

Stack/File: Selections from the Kentler Flatfiles

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“Drawer 5 is next. Grab the handle. Pull it toward you. Make sure to lift up as you open it, otherwise, the drawer will stick. Now unhook the heavy black cover and roll it away from you. Is it placed securely at the back of the cabinet? Look.... This drawer is tightly packed with white portfolios. Carefully slide each one out and stack them on the worktable behind you, piling them in reverse order. Hierarchies of position are upended... On the remaining clear space of the table, begin opening the portfolios. Leaf through the drawings. Or carefully flip them over with both hands. Feel the weight and hear the sound of the paper as you manipulate it. Measure its scale through the strained extension of your arms as you handle the piece. Notice the tension—careful, hesitant—as you hold the fragile drawings in white cotton gloves. Think back to the last time you were allowed this close to an artwork... Go ahead, touch the art.”

Viewing the Kentler Flatfiles is an intimate process of exploration and discovery. As if at a newly found archeological site, visitors excavate layers of portfolios—inscribed with often unfamiliar names, containing foreign images—until they reach the bottom of each drawer and can begin to piece together the identity of this extensive collection. The process becomes an overwhelmingly visual one, as supplementary information (title, date, etc.) is, in most cases, only available through an alphabetically organized binder of consignment forms, requiring a cognitive break from the exploratory shuffling. One’s attention is, therefore, sustained by the discernible characteristics of each artwork and its blatant physicality. It is a hands-on, analog experience in an increasingly screen-based, digital (art) world.

The act of perusing these works on paper as they are, sandwiched in portfolios and stored in stacks, prompted a novel thread of inquiry. How does one’s engagement with artwork change when it is stored in piles, not hung adjacently on a gallery wall? The latter is an impersonal and choreographed experience, where the viewer’s attention is manipulated through careful curatorial deliberations. A search of the Kentler Flatfiles, by comparison, permits the autonomous navigation of a network of dense drawers through a sequence of personal choices—which to open next and how deep to dig.

After thinking through the concept of the latent vertical stack (as opposed to the overt horizontal hang) during several visits to the Flatfiles in preparation for this exhibition, I began to notice stacked and layered elements in the artworks themselves. I found this propensity for superimposition as a function of medium (printmaking), process (layered paint), composition (layered forms), subject matter (layers of urban construction) and concept (layers of meaning). ***Stack/File: Selections from the Kentler Flatfiles*** features 25 artists that represent the breadth and significance of layering in artistic practice.

The most concrete illustrations of superimposition in this exhibition are those works made through additive mechanical processes. Karen Helga Maurstig’s delicate landscape, *Winter Morning*, for example, is physically built up through the inherently layered medium of woodblock printing. Each wood block is inked with a different shade of her muted color palette, in order to produce this hazy image that seems not to be the product of observation, but the visual notation of a memory. Conversely, Beth Caspar’s *some fall down ob 2* is an experiment in the renunciation of artistic subjectivity. Her systematized painting is composed of two layers—the first, a 4-x-4 grid, the second, superimposed geometric units, their tilt determined by the literal spin of a wheel. Florence Neal’s drawings also

represent a mechanical layering process, though in her case it involves placing a sheet of paper against a tree trunk and capturing the patterned trace of its bark through the technique of charcoal rubbing. While the final art object is the two-dimensional mediator, it carries within it the indexical mark of the layered undertaking.

Moving from the physical to the virtual plane, several artists in the Flatfiles employ layering in their compositions to demonstrate depth and spatial relationships. Ernst Benkert's drawings treat the grid not as a structural guide, but as a repeatable unit—multiplied, piled up, off axis—to create playful arrangements that complicate the divide between positive and negative space. In Richard Howe's striking graphite drawings, gauzy layers of undulating forms evoke subjects as disparate as geological strata, wrinkled fabric or even sound waves (possibly referring to his work restoring old manuscript scores for John Cage). Considering the artist's candid acceptance of polysemy in his 2003 Kentler exhibition essay, however, any definitive referent is bound to remain ambiguous. Yvette Cohen's *Paper Landscape*, which makes use of a similar topographical contour, employs perspectival tricks to make her pleated rectilinear forms look as if they are floating out in the viewer's space. Layering is not only a compositional tool, but also a conceptual catalyst in **Lucile Bertrand's** series of surreal juxtapositions, *Lit Avec Cheveux*. The overlapping piles of hair, which look like brushstrokes from a distance, seem to be acting out a narrative sequence, the details of which are also teasingly unclear.



Lucile Bertrand, *Lit Avec Cheveux No. 1*, colored pencil on paper, 8 1/4" x 11", 2001

In the realm of artistic practice, layering is often used as part of additive and subtractive experiments with color. Pauline Galiana's delicate pastel drawings, exemplary of the subtractive color process, which involves the mixing of pigment, are remarkable for their energetic vertical compositions and their rich bouquets of bright hues. Hovey Brock, while also engaged in the subtractive process of watercolor painting, superimposes faint, translucent layers of dots—diminutive spotlights on the white paper surface—to build up delicate images that appear almost as intersections of colored light.

Shifting from formal to conceptual analysis, one might consider the layers of meaning latent in many of the works on display. Tomie Arai's prints, for instance, are an amalgamation of archival photographs and illustrations—representing history and memory—that coalesce to tell a story through images. Certain works, like *Portrait/Young*

Woman, borrow from the language of the family album, while others like *Dreamer* present complex and symbol-filled narratives. Phillip Chen, an artist deeply engaged with similar themes, superimposes and combines disparate objects in his haunting relief etchings. By layering photographic and schematic elements, the artist creates intentionally dense and “dizzying” illustrative equations that take as their subject his personal stories and family histories. Karni Dorell’s *Discourse* provides another example of the way in which artists excavate narratives in procedural levels. While the origins and subject matter of the photographic image are unclear, Dorell’s isolation of certain sections—by, in effect, zooming in—creates a multifaceted photo that says more about exploration than it does about discovery.

Layering, for many artists, is a creative process in the literal sense of the word. Unlike juxtaposition, which encourages comparison and difference, superimposition, on the other hand, layers two (or more) elements to produce a new outcome. An example of this additive equation is Grace DeGennaro’s elegant mathematically based watercolor drawing *Geometry #7*. In her quest to reveal the “unseen structure that supports the universe,” the artist here has created an overlapping geometric composition, reminiscent of a Venn diagram, that serves as a beautiful visual metaphor for the generative effects of layering. Similarly, Stephen Maine’s prints function as experiments in the invention of new textural experiences through the formulaic overlapping of several patterns. In his compositions, just enough of each layer is left in tact, so that each can be appreciated both in isolation and through their contribution to the textural strata. James Jack’s drawing, *Evolution of a Mark*, also preoccupied with linear and geometric forms, is yet another way to visualize this creative fusion. The image, which evokes a chess set or a battlefield, holds a moment of climax at its central point of contact, wherein two armies of symbols (lines versus shapes) collide and merge.

As a creative tool, the layered composition can be used to construct hierarchies or other systems of order. Marietta Hoferer’s three-dimensional works on paper are the product of a meditative, time-intensive process in which the artist places tiny, monochromatic strips of tape in various formations, to luminous and dynamic effect. From this intuitive experimentation with arrangement and texture, evocative patterns emerge—channeling sources from woven fabric to Moroccan mosaics. Colorful photographs by Portia Munson also evoke a culturally specific source, namely the mandala. Pulled from a larger series, these quasi-spiritual arrangements are captured by layering flowers (whichever happen to be in bloom at the time of the piece’s making) directly onto the glass surface of a scanner. While Munson’s imagery is engaged with nature, Matthew Thomas’s densely layered digital drawings mine the vocabulary of recent pop culture. His frenetic, saccharine-hued print, *Inheritance*, features a symmetrical format reminiscent of religious iconography and a hierarchical inventory of the trappings of contemporary male success—fame, women, style and wealth. Karni Dorell’s prints, which span several of the sub-themes in this exhibition, also create order through layering. In *Prayer Field* and *Far Enough*, for example, Dorell stacks a repeating unit—the human figure—in the service of larger compositions. From a distance, the building blocks are indiscernible and merge to form wavelike and dense abstractions. Up close, the human figures reveal the artist’s preoccupation with “how the feeling of the group experience fluctuates between vulnerability and security.”

Unlike the rest of her work in the exhibition, Dorell’s goal in *Mall Combo* and *On the Cusp* is not to create order, but instead to summon swarming crowds through insistent repetition

of the human figure. The cramped and chaotic mood in these works reflects issues such as overpopulation and dwindling resources, subjects that are particularly relevant to viewers living in New York City. In a similar vein, the surface of Stephanie Brody-Lederman's small-scale paintings can be read, in the words of curator Carter Foster, as a "fragment of an urban wall, a representation of a very used, gritty cultural site." The city wall as a repository for layers of urban expression is a telling metaphor for her work. In the same way that graffiti can highlight or obscure whatever lies beneath, Brody-Lederman's revisiting of the surface in layers and through different media becomes a record of her thinking, archived over time.

The layering of urban construction is a unifying theme in the works of Damon Kowarsky, Claudia Sbrissa and Josette Urso. Despite working in three different media—etching and aquatint, vinyl collage, and drawing, respectively—their shared focus seems to be the dense and stacked nature of city architecture. Kowarsky's rendering of the Uzbek city of Khiva provides a bird's-eye, atmospheric view of the multistoried buildings that form its dense landscape. Sbrissa's fanciful and fortresslike construction is equal parts utopian and claustrophobic, its self-sustainability bordering precariously on complete isolation. Urso's two window views out onto the same crowded city street are imbued with a focused observational energy that permeates the graphic quality of the line work and the dynamism of the cross-hatching.

Just as layering can be a creative process, the repetition and superimposition of forms can also obscure and negate. Written descriptions of passers-by recorded by Toine Horvers during his 2004 Kentler residency are crowded together in his drawings and layered to the point of illegibility. The utility of these "field notes" is counteracted by the artist's compositional choices, creating a tension between the conceptual and formal elements in his work. Hedwig Brouckaert also exploits the destructive potential of layering. In her prints, the artist chooses a page from a mail-order catalogue as the basis for her work, which is then built up through multiple layers of drawing, digital photography and digital printing. The result is an abstracted image with no clear referent—frustrating the commercial intent of its source. Function becomes dysfunction through the aggregation of layers. Similarly, Michael Kukla's *Grid Auvillar #3* also exhibits a tendency to negate and manipulate the virtual space of the drawing. His undulating repetitions of geometric forms warp and penetrate the placid paper plane, creating a startling three-dimensionality that challenges and deconstructs the surface.

Despite the many iterations of layering, one thing remains consistent throughout all of the diverse works in the exhibition: superimposition inherently contains within it a record of the passage of time. Similarly, the Kentler Flatfiles, which have grown and evolved over the course of their rich twenty-five-year history, attest to the organization's sustained commitment to superlative contemporary drawings and works on paper.

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<http://www.kentlergallery.org/pages/current.html>