

Rex Weil's Ripography

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Essay for the exhibition **Rex Weil: Ripography -- Works with Paper**
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The near-unfathomable roil of color that is Rex Weil's Ripography installation "300+ pennants" presents an amalgamation of the artist's process in making an intensive study of rips, and places that process in the open air. While the dense manual/physical effort in creation is made palpable, these elongated shreds of paper are not imbued with violence or born of ire: each one is focused, precise, chosen, excised from its native context with care. (Weil would no doubt hold that every rip in the bunch could stand on its own.) To this writer's mind, these pennants convey equally as secular prayer flags, inscribed with the symbols and invocations of commerce. Direct-marketing mantras to be rhythmically disseminated via a newly concentrated vehicle, all acquiring fresh meanings when joined in chorus. For all its *horror vacui*, "300+ pennants" also acts as an entreaty to look closely, to decode, to guess-at sources while luxuriating in the work's textures and high-key colors. Individual origins slip in and out of relevance, and one experiences a mesmerizing surrender to the whole, to the big idea. The gestalt effect is bright, rippling, energized, and communicates a psychology of agitated consumption: Live! Love! Eat! Drink! Smile! BUY! *In toto*, Weil's recombinatorial crazy quilt of cues, quotations, patterns and ciphers serves as a wry commentary/meditation on serialization, mass reproduction and the sheer abundance of material sources.

If you, dear reader, are anything like the average American, the U.S. Postal Service delivers 1.5 personal letters to you each week. You simultaneously receive 11 pieces of "junk" mail – much of it unsolicited, all of it paper – from commercial entities. It likely needs no saying that much of this so-called junk arrives in sales catalog form. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, the \$100 billion paper-based catalog industry mails out 50 million catalogs a day. In an age of search engine optimization and social media strategies, such catalogs seem almost quaint, but web and paper in this case are symbiotic: catalog response rates hover somewhere between 3 and 10%, depending on product. Since the glory days of Sears and Montgomery Ward awareness of the environmental concerns posed by SO MUCH PAPER may have risen, but in a cost-driven industry, snail-mail advertising still has the lowest cost per lead and shows no sign of abating.

Art in advertising is a study of paramount importance. Use pictures only to attract those who may profit you. Mail-order advertisers have pictures down to a science...the picture must help sell the goods. Picturing beautiful women, admired and attractive, is a supreme inducement.

The competent advertising man must understand psychology. The more he knows about it the better. We learn, for instance, that curiosity is one of the strongest human incentives. We learn that cheapness is not a strong appeal. Americans are extravagant. They want bargains but not cheapness. They want to feel that they can afford to eat and have and wear the best. Treat them as if they could not and they resent your attitude.

Scientific Advertising, Claude Hopkins, 1923

Everyone is in an archival roller-coaster process of picture language.

Thomas Struth (photographer), 2012

Though he only refers to his base media obliquely in the title of this exhibition (Works with Paper), Weil's original sources are significant and he ultimately makes no secret of them. States Weil: "I would like to think that the literal ripping, tearing, shredding of myth as emblemized in ad copy, fashion photo, etc., has a de-naturalizing effect, performs a de-mythologizing operation. In the images, there are real people, working real jobs and real commodities made by real workers under real working conditions. Perhaps, in a small way, tearing at the fabric of myth suggests the real conditions behind the curtain." There is ever a political puissance to collage work which 'upcycles' commercial compositions, in that it juxtaposes images and ideas that their originators intended be kept apart.

Beyond the desire to intervene and disrupt the cannily constructed narratives of high commerce, Weil's desire to rip is born from attraction. He favors, perhaps for obvious reasons, the more stylized luxury catalogs, with their heavier stock, keyed-up hues, and top design talent. Also significantly, the artist collects this source material "as he goes", without imposing any predetermined organization upon it. In Weil's studio, Neiman Marcus's new season, Tiffany & Co.'s latest, auction catalogs, postcards and real estate glossies – along with product packaging itself – all come in containers, waiting to be repurposed. In this way, Weil delays the gratification of the treasure hunt; and when the time comes, he savors the challenge of finding the core expression of the image before him, which he achieves through a kind of practiced optical divination. One gets the sense that Weil almost pities the forms he finds for the cacophony and blur they would perforce dwell and ultimately drown in. His rips become rescue attempts, intentional salvage efforts...elemental shapes and liminal features mercifully liberated from their commercial moorings and stripped of profit-driven calculus. The resulting rips are paradigms of aesthetic efficiency, unique still lives, somewhere between jewels and specimens.

Indeed, the setting of a luminous gemstone against a black backdrop is a time-tested jeweler's presentation strategy, and one which Weil employs to great effect with his individually framed

works. (Or are they more like pinned butterflies, wings spread for the viewer's examination?) The naturalistic picture plane is dissolved, and the fragment is left to fascinate on its own merit. Some of these works are slightly Rosenquist-y, most conjure no direct comparisons. Their titles are playfully pat – tree house; sweater tiles; house in a bag; dogs – issuing a kind of semiotic challenge to read them as they appear, to consider the fragment AS the whole. As a professor of art theory and criticism, the artist is not innocent to the specific history of collage, and is acutely aware that the very act of making collage, or anything referencing the technique, is an engagement with that history. Weil's forthright titling choices are more reminiscent of papier collé pioneers Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris (e.g. "Guitare, journal, verre et bouteille" or "La Lampe") than any of his Pop progenitors, although the vivid punch and occasionally jarring tangents of Weil's arrangements nod to the latter's legacy. That said, one noteworthy difference between Weil and other contemporary collagists (think Wangechi Mutu, Thomas Hirschhorn, John Stezaker – even Rauschenberg) is their intentional focus on the face, the full body, the gaze. In Weil's ripographies, with few exceptions, the human face and figure are merely excerpted, hinted at, weighing no more, no less, than the other constituent parts, with which they are fused together in disjointed harmony.

"96 sticks" is the micro to "300+ pennants" macro. By tightly wrapping ripped paper around simple craft sticks, the artist narrows the passage of our perception to a fine point. We again experience the quasi-devotional quality of Weil's rescue mission, and the power of the miniature comes into full force. As Susan Stewart points out in her wonderful text "On Longing"* such drastic reduction in scale sets the stage for a *multum in parvo* effect, and places the object within a still context of heightened detail. Just as the paper envelops each stick, our physically transcendent viewpoint (the hand being the measure of the miniature) allows us to visually envelop and imaginatively possess the miniature. These elegant yet vertiginous slivers, embellished with imagery removed from minutely (scientifically, per Claude Hopkins' classic advertising treatise) market-tested contexts, are portals to unbounded fantasy. Weil has hereby created one-off originals out of endless repetition and the drone of mass print. In a Tumblr and Facebook era in which snagging, posting and recycling images are everyday activities for many, Weil's studied ripographies are rarified and enchanting.

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*"On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection" – Susan Stewart, 1993