



HOUSTON

Dana Harper

HIRAM BUTLER GALLERY

Artist Dana Harper is a preservationist at heart. Here in Texas, he is probably best known as the proprietor of Sengelmann Hall, an 1890s dance hall, saloon, and *Biergarten* in Schulenburg, Texas, that was shuttered for decades before Harper restored it in 2009. While the connection between a Texas dance hall and this artist's recent body of collages may not be immediately apparent, both are the product of a similar compulsion: to save something on the brink of obsolescence.

The collages, crafted out of black-and-white images excised from old magazines, tread a delicate line between inventiveness and anachronism. Their appeal lies in Harper's intuitive ability to combine people, things, and geometric forms into compelling visual arrangements. Most of the works have the feel of intimate, manufactured worlds. Harper is adept at layering elements of landscape (open water, dark skies, billowing clouds) with anonymous, often faceless figures set amid floating shapes and random objects. In one collage (all works untitled, 2011), a birthday cake sits nestled at the base of a jagged, snowcapped mountain range that itself rests on a spread of mossy-looking hills. In another, an enormous circle, divided color-wheel style into an array of photographic slices, crowds the head and shoulders of a smiling woman nearly off the page.

The above descriptions detail work that not only evokes Surrealist and Bauhaus collage, but, in many cases—given that the artist culls his imagery from magazines dating back to the 1930s—even shares contemporaneous source material. And therein lies the ambiguity of Harper's project. A harsher (more dialectical) critique might contend that such collages represent a regressive move, one out of sync with the history of photomontage as it evolved from its initial avant-garde contexts. Far from the politically charged montage techniques of Berlin Dada and Russian Constructivism that served a mass communicative function, the subjects of Harper's works and their combinations (we encounter such things as bicycle wheels, empty cups, bowls of fruit, parachutes, balloons, cars, mannequin heads, articles of clothing) return instead to an aestheticized model of composition that is driven in equal parts by chance and whimsy.

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...back to the notion of preservation through collage, one must remember, was initially born of the inherent (and at the time, novel) capabilities of photographic media. To manually cut and join disparate photographic elements was not only a radical breakthrough in terms of the potentially disjunctive compositions it enabled but also for the way it supported a new structural process of visual thinking in which images could be treated as units within a defined system, to be combined and rearranged in the same way as letters or words in language. Today, when one has access to an infinite number of instantly searchable images, that kind of close structural work is in danger of being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of visual elements available; we consume and mentally discard images as fast as they are produced, without necessarily comprehending their semantic potential. By this measure, Harper's collages—the result of a daily studio practice undertaken over nine months of working with only knife, glue, and old magazines—represents a reinvestment in the physical restrictions of print media and a recovery of the most basic visual exercise—how to work with a preexisting set of ready-made images.



When Sengelmann Hall finally reopened after sitting vacant for so many years, one commentator remarked that to save Texas dance halls from dying out, people have to dance in them. In Harper's case, his studio practice appears to be fueled by the same sense of personal necessity. To preserve the strangeness that can result from an encounter between two scraps of pasted paper, he must physically engage in the act of making collage.

—Jennifer King

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