



**Material Matters:**  
Water, Pigment, and Light

*Material Matters: Water, Pigment, And Light*

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Essay by Tyler Starr ©2016

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Van Every/Smith Galleries

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DAVIDSON

THE VAN EVERY/SMITH GALLERIES

## Marked Atlases

by Tyler Starr

*Material Matters: Water, Pigment, and Light* highlights compelling works of art that take advantage of paper as a substrate. With this relatively humble material the participating artists produce surprising results through innovative manipulation of digital and analog processes. This exhibition also presents an opportunity to investigate installation strategies utilized by the artists to create networks of correlations within a body of work. The installations encourage viewers to participate in the further generation of associations and consideration of wider implications beyond the limits of the venue.

Constellation-like groupings deployed by the artists recall the surprise of encountering image results from Internet search engines. Along with this association come the controversies of the algorithms used by the search engines. These algorithms are inevitably skewed either by the nature of the programmers or by the search results' reflection of the idiosyncrasies of the masses

that generate the data being searched. Information today is sourced lightning-fast from multiple platforms with hyperlink-enabled stream-of-consciousness cross-referencing. Encountering this flow of data generates a sense of excitement as well as some dread as time evaporates within the *Wikipedia* of daily research. People now typically receive their news from a minimum of four devices. The devices in order of frequency of usage in the U.S. are: television, laptops, radio, paper newspapers or magazines, cell phones, and tablets.<sup>1</sup> Paper is still on the list after roughly 1900 years since it first became widely available.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, and Elisa Shearer, "Pathways to the News." Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/>

"How Americans Get their News." American Press Institute, March 17, 2014, <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/how-americans-get-news/>

The paper fragments composing the works in this exhibition speak to previous attempts at visualizing information and implying narratives through the use of images on paper such as Aby Warburg's notoriously enigmatic *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Warburg (1866–1929) was an iconoclastic art historian and theorist whose work has generated much recent interest for his pioneering opposition to humanistic portrayals of art. This once dominant art historical trope was a narrative of the supposed progress of *high art*, but Warburg offered a more ambiguous and mysterious consideration of art embedded within the messy context of visual culture in all its forms.

Late in his career, after suffering from a psychotic breakdown induced by his experiences in World War I, Warburg began a project presenting streams of visually encoded primal ideas weaving their way through the Renaissance into contemporary times. The incomplete project was left upon his death in the form of photographs showing 63 collage-like presentation boards of appropriated images that had been composed to accompany his orations. One of the working titles for his unfinished project was

Aby Warburg, *Picture Atlas Mnemosyne* (1928–29), Panel 79;  
Copyright: The Warburg Institute, London





*Mnemosyne: Series of Images for Investigation of the Function of Previously Stamped Classical Expressive Values in the Depiction of Life in Motion in European Renaissance Art.*

Panel 79 of the *Atlas*, for example, arranges a schematic of a 9th-century wooden chair for the Pope next to a photograph of a Japanese hara-kiri ceremony along with newspaper clippings of a golf star and the signing of the Locarno Treaties — all presented on equal footing as examples of a complex web of relationships that visually evidence pagan elements of the Eucharist. The placement and groupings of the clippings were used to imply relationships, with the audience filling in the gaps. This layered information, within its acknowledged political context, makes a reconstructive use of archives.

Similarly, the works in this exhibition speak both to the zeroing in and panning out of information encouraged by the current state of multimedia research, and the exploration of the physical properties of paper itself. Photographs posted on soldiers' blogs are used as source material in Selena Kimball's *Night Vision* series, which are then digitally output and collaged, puzzle-like, with

Shoshanna Weinberger, *Embryonic Afro-Stripes*, 2014, Ink and gouache on paper, 21.25 x 17.25 in., Image Courtesy of the Artist

tactile aluminum tacks and foam. Lavar Munroe's assemblage-based work combines his experiences growing up in the Bahamas with research into mythology and a critique of western representations of the exotic. Shoshanna Weinberger maintains a poetic open-endedness in the presentation of her calligraphic drawings, which explore the complexities of race, heritage, sexuality, and iconic portrayals of the human form throughout art history.

William Cordova has comparable concerns in his approach to archival sourcing of imagery for redress of overlooked or disregarded histories. The collage-like multimedia development of Cordova's projects constructs new histories by appropriating, subverting, and reconstituting references to music and film as well as incorporating anthropological fieldwork such as interviews and participant observation. In Nancy Baker's paper constructions, the accumulation of fragments to constitute a new body plays a central role. Baker utilizes an abstract vocabulary incised out of found commercial packaging and hand-painted paper to create bewildering compositions of complex layers, which she often assembles directly onto a venue's wall.

All of the aforementioned works are imbued with multifaceted experimentation. The various techniques (including photography,

collage, drawing, painting, and digital printing) are strategically manipulated so that the artists are often somewhat at the mercy of their chosen media. They purposefully introduce glitches into the process, ceding some control to the alchemical properties of the medium, before reassembling and editing those outcomes. Experimentation with materials and process extends into challenging optics and the light spectrum. Chris Duncan drapes fabric over skylights so that UV rays affect the delicate lightfastness of dyes, capturing traces of time, folds, and architectural structures. Liz Nielsen utilizes analog photo processing techniques and jerry-rigged darkrooms to develop images from negatives, themselves hand-constructed from color gels on glass. Matthew Brandt reintroduces landscape photographs into the environs from which they were taken, subjecting them to the mercy of environmental chemistry.

The bodies of work in this exhibition take advantage of the speed of light in multiple ways — ambiently, photographically, and digitally — as a means of creating systems of relationships and new knowledge. They are exciting attempts to become oriented within a breakneck world, akin to marked atlases that will offer insights well into the future.

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