

Written by Steve Banks

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Pressed clumps of richly textured paper pulp shaped into crusty grates, inquisitive fish, and smooth vertebrae are given chromatic life with hints of vibrant blue-greens, rusty reds, and creamy whites. These colors and textures are given room to breathe with large expanses of grays and earth tones.

The paper-based works of Dawn Wohlford-Metallo incorporate textured relief sculpture, a clever two-pronged approach to found objects, and subtle passages of painting. Few artists in the area work so heavily in the milieu of sculpted paper, and *Juggling Act* - a show of nearly 30 handmade-paper works - demonstrates how it is done. The show runs until May 11 in the Morrissey Gallery at St. Ambrose University's Galvin Fine Arts Center.

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There is a nod to the magic of summertime fun in *Twist & Shout*, an image that benefits from the structure imposed by its frame. In this complex work, Wohlford-Metallo plays pairings (instead of the industry standard of threes) of similar shapes, contrasting colors, and delightful textures and materials off each other. Unless the artist specifically wants to trap the viewer's attention between two similar areas, the challenge with pairings is avoiding a tight rebounding phenomenon. Wohlford-Metallo bypasses this by overlapping the rebounding zones so the eye can be diverted toward other interactions within her work.

In the upper left corner is a rhythmically textured, effervescent aqua-blue plate balanced on the right side by a black box, and it contains five golden-rust-colored strips of metal. A dark, pie-shaped wedge of woven metal inhabits the lower left register and bounces the eye to an irregular spiral of wire erupting from the side of the aqua-blue square. Cutting across the center and upwards is an actual section of aqua-green garden hose with a small passage of spray bursting toward the right edge of the piece. Finally, there are two garden-faucet knobs embedded in the rough-paper surface that lend a call-and-response element.

The dialogue established between warm and cold squares causes a tight tension between the left and right sides of *Twist & Shout*. While the pie-shaped piece of metal is contrasted with metal knobs and the spiral of metal toward the top, its positive shape is echoed throughout the image in several wedge-shaped negative spaces.

Wohlford-Metallo uses color to great effect here. The majority of the piece is pleasing earth tones, with the surface of the paper liberally covered by soft linear turns and twists of faint pastel. These masses of more neutral tones energize the interactions between the comparatively smaller areas of warm and cool colors without allowing them to be overbearing. While the knobs, hose, and spray suggest carefree fun, the golden metal tags make reference to reading water meters. While a deeper meaning is elusive, the piece remains a visual treat.

A prominent component of her work is a twist on the found object. Instead of plucking an object from its regular use or environment and "re-purposing" it for art, Wohlford-Metallo will make a cast from a found object out of handmade paper and use that in lieu of the original object. Something that at first glance appears to be some kind of mass-produced object is actually an original handmade artifact. In several pieces, she takes this irony a step further by combining paper casts of found objects with actual found objects, juxtaposing notions of the banal and mundane against artistic conventions of the original and the precious.

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Making art out of found objects can be trickier than it might initially appear. The found-object floodgates were opened with the readymades of French artist Marcel Duchamp, who was more concerned with the conceptual ramifications of proclaiming an object to be art. Little emphasis was placed on changing its appearance, as evidenced by his groundbreaking urinal-turned-art *Fountain*.

Duchamp dared the viewer to think about the found object in a different light, but the objects never lost their original identity. By paper-casting objects, adding pigment, and grouping them with other forms, Wohlford-Metallo frequently changes the visual character, and therefore adds to the meaning, of her found objects.

A comparison between Wohlford-Metallo's *Running for Cover* and *Finding My Way* helps to illustrate the importance of this transformation.

*Running for Cover*

is a cast of a manhole cover with a brownish paper lightly spattered with green and white paint. The radial balance of the piece is accented by the numerous circle-inside-a-square depressions that surround a larger central circle. The even spacing of those elements causes your eye to unerringly move to the center of the piece. But the piece begs to be more; the manhole cover has nothing to interact with, and its identity remains the same.

In the manhole-based piece *Finding My Way*, that "more" comes to fruition. Here, Wohlford-Metallo has added three stylized, rust-brown fish forms playfully residing on a bubbly realm of chalky, grayish-green paper under a grid-pattern style of manhole cover. Even though the manhole cover is comparatively more identifiable, with the backwards word "Moline" on it, Wohlford-Metallo's handling of it as a barrier separating the fish allows it to be read as a strange rock outcropping or some kind of celestial disc driving its way between the fish.

Her addition of that pitted grayish paper around the rusty disc helps the manhole cover inhabit the environment along with the fish. That makes the movements of the eye between these elements and the imaginings of what they could be far more enjoyable than the solitary manhole cover. As just a shape, the cover could represent a man-made reef in a fish tank, but read as a manhole cover, it can become a metaphor for humans being fish in some kind of a tank. Instead of unquestioningly navigating around a reef, we slalom around a pothole-ridden street.

*Regeneration* is a simple yet striking work made from corn-husk paper, oil pastel, and twigs.

## The Importance of Transformation: Dawn Wohlford-Metallo: "Juggling Act," thru May 11 at St. Ambrose

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The piece deftly plays with the design mainstay of using groupings of threes to generate interest. The under-layer is composed of three smooth and twisted twigs tightly bound at the bottom and splaying toward the top. Resting on the twigs at different heights are the corn-husk-paper discs.

Each disc of rough textured paper has two forms that spiral outward from the center and give the impression of interlocked fossilized vertebrae. Not only do the paper circles draw your attention back and forth, but they also serve to draw your eye upwards. The twigs form a downward thrusting arrow to counterbalance the buoyancy of the circle forms. The irregular format and the open spaces between the sticks allow the piece to visually breathe more than many of her pieces that are confined by the frames.