The versatile but labor-intensive activity of making paper by hand, as the seven artists in Pulped Under Pressure know all too well, begins with wet pulp that is stirred, formed, drained, and then pressed to remove excess water from the fibers before drying the finished product. While the word “pressure” in the exhibition’s title recalls this penultimate step, more importantly it alludes to the ways in which these practitioners adopt hand papermaking to convey pressing concerns beyond functional considerations, often using the medium as an activist tool for social engagement. In their art, process itself has inherent value, launched as it is by purposeful decisions to reuse unwanted scrap materials or to maximize artist-grown fibers and dyes, which bring into play environmental issues such as sustainability, plant stewardship, and biological diversity. Process also accrues meaning through its connection to the cultural contexts of traditional handicraft that, when highlighted here, foregrounds overlooked narratives focused on women and their undervalued labor. The artists in this exhibition physically embed traces of these histories in the fibers of their work and, in so doing, bolster the central role of paper to record and preserve.

Julia Goodman’s body of work, Rag Sorters, was produced during a 2013 residency at the San Francisco waste-disposal company, Recology (aka The Dump), whose invitation to artists to creatively reuse discarded materials evokes the impact on other municipalities of Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s pioneering work as artist-in-residence at the New York Department of Sanitation. Perhaps in response to the overabundance of refuse with which one assumes she was confronted, Goodman devised a project that instead addressed the historical theme of scarcity, characteristic of an earlier era when rags were a rare, and thus prized commodity for paper production. Making paper pulp onsite from fabric scavenged at The Dump, she conceived the multipart Rag Sorters (1964), the final work in this chronological series, as a tribute to the now forgotten local women who, up until that year, sorted various fabrics handed over to them by the city’s garbage men. Goodman cast seven of their names in shallow relief, having carved wood molds in which to pour her paper pulp. These names—Rita Bianchi, Guissipina Calagri, and Emma Muzio, for example—also summon another history, that of San Francisco’s changing ethnic makeup, shaped by the influx of Italian immigrants a century ago.

Having come of age as artists at a time when social practice was firmly taking hold in educational institutions and within the arts at large, several participants in this show make collaboration through participatory formats an essential part of their practice. For Melissa Potter, associate professor in the Book and Paper Arts program at Columbia College Chicago, and MFA alumna Maggie Puckett, the Papermaker’s Garden on the college’s campus has provided fertile territory for developing initiatives that merge gardening, papermaking, community engagement, creative pedagogy, local history, and a feminist perspective. With Seeds InService, their impressive papermaking project, Potter and Puckett not only grow plants whose fibers provide raw material for a range of artworks and papermaking activities, including onsite workshops for the public; they also propagate a form of environmental activism in themed gardens, undertaken in partnership with heirloom seed banks, where the selection of plantings each season addresses...
such critical topics as women’s health and agricultural traditions in Mexico, Bosnia, and Syria endangered by wartime conflict.

Dispersal of the garden’s seeds and message occurs through homegrown paper packets, printed with texts relaying the historical and political context of each corresponding crop, along with care instructions and recipes. These seed packets also introduce us to the obscure histories of immigrant women who, as prostitutes and low-wage workers, earlier occupied the garden’s site, once the center of Chicago’s vice district. Conducted at the city’s historic Hull-House, Potter’s research on this subject and early 20th-century attitudes toward race, class, and ethnicity also informed her collaborative performance, *Food, Sex & Death*. Documents archived at Hull-House, the famous settlement house co-founded in 1889 by social reformer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Addams, likewise inspired Puckett’s accordion book, *Biological Diversity for All*, which serves as a carefully crafted, handmade-paper container for seeds representing the ethnic and racial diversity of the area during this period. By integrating artmaking with a focus on education, social engagement, and sustainable food practices, Potter and Puckett continue to cultivate a vision advanced by Addams that regards these activities as significant ingredients in promoting democratic, self-determining communities.

“Art as action” is how Filipina-American artist Trisha Oralie Martin describes her various community-based artmaking activities, which typically address issues of local concern.* Her focus on participatory projects shares an ethos encapsulated by the Tagalog term, *kapwa*, often translated as “togetherness” or “fellow being.” In a mutually beneficial exchange over a month in 2011, Martin worked with Hardin ng Kalikasan, a self-reliant women’s papermaking cooperative in the Filipino province of Quezon, whose members harvest and process into paper abaca, cogon grass, paper mulberry, and coconut husks, also making natural dyes from tree barks and turmeric. Later, as a volunteer at Chicago’s Field Museum researching its extensive collection of Filipino artifacts, Martin initiated a monthly series that involved a process of co-curation and dialogue about the selected objects with community members. Experiences such as these, as well as a recent visit to Whang-od Oggay, who at 99 years old is considered the last Filipina tribal tattooist, have inspired Martin’s adoption of motifs specific to her heritage. In keeping with a cultural tradition that accords symbolic meaning to each design as a means of preserving stories in what was once an oral society, Martin revitalizes certain motifs in order to assemble her own personal narrative. They appear in patterned block prints on handmade paper, often arranged in large multi-sheet compositions, as seen in *Textures of the Philippines*.

Like the artists discussed above, self-described arts-activist Jillian Bruschera recognizes that the universal familiarity and ubiquity of paper make it an especially approachable and inexpensive material with which to engage a wider public, as both makers and viewers. In fact, Bruschera’s itinerant Mobile Mill, a pop-up studio with portable equipment, allows her to travel “the [hand-paper] making experience to any person in any place,” where she always relies on fabric and paper scraps collected onsite. Her admirable refusal to be hampered by limitations thematically infiltrates her series of handmade paper collages, *Rules for Grammar*, in which she also recycles language. The resulting wordplay constitutes one element in an evolving formal vocabulary, conceived by the artist as an autobiographical means of probing queer identity. Her focus on interrogating certain social constructs whose “rules” reinforce outdated binary concepts recalls the notorious “bathroom bills” currently on the legislative dockets in multiple states; much more than a matter of semantics, as Bruschera’s work underscores, these measures once again buttress a simplistic, harshly discriminatory view of gender identity. Of the many configurations her handmade paper bricks, *Wastemade*, can take, one version resembles a crumbling, unstable wall, suggestive to this viewer of her ongoing efforts to dismantle barriers of all sorts.
While Maggie Puckett’s abstract map-like handmade-paper triptych, *Psyche-Anthropocene Projection*, represents her intuitive, deeply felt response to the future consequences of climate change, Marilyn Propp creates images that speak directly to the environmental destruction wrought by human activity and disregard. If the content of her series of relief prints on handmade paper, *Notes from the Sea*, is any indication, the centuries-old status of the turtle as a symbol of longevity and endurance may soon become obsolete. In her densely-packed compositions, these creatures maneuver obstacle courses littered with machine parts and industrial debris, evidence of the cause of their endangered state. A veteran printmaker and painter who in 1990 co-founded Anchor Graphics, now part of the Center for Book, Paper and Print at Columbia College Chicago, Propp deftly renders the depth of watery layers through her command of material and process, also dragging her fingers through the pigmented paper pulp to create marks evocative of sea-life movement. Accommodation, she notes, is the result of this ungodly mashup, though one can’t help but imagine, when looking at her works, that accommodation could easily slide into increasing devastation and, finally, extinction.

As indicated earlier, *Seeds InService* hinges on the sequential stages of a seasonal cycle—grow, harvest, process, make—as does Julia Goodman’s production of beet papyrus, another mainstay of her art that, in this instance, entails collaboration with local organic farmers. Underscoring these transformative hands-on activities, which elevate craft over technology, Puckett and Potter make what they call “slow art.” The same description could be applied to VCUArts Professor Reni Gower’s papercuts and pulp paintings, not only in terms of the obsessive handwork required to create them, but also with regard to the response she hopes to elicit from viewers.

Gower’s background in nonrepresentational painting and her interest in various cultural traditions of sacred geometry coalesce in the intricate hand-cut paper patterns she began making in 2009, based on the interlocking designs of Celtic knots and those appearing on Islamic tiles. In her pulp-paper paintings, rather than using these stencils as templates around which to trace and cut out each piece, as she does in the *Papercut* series, Gower instead employs them to block the wet pigmented pulp as it is sprayed on the paper ground. By manipulating process in this way, she has produced two distinctive bodies of work; though closely related variations on a theme, each has its own particular, nuanced presence that compels and rewards close observation as the viewer instinctively compares them, moving from one work to the next. Over time and space, complex, repetitive geometric patterns have long offered a meditative pathway to understanding universal truths and, as an antidote to our busy outer lives, Gower intends to inspire a similarly contemplative state of mind.

Not to mention Melissa Potter’s *Craft Power: Tusheti Rugs* would be an unfortunate oversight. Potter’s international collaborations with ethnographers, activists, and artisans, supported by several Fulbright awards, have taken her to such far-flung destinations as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Venezuela, United Kingdom, and the Republic of Georgia. In an historic region of northeast Georgia, she worked with, and advocated for, women craft unions and traditional felt artisans. Her *Tusheti Rugs*, inspired by this experience, incorporate regional motifs associated with ancient Amazonian cults celebrating female power. Rendered with pulp painting on handmade paper, and embedded with electroluminescent EL wire, the two glowing works from the series included here are the exhibition’s totems.

*Quotations attributed to the artists derive from their respective websites.*

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