

## Pictures Within Pictures, or Why I Make Collages

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In late 2016, thanks to a three-week artist residency I'd been offered for the ostensible purpose of writing a book, I unexpectedly found myself pulled back into a practice that I'd set aside 30 years earlier: making collages. My surprise at the time wasn't so much about why I might again try my hand at an activity from which I once derived great pleasure. Instead, it was the sheer avidity, even ferocity, with which my instincts took control of the process once they were in the driver's seat. It was as if finding images, cutting them up and pasting them together to make new images was as natural to me as having breakfast in the morning, taking a long walk, or sitting down to write an essay about art.

At that moment in the late 1980s when I decided to stop, I probably was taking on way too many projects, as one tends to do in one's early thirties. To raise the stakes a bit higher, that rare opportunity to build a professional life as a curator, which up to then was an elusive fantasy, appeared tantalizingly within reach, but only under the quickly self-imposed condition that I give it my undivided attention, which meant dropping all ancillary activities. At the time, I was making music nobody particularly listened to, writing plays that would never be produced, and creating pictures hardly anyone would see, so if being a curator satisfied those creative urges while granting access to the mode of expression that most inspired me, what was the downside? The obvious next step was to jettison all that artistic pretense in one clean sweep — leave childhood's toys decisively behind, and go on to face the grown-up challenges of being an independent curator with a career in New York City.

Fast forward to the present moment, and the stereotypical understatement that certain things I embraced with a passion in my early thirties have a different appearance to me today. Perhaps most significantly, I've worked steadily for forty years as a curator — thirty-two of them without a parallel studio practice —, and I feel more strongly than ever that the production of visual knowledge simply carries on, irrespective of what platform is being used, or by whom. I've also come to appreciate that my deepest impulses as a curator have been to introduce viewers to forms of artistic expression that are apt to surprise them, create dynamic, unexpected groupings of objects and environments, and induce viewers to reflect on their own lived experience. In that light, perhaps my return to art-making during the past five years can be understood as a case of actually practicing what I preach, because I'm newly amazed by how much my unconscious has to reveal about my particular way of navigating reality, and how intricately bound up it is with the curatorial and critical work I've been producing all along.

My collages are composed of fragments of a world that I barely understand or recognize, but these fragments have caught my attention as I go about sifting through

things that curators typically sort through in their famously boundless curiosity. These things invariably belong to the past, often to other places with their own cultures and histories. Photographs, postcards, advertisements, illustrations, exhibition announcements, magazines, textbooks, packaging and other scraps of language and color are culled from sources whose origins are typically obscured, and in many cases either unknown or forgotten. Severed from their original contexts, they are transformed into open, unattached signifiers, which I then re-assemble in an effort to construct a new composite visual reality that makes intuitive sense to me, despite the fact that the precise nature of the outcome is not usually intelligible until quite far along in the process. I often think of them in terms of mosaics, with defined segments of independently articulated colors and textures juxtaposed with layers marked by overlay and continuity. At a certain point, as with an exhibition, the activity in making a collage starts to make its own sense, but only because an emergent reality begins to impose itself on my perception of the work in progress.

For a few years after returning to art-making, I kept it a secret from nearly everyone I knew. There were other things I was working on, and because the studio activity had a tentative, conditional haze surrounding it, the collages didn't seem pertinent to anything else that was taking place. That thinking shifted once I framed a few and started hanging them on the wall, and it probably should have been clear from the start that a person who spends so much time looking at, pondering and writing about pictures made by other people ought to be able to put a picture together by himself, should the occasion demand. The question then, as before, would have been, "Yes, but a picture of what?" Now that I've been doing them long enough to have a clearer sense of what works and what doesn't, my response would probably be that they are fragments of an old order suspended in the act of re-arranging themselves within a new order.

When the pandemic shut down much of the art world in March 2020, my collages became a lifeline to my own creativity. Multiple exhibitions I was working on had been postponed or worse, and a book I was scheduled to write was cancelled, so a lot of creative energy was going unspent at the same time that everyone's activities became drastically more inner-directed. By May 2020, my Glens Falls studio had become a refuge, where I had the freedom to explore my thoughts and ideas without concerning myself with anybody's eyes but my own. In the intervening year, I've begun to appreciate anew that in my collages I'm doing what most artists do, which is to create an imagined version of the world in order to mentally live inside it, and to seek meaning where all kinds of pictures are flowing in, out and around each other, and where I've been able to set aside the rarest and most intriguing examples for myself.

Something else that's become clearer to me over the past year is how closely connected my collages are to my curatorial practice, and in particular the specific way I think about art history. The German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) is best known today for having produced hundreds of iconographic charts that link archaic images and forms across the centuries until they evolve into modern renditions of the same visual principles. Warburg was also deeply preoccupied (as am I) with developing a library and archive suitable for his own research. My personal inclination has always

been towards ephemera from an age and location recent enough to seem familiar at first, but old enough that its attitudes, words, and symbols are foreign to us today. When I reassemble these fragments into a new composition, the subject of which isn't usually clear to me until at least halfway through the process, I frequently work on vintage samples of paper and cardboard, and often choose second-hand frames rather than new ones, in order to underscore the object's recycled quality.

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DAN CAMERON was born in Utica, NY in 1956, grew up in Hudson Falls, NY, and currently divides his time between New York City and Glens Falls. Although this is his first exhibition as an artist, as a curator he has organized international exhibitions throughout the US, France, China, Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Greece, Turkey, Sweden, Ireland, Portugal, Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Ecuador and Taiwan. He has held senior curatorial positions at the New Museum, the Orange County Museum of Art, and the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, and is the founder of Prospect New Orleans, which premiered in 2008 and will open its 5th edition in October 2021. He has authored hundreds of essays and articles on contemporary art, and taught at the graduate MFA faculties of Columbia University, NYU and School of Visual Arts, among others. In June 2021, Dan's book on the paintings of Nicole Eisenman will be published by Lund Humphries (London).