ventures to within eavesdropping distance of my own work that most comments addressed the images, not technique. This would turn out to have interesting repercussions later.

But from a collagist's viewpoint, I found plenty to admire in both image and technique. I especially liked Cheryl Dawdy's collages, which I read both as primary landscape forms but also as a metaphor for the building blocks of life. Her rough-edged taking-apart and putting-back-together layering was suggestive of lives being lived, of the physical process of reconstructing



one's personal landscape. By contrast, Emma Zakarevicius's cool-headed diptych landscapes reminded me of snapshots of scenery as it might be viewed through the window of a train or while looking up at a night sky while on a walk. But her fragmentations, while furious, didn't overwhelm. I was also enchanted by the wide-view but cunningly intimate peep-hole portraits of Christopher E. Manning, who conjures little worlds from vignettes of appropriated imagery inset into discarded Prang watercolor holders (which Manning collages and distresses with tea and a toaster oven). When I spoke to Manning about the mystery inherent in his work, he laughingly shared that he was inspired by television game shows..."you know...like...what's behind door number 3?"

Also mysterious, and as compelling in their heartbreaking surreal flatness as Manning's works are in their textural lushness, were Michael Hillerman's digital dreamscapes. I found the contrast between nature's laws and Hillerman's hyper-realistic environments—influenced by

Hillerman's studies of Jungian archetypes, Siddha yoga, and quantum physics—a thought-provoking, if uneasy, catalyst for contemplation. In other surreal explorations, Debra Friedkin, a self-described metaphysicist, contrasted organic and geometric forms, tempered by lyrical color choices and overlaid with paint for movement and unity. In between the seamless digital construction and the built-up painted surfaces were the eccentric, exquisitely craft-

ed collages of David Barnett, whose work is populated with believable, if other worldly, figures. Relying on visual balance rather than clever juxtapositions (we enjoyed a lively discussion about "distraction" in collage), Barnett's detailed worlds are ripe with reference while deliberately downplaying the shadowlines and layerings usually associated with collage. By contrast, my own work, just down the wall from Barnett's, revels in layers, textures, and abrasions as it explores life in the family and society, often using transparent elements to focus viewers' attention on particular associations.

It was with great eagerness that I returned to the gallery a month after the opening to learn what collage had sold. Unfortunately, none of the approximately 30 collages had been purchased during the show's duration. Looking around for the iconic red "sold" dots, it didn't look like the non-collaged work had sold either. But I have long ago discovered that on-site sales alone don't quantify success. From my perspective, I generated leads, forged new connections, came away invigorated and inspired, and, a week later, sold two pieces from my website. While the collages purchased had not been on display at Upstream, the collector was intrigued enough by what he saw there to follow up afterward with questions and, ultimately, a purchase. There is much to be said for exhibitions like Paper Works, which advance a clear, unambiguous statement about not only the capacity of the collage medium to take diverse forms, but its ability to represent in a potent and vital manner how we envision the world around us and our places within it.

(image left)
Turning the Corner
by Cheryl Dawdy
6"x4"

cut and torn, painted pieces of
pantone colored paper; part of
an envelope
2012

(image below)
Clouds
from the "Windows" series
by Christopher E. Manning
2.25"x6.5"
collage on paper
2009-2012

