

HAND PAPERMAKING

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COVER: Joan Hall, large detail of *The New Normal: In with the Tide*, 2018, 70 x 100 x 15 inches, handmade paper of kozo and gampi, mixed media (collagraph printing, glass pins, acrylic, Mylar). Photo by Dan McManus. Courtesy of the artist.



Detail of *Going, Going, Gone*, 2018, installation dimensions variable, kozo, gampi, and flax papers, mixed media (paper colored with metal pigments that rust as the paper dries). The sculptural forms are sprayed with textured paint so that the pulp grabs onto the stainless-steel wire when dipped in overbeaten flax and abaca.

Beauty and Peril:
Joan Hall, “Sea of Heartbreak”

FRANCINE WEISS



Close detail of *Algae Bloom*, 2017. **TOP:** Artist cutting paper laminated to Mylar, collagraph printing plate on the next table over to her left. On walls behind the artist are *Algae Bloom*, 2017, and *Going, Going, Gone*, 2018. All photos courtesy of the artist, and taken by Daniel McManus.

Joan Hall’s paper-based sculptural installations are complex syntheses of materials and ideas. For “Sea of Heartbreak,” a solo exhibition at the Newport Art Museum in Rhode Island, May 19–July 29, 2018, Hall is creating new works of art intended to transform the gallery into a luxurious marine environment that conjures up memories of the sea while concomitantly warning viewers of the danger humankind poses to the world’s water resources.

Joan Hall’s love affair with handmade paper began in 1977. Since then, her work has evolved; moving away from printmaking on rectangular sheets of handmade paper, Hall began using free-form shaped papers to create sculptural works into which she incorporates various materials. In essence she has fulfilled her own stated desire to push paper “beyond what paper can do” leading some viewers to ask “Is that really paper?” Combining plastic, metal, glass, and Mylar with paper, Hall’s sculptures join rich textures and vibrant colors to create tantalizing constructions that are highly evocative and reminiscent of various natural and manmade forms—undulating currents, algae blooms, coral reefs, and fishing nets.

She begins her installations by making parts of her work in the sun-filled rooms of her studio and then transports the components to the gallery where she assembles the pieces and other materials onto the wall. Basic decisions about scale and layout are made prior to installation, but final placement and the rhythm and flow of the forms take shape while Hall installs the work in situ. For “Sea of Heartbreak” (which will be installed shortly after the publication of this essay), Hall plans to mount new major works including *Algae Bloom* with its swells and ripples of paper in

shades of green, orange, and rust; *Going, Going, Gone*, comprised of brown, orange, and cream-colored clusters of cast paper and paper on wires that appear to be sprouting from the wall; *Invasion of Hull Cove*, which combines original vinyl wallpaper depicting coral in shades of pink along with steel, organic forms that seemingly emerge out of the wall; and *Greening of Our Beaches*, a floor piece made of sand collected from around the world contained in glass, situated on a circular platform. The circle evokes the continuous relationship of cause and effect, and builds on the artist’s personal lexicon of compass shapes, fitting iconography for a veteran sailor. Inspired by an article Hall read about Miami Beach running out of sand, motivating experts to investigate the possibility of replacing it with ground glass, *Greening of Our Beaches* relates to *Going, Going, Gone* in that they both talk about loss of habitat—beach erosion and disappearance of coral which fish feed on to help produce sand, a spiraling cycle of depletion.

Hall’s mixed-media installations are visually striking and seductive, with an express purpose in mind. “My works use beauty as a means to draw a viewer in and impact him/her in a subversive and emotional way,” states Hall. “The works initiate a conversation.” Specifically, Hall is interested in highlighting the human footprint on nature, with a particular focus on plastic pollution in the ocean and its consequences. Water is of course essential for our survival. The human body is about seventy-five percent water. Two-thirds of the global economy is derived from activities that involve clean

water resources in some way, yet as Hall explains, ten percent of the world’s plastic winds up in the ocean. Water pollution ultimately impacts everything and everyone. Non-biodegradable plastic waste “floats indefinitely, circulating the world,” Hall reminds us. It also breaks into tiny particles ingested by fish and birds. For “Sea of Heartbreak,” Hall’s stunning, large-scale works address increases in algae bloom and invasive algae, and refer to the coral reefs that are dying worldwide. Both are the result of increased ocean temperatures caused in part by plastic pollution. According to the artist, the sea surface temperature where she lives on Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, has increased 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit since the 1960s, and new research has revealed that plastic microfibers are in eighty-three percent of water samples worldwide.

With water pollution as a core concern in her artwork, it is only natural that Hall would work in a medium that involves water. Dispersing a range of fibers in water, Hall forms her sculptures using abaca and cotton pulp. She makes large sheets of paper up to 8 x 10 feet using kozo and gampi fibers that are hand beaten. Hall works with overbeaten abaca as a liquid drawing medium. She also employs high-shrinkage flax pulp to coat wires and forms that she fashions from plastic. For some of her sculptural works, Hall creates shapes with overbeaten abaca that is colored with dry pigments and metal fibers that rust in the paper. “The rusted pulps change colors as they dry,” describes Hall. “Oftentimes I am not quite sure what they will look like until they dry, much like printmaking where one

really does not know what the end result is until it is pulled off the printing plate.” The resulting, richly colored layers of paper in her sculptures are meant to evoke the experience of looking down into ocean water.

After coloring the paper, Hall prints the sheets with large printing plates that are often made through the artist’s documentation of the detritus that she has removed from the water at sites along the coast. She often embosses the sheets with objects she has gathered when making the collagraph printing plates.

After she prints the paper, Hall adheres it to Mylar using a thinned-down acrylic gloss medium. Once the prints have dried, she can cut intricate shapes and paint with pulp on top of the printed, mounted paper. Cutting the Mylar-backed paper into forms is both a creative and meditative process; it also requires a great deal of precision and patience. Hall does not shy away from using the very manmade material to which she is drawing attention: plastic. She incorporates plastic into her work because for her it is not about eliminating plastic altogether; it is about raising awareness of ocean pollution and encouraging a more responsible use and disposal of plastic. As a final step, the work is carefully rolled and boxed for transport. Hall installs the work at its final destination, and each installation is different. Like shifting currents, the work changes as Hall installs it for exhibition, a transformation that she describes as “symbolic of our ever-changing bodies and planet.”

The process and ideas behind “Sea of Heartbreak” are deeply personal for the artist. Hall began sailing as a teenager and became an artist. She now lives on the water in Jamestown, Rhode Island, where she sees, enjoys, and contemplates the ocean on a daily basis. Making art, making paper, and working with paper all involve control but they also require that one relinquish a certain amount of it. As with sailing, Hall is drawn to this tension between control and surrender. She has learned to wholeheartedly embrace the unpredictability of her medium and materials. Yielding control has often led to happy surprises.

The exhibition title “Sea of Heartbreak” is taken from Don Gibson’s country hit from 1961, in which the singer laments a lost love. For Hall, it references the ups and downs in an artist’s life and creative process. More broadly, Hall uses the title to point out the harm of plastic pollution to the world’s oceans, marine life, and ultimately humankind with all the resulting “heartbreak.” And finally, it refers to love and loss as two sides of the same coin—because in order to be heartbroken, one must love something or someone enough to risk being broken. It is a bittersweet realization. When viewing Joan Hall’s exquisite installations, one learns that in the many layers of paper, glass, and metal, we will find a vast ocean of meaning, symbolism, and emotion.



The artist pulling kozo sheet off the printing plate that has been painted with red abaca pulp. The paper is laminated to Mylar after printing and before cutting.



Paper studio of Joan Hall, creating the components for Going, Going, Gone, 2018. The wire and the plastic forms are dipped in flax and overbeaten abaca. The irregular forms on the screens are made with 7 layers of overbeaten abaca and/or flax. In the background are large screens used to make the thin sheets for printing. The largest screen measures 8 x 10 feet. The wood frame on the floor gets lined with a drop cloth and the pulp and water is poured into it. The papermaking team steps into the tank with the large screens to form the sheets.

Paper Sample: Part of the Tide

JOAN HALL

This paper sample is cut from a large printed sheet using the collagraph plates for my artwork titled *The New Normal: In with the Tide*, 2018.

To make the paper, I formed 5 x 7-foot sheets of kozo or gampi paper using a giant improvised “swimming pool” in my studio. I pulp painted them with pigmented abaca, let them air dry, then printed them with high-relief collagraph plates that I constructed by attaching plastic and other bits of detritus retrieved from the sea’s edge. I then adhered the printed sheets onto Mylar with a diluted solution of acrylic. This step allows me to cut intricate shapes out of the sheets as shown most clearly in the close detail of *Algae Bloom* pictured on page 34 of this issue.

To produce this paper sample for *Hand Papermaking*, three assistants—Anna McNeary, Nina Ruelle, and Ruhan Feng—spent three days, cutting three of the large-scale printed sheets into the sample squares.

Run your finger along the surface and you can feel the sea in its glory, and in its distress.



*Overhead view of Joan Hall’s studio, showing the paper samples cut from large printed sheets using the collagraph plates for her artwork *The New Normal: In with the Tide*, 2018, as pictured on the cover of this issue.*