



Paper Is People: *Decolonizing Global Paper Cultures*

Curatorial Statement

Paper Is People, curated by Tia Blassingame and Stephanie Sauer, assembles artists from around the globe to consider what handmade paper might be if its definition were not limited by legacies of cultural genocide and colonialism.

Our ideas about paper are linked to how we value traditions of language, knowledge production, creative expression, storytelling, and history. Many of us think of paper as thin sheets fashioned from fibrous pulp, but this understanding leans heavily on European applications and usage, with its roots in ancient Chinese technology and centuries of violent occupation, enslavement, and trade. To appreciate global paper cultures in a decolonial context, it is important to consider definitions of paper that move beyond those created and sanctioned by imperial powers.

Reexamining the materials used as substrates in specific cultural contexts, *Paper Is People* considers the vital role these substrates play in a community and explores how meaning is made from what we might call paper and papermaking. *Lineage* by Alisa Banks, for example, asserts that African American quilts can be read as one such substrate, reminding viewers that—among peoples subjugated under slavery and often denied access to literacy and the requisite tools for creating paper and books—perpetuating and building upon their threatened cultural knowledge required incredible creativity.

Piecing together African American patchwork and Pacific Island bark paper traditions in her naturally pigmented, geometric *kapa* paper quilts like *Patchwork: Incremental*, Chenta Laury illuminates the historical connections between paper and cloth. Her work also calls to attention the cultural recovery efforts of contemporary *kapa* makers in Hawai'i. Focused on Hawaiian environmental and cultural restoration, Page Chang combines sustainable *Wauke*, or Paper Mulberry, tree planting and harvesting into her *kapa*-making practice, which includes fine art, textiles, and wearable art pieces. Julio Laja Chichicaxtle brings intricately woven works of *amate* made in the Otomi tradition to *Paper Is People*, extending the conversation around bark paper as a prominent papermaking tradition across the Indigenous Americas, the global south, and Pacific Islands.

Bark as paper is featured in work from Kelly Church's *Birch Bark Biting* series, which is composed on bark that the artist sustainably sourced from the White Birch tree, also known as Paper Birch, in the Anishinaabe tradition. The connection between tree and human that inspires each of Church's designs reminds visitors that unprocessed bark has long been used in North

America by Native peoples both to create utilitarian objects and as a substrate for expressing and sharing culture.

Paper Is People considers how, in many Indigenous and oral cultures, weavings, pottery, tapestries, and other handmade substrates act as vessels and embodiments of culture and memory. In some instances, these substrates, once they are crafted by hand, are considered animate and assume active roles as members of a community, not objects. Using her ancestral basketry tradition as a departure point, *Egwa-Ul'nigid'* by paper-weaver/basket-weaver Skye Tafoya asks viewers to experience this basket-as-book on a physical scale that underscores the cultural importance of its medium.

Reimagining papermaking traditions and materials in their local, post-industrialized landscapes are artists from the Seringô Collective, with their manipulation of natural latex and biowaste from the açai industry; Hannah Chalew, with her creation of *plasticane*, a paper derived from sugarcane and disposable plastic waste; and Hong Hong, with her site-responsive, monumental papermaking practice that embeds memory and the literal accumulation of natural materials from the pour sites.

Dresses by Aimee Lee showcase the beauty and versatility of Korean *hanji*, derived from the Paper Mulberry tree, as it is woven, dyed, and transformed into paper thread. The strength of Lee's threads asks observers to link the enduring life of the source fiber with the enduring tradition that is *hanji*.

Constructed with Paper Mulberry and cotton—a fiber this exhibition circles back to because of its historical associations with cloth and paper, liberation struggles, and colonial rule—*Jaali* by Radha Pandey highlights the interplay between the hand papermaking traditions, architectures, and visual languages of two cultures that intertwined to create a new Indo-Islamic one. The mesmerizing movements of this book's dynamic structure amplify the themes of co-existence and cultural adaptation in papermaking cultures today and throughout time.

Process materials like fiber samples, videos, and photographs illuminate the intertwined nature of the traditions and practices of the exhibiting artists and contributing artist Steph Rue.

Viewed together, the pieces on display seek to open a conversation around what paper is across cultures today: a vessel for collective memory, a body, a site of meaning, a living ancestor, and a form of cultural survival and resistance.

Featuring works by Alisa Banks, Hannah Chalew, Page Chang, Julio Laja Chichicastle, Kelly Church, Hong Hong, Chenta Laury, Aimee Lee, Radha Pandey, the Seringô Collective, and Skye Tafoya, *Paper Is People* presents global paper cultures in a decolonial context to consider the full meaning of this vital substrate in our lives.