

# A CUT ABOVE

Most people, if asked to name the definitive artistic medium of the 20th century, would probably answer film automatically, but on further reflection a fairly compelling case can be made for collage as the better choice. Just as it's nearly impossible to imagine the development of Cubism without the *papiers collés* of Braque and Picasso, many believe the greatest works made by Henri Matisse were his large cut-paper compositions. The abrupt juxtapositions found in Dada and Surrealism were always rooted in collage, and Max Ernst, Hannah Hoch, John Heartfield, Joseph Cornell, Kurt Schwitters and Joan Miro, among others, made especially powerful works based on composite images assembled from bits and pieces of other imagery. After World War II, the Parisian *affichistes* and the proto-Pop generation in London (i.e., Eduardo Paolozzi) and New York (i.e., Robert Rauschenberg) redefined collage as a response to the fast-paced visual barrage of the Information Society.

Closer to our own time, collage as a tool – if not always the final medium of choice -- is practically omnipresent in studio practice, from James Rosenquist and David Salle to Marilyn Minter and Jeff Koons. At the same time, the digital simulation of collage is all but omnipresent throughout visual culture, thanks to the ubiquitous status of Photoshop, which continues to be applied in a broad swath of media and contexts across the stylistic spectrum. Meanwhile, a veritable renaissance of collage in the Cubist/Dada/Surrealist tradition seems to be unfolding in the respective oeuvres of Tony Fitzpatrick, Shinique Smith, Roy Dowell, Wangechi Mutu, Sarah Cain, Elliott Hundley, Rokni Haerizadeh, Brian Dettmer, not to mention a host of others. Among them are the purists, who use collage as the primary tool for rebuilding the world in miniature; the occasionals, who employ collage as one among many media (video, sculpture, painting); and the hybrids,

who strive to merge painting, photography, and collage into a visual language centered on latter, but always expanding on its historical boundaries of scale, form and texture.

Within this off-the-cuff ranking, Aspen-based artist Rob Brinker has steadily developed into one of the most original and accomplished collage artists of our time. In his case, the hybrid designation stems from his engagement with collage on multiple scales and at various stages of his creative process, while always expanding our notion of what collage can be. Whether his larger, more elaborate works are in fact collages at all is still somewhat debatable, since the actual technique is cut paper. But the aesthetic principles of collage inform Brinker's work at every level, most emphatically in the way he composes the large paper sheets that the works are cut out of. Many of these are actually collages, photographs or found posters that have been scanned, usually at an enlarged scale. Because Brinker also works directly in collage at a smaller scale, the visual impact of his larger pieces happens through multiple layers. Typically based on well-known Chinese cut-paper patterns, traditionally in the form of dragons, passed down through generations of tradition, the hundreds of intricate cuts in Brinker's final versions permit just enough of the original imagery to show through so that the viewer's gaze wanders between the outer image, the under image, and the negative spaces that bind the two together.

In XXX Secret Dragon (Fig.1), one of the standout larger pieces in his recent series, "Chasing Dragons," Brinker strives for a visual ambiguity that oscillates between the explicit and the oblique. Slivered glimpses of erotica, graphic novels, advertisement, and what appears to be circus posters drive both the viewer's curiosity and an accompanying urge to disentangle the visual complexity on hand, even after the brain's cognitive mechanisms have established that no amount of perceptual shuffling will boil the conglomeration down to a single, unwavering image, except the dragon. In the even more compositionally intricate Starlets Dragon (Fig.2), deliberate



Fig. 1 Detail XXX Secret Dragon • 2016 • Cut Paper • 56 x 34 in



Fig. 2 Detail Starlets • 2016 • Cut Paper • 58 x 46 in



Fig. 3 Detail Vampire Academy • 2016 • Cut Paper • 37.5 x 61 in

incongruities in the legibility of the underlying forms are offset by the dramatic patterning achieved by the paper cuts, while the seeming instability of the outer contours is counter-balanced by the often startling depth of the interior spaces. Without ever explicitly committing to a predetermined subject matter for his work, Brinker succeeds in creating a fundamentally abstract object in which there is at least one, often two, and sometimes three separate degrees of imagery constantly weaving in and out of each other: the outer shape, the original collage source, and the 'modified' imagery that provides the warp and woof of the work's simulated textures.

Brinker was trained as a painter and worked primarily with brushes and paint for years, so it seems reasonable to suggest that in turning to collage, he has sought to expand his search for answers to the many formal and content-driven questions that have dogged abstract painting since its inception a century ago. Viewed from an art historical perspective, the hide-and-seek visual dynamic of Brinker's newest works comes directly out of a painterly legacy of Cezanne's chunky hills and Seurat's daubs of pure color, but also from ongoing debates about painting's continued efficacy in a society in thrall to Instagram filters and disappearing Snapchats. It remains open to debate whether our endless bombardment by hyper-paced, mediated streams of imagery has had the presumed effect of diminished attention spans and narrowing visual literacy, but it seems beyond question that a new visual complexity does exist which has in turn provoked artists to compete with digital culture on its own terms, while offering a more engaged alternative to passive media absorption. Brinker's works compel you to lean in, then step back for an overall view, then move in again for a close-up – in essence, persuading us to employ bodily movement if we expect to decode any of its hidden meanings.

One of the most refreshing aspects of Brinker's latest works is their author's willingness to bend many of his own established rules determining each work's constituent components and how he puts them together. For example, His Vampire Academy Dragon (Fig. 3)

contains no underlying imagery at all, although its fragmented text, reading THEY SUCK AT SCHOOL, makes its pornographic origins pretty explicit. The jarring contrast between the reference to sexual exploitation implied in these four words, and the boldly minimalist colors of the background, combined with the slightly goofy facial features of the overlying dragon, places the actual nearby glimpses of female flesh in a somewhat different light. Similarly, the title and graphics of Too Much Pussy Dragon (Fig. 4) are taken from the poster for the 2010 sex-positive film Too Much Pussy! Feminist Sluts a Queer X Show, which follows a troupe of performing feminists as they travel by bus across Europe. White Dragon (Fig. 5), an even more striking variation on the larger pieces, contains, as its title suggests, no reference to imagery or any color whatsoever – just a broad monochromatic figure to remind us of how complex and technically challenging these works are, even without any photographic reference incorporated into them.



Fig. 4 Detail Vampire Academy • 2016 • Cut Paper • 37.5 x 61 in

Although his larger, multi-layered works constitute the more ambitious artistic statement overall, Brinker's dazzling manual facility with both media – the additive process of collage and the subtractive cut paper has also produced two series of medium scaled works that make use of less compositionally intricate cut-paper motifs – the warrior and the vase of flowers – to frame of more anatomically explicit images. With Kara Vase (Fig. 6), Brinker has situated a pair of female hips at the vase's broadest point, drawing on one of the oldest conventions of classic iconology: the doubled vessel, each conveying pleasure at its most temporal. In Warrior #2 (Fig. 7), the model in the underlying photograph uses her mouth, teeth and lips to simulate sexual ecstasy, which the scowling warrior outlined in the cuts seems to be voyeuristically appraising. An especially beguiling, if equally shopworn, overlay appears in still another centered on the layering of erotic imagery with the bursting outlines of budding flowers. Despite its well-worn theme, the latticework-like complexity of the botanical shape enables a more sustained focus on the underlying imagery, and its humid atmosphere of primary and secondary sex organs fused with



Fig. 5 Detail Vampire Academy • 2016 • Cut Paper • 37.5 x 61 in

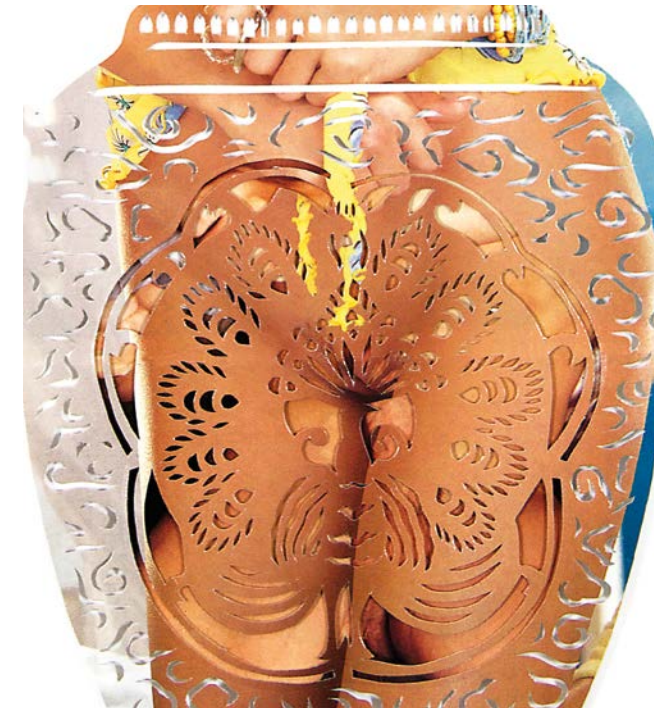


Fig. 6 Detail Kara Vase • 2015 • Cut Magazine Centerfold • 21 x 10.5 in



Fig. 7 Detail Warrior #2 • 2016 • Cut Magazine Centerfold • 21.5 x 10 in

the stamen and pistils of exotic blooms. The most modestly scaled of the recent groupings of work, "Bits and Pieces," consists of fully abstract collages assembled, as their name suggests, using fragments recycled from the making of the bigger pieces. Dense and compact, they serve as a kind of key or codex to the entire body of work, as well as a reminder that the heart of Brinker's endeavor is, in the broadest sense, a marriage of printed matter and glue.

In its celebration of contemporary mores of human sensuality by way of a centuries-old Chinese artistic tradition, Brinker's new works also provide us with an historical context within which we can engage with his subject matter and technique without limiting ourselves to the mostly theoretical issues that seem to preoccupy many of his contemporaries: cultural appropriation, identity, authorship, and the role of painting. With not a single brushstroke in evidence, Brinker outlines a way forward for painting's inherent qualities of pictorial invention and historical self-awareness, while gifting his viewers with the opportunity to experience a fully post-modernized vehicle for enjoying the pleasures of uncensored visual creativity, without apologies, excuses or irony.

Dan Cameron  
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Dan Cameron is a New York based curator and writer.