



Constructed Paper

Judy Pfaff's collages portray an untamed natural world full of surprise

MATT MORRIS // JUL 29, 2009

Judy Pfaff's current exhibition of large-scale collaged works and small prints seems to continue an abiding interest that Carl Solway Gallery has in highly accomplished, mid-career artists who favor abstract interpretations of nature through a variety of approaches.

Like Pat Steir, Lynda Benglis and Joan Snyder, who have all exhibited at Solway in the past year, Pfaff offers the best of both worlds through experimental uses of materials that are grounded in accessible references to nature and gardens.

Pfaff's *Constructed Paper* shows how she, now in her sixties, continues to create artworks full of fresh takes on the new art practices of our day. She has had a major impact on other artists through her many solo exhibitions in New York, where she lives and works, as well as projects across the world, including Brazil, Japan and a Venice Biennale. A 2004 MacArthur Fellow, Pfaff has also influenced generations as a professor and co-chair of the art department at New York's Bard College.

In *Constructed Paper*, most of the works accumulate dismembered pieces of paper, plastic, party streamers, crinkled twists of aluminum foil, artificial plants and dyed coffee filters into jumbled jungles of collage. All of the pieces are wall-bound shadow boxes full of abstract-expressionist sentiments and culled bits of nature and artifice.



Throughout her career, Pfaff has created installations concerned with the aesthetics of modern painting sensibilities yet sculpturally structured to engage the spaces in which they are presented. While these works might at first seem tame compared to the sprawling installations that Pfaff is best known for, the heavily layered realms of color, pattern, found

objects and broken-down imagery contained on the walls feel as if they might break out at any second.

During each visit I paid to the gallery, these works revealed entirely different personalities that emerged from their tattered layers. What on the first visit would strike me as a unanimously celebratory suite became streaked with an undeniable sense of melancholy during later viewings.

Works like “dust to dust” and “Living with Shade” are as much evocative of funeral processions and forest fires as they are windblown parades passing the viewer by. Twists of black aluminum foil practically drip across the otherwise bright green, orange and red compositions of flower and leaf patterns. These shadowy elements give way to actual bouquets of black flowers hung upside down in the cases, with their blossoms nearly dragging against the bottom of the frame.

Standing before “North Wind,” I gave pause to consider Pfaff’s methods of working with materials and image. Spindles of what is listed as “umbrella parts” roll across the front of the collage like blackened, static fireworks. By stripping away the fabric on the umbrellas, does Pfaff mean to imitate the destructions and disasters nature is prone to cause? More than just a destructive impulse, Pfaff strips objects like coffee filters and umbrellas of their original function to place them in an abstract visual territory that embraces different readings.

Overall, her collages are both passionate parties and probing inquiries into human experience.

Her accompanying prints use about as many techniques as possible to interplay little sparsely placed tree branches against playful patterns of dots. If the large pieces are fiery with emotion, the prints are graceful and tactful like the Japanese practice of ikebana flower arranging.

An abundance of perspectives peers out of Pfaff’s prints and collages, often with surprise twists and unexpected changes in mood, so that their overwhelming attention to beauty is accompanied by a risk-taking quality so often the hallmark of great work.

CONSTRUCTED PAPER continues through Aug. 15 at Carl Solway Gallery.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13016678/constructed-paper-review>