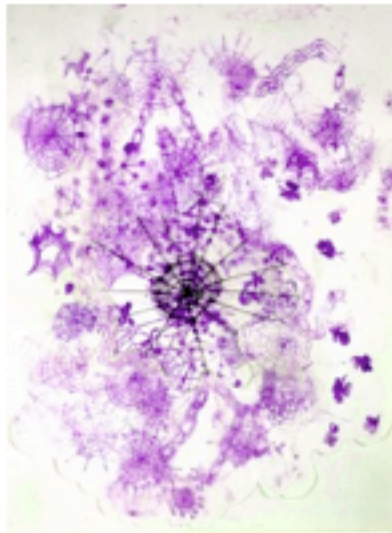


## Evidence of a Life Lived

— By DOROTHY SPEARS

*Art on Paper talks to three artists who use paper - and their own bodies - to explore life's impermanence.*

In 1986, artist Jim Hodges entered the New Museum's old Mercer Street storefront and sat down to have his palm read. "It was all very public," he recalls, referring to the throng of people waiting behind him among the museum's Opening-night crowd. The palm reading, part of a seven-year, Once-a-month performance by artist Linda Montano, offered a service dubbed as "art-life counseling," which Hodges, then a recent graduate of Pratt Institute and searching for a sense of artistic purpose, desperately felt he needed. "Don't be afraid," intoned the art-life soothsayer, "to be conventional."



"That was my fear," Hodges says, rolling his eyes at the recollection, "to be conventional." At the time, he was making work that looked and felt ephemeral. "I wasn't interested in holding onto the evidence of things. In fact, I created projects that were about not holding on to the evidence of things." After the palm reading, he continued to make this type of work, but realized that one could make representational sculpture or drawings without being conventional or sentimental. He began to embrace the way everyday materials- paper, pens, paper-could bear great emotional weight, while still retaining their vulnerable and (in the case of paper) seemingly ephemeral qualities. In the context of late 1980s appropriation and 1990s Conceptual art, which often favored irony, this was an act of defiance. He risked being dismissed as sentimental, or, perhaps even worse: earnest. But today, looking back over his work on the occasion of his survey exhibition at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea in Santiago, Spain, it is this paradox - of using "throwaway" materials to retain the evidence of a life lived - that gives his work its beauty and resonance.

Over the past fifteen years, Hodges has employed his body as a central metaphor in addressing tough issues-the fragility of life, political despair, and AIDS-with a sense of understatement. In *A Little Extra Something* (1990-91), for example, he covered the surface of a sheet of paper with theatrical make-up. The paper resembles skin; the makeup reveals a certain thoroughness, a delight in its application, and alludes, according to Hodges, to his own homosexuality. To make his saliva-transfer drawings in 1992, Hodges drew ink doodles of spider webs, clovers, chains, lines, spirals, and a matrix of dots. Then, blurring these doodles with his saliva, he pressed the wet image against another sheet of paper, creating a printed impression. "The use of saliva," he recalls, "was a sensuous act. It's as if I were collaborating with myself, revealing my relationship to the material. My hand would make the drawing. Then my mouth would transmit it. The question is, 'How do you empower yourself, or hold onto elements of reality, such as bodily fluids, when they are so often being referred to in horrifying ways?'"

Turning the utterly ordinary into the modestly beautiful remained at the heart of Hodges' work when he addressed the seemingly saccharine convention of floral art, filling an entire gallery with paper napkins, each bearing an individual ink drawing of a flower or several flowers. He has described *A Diary of Flowers* (1994), which was made over three years, as "a record of his daily trips to the deli. 'These moments matter,' he once commented, 'and the record is important.'"

Several years later, for "Flowering" (1999), he cut shapes out of white paper, and used the cutouts to make petals and stems, which he attached to the paper's surface. Given the work's monochrome aspect, he relied on light to generate a sense of depth. Made during an airplane flight, when glue was unavailable, he used the gum he was chewing-Wrigley's Winterfresh – to affix the paper petals and stems to the back-ground. His inclusion of the chewing-gum brand and flavor in his list of materials is noteworthy, since the gum contains his saliva-and therefore, a part of himself-and because its name ("Winterfresh") echoes with the white-on-white imagery.

Hodges is not alone among the artists who came of age in the 1990s in invoking paper's fragile, vulnerable nature as a metaphor for human life. For Mona Hatoum, the metaphorical connections between the use of paper and the body are informed by her feminist critique of Minimal art. In 1999, during a residency at a Shaker community in Sabbath day Lake, Maine, she laid Japanese wax paper over several traditional Shaker kitchen tools (colander, cheese grater, strainer) and made a "rubbing" of their surfaces. The resulting works appear scarred by the objects' protrusions and grid patterns. "There were these beautiful kitchen utensils," recalls Hatoum, "with all the holes punched by hand. I wanted to keep an impression or memory of them. When I was making the wax rubbings, the holes started to resemble constellations of stars, the way the wax was breaking. There was also this minimal aspect of making the paper come alive with this impression on it." Hatoum imbues the convention of souvenir collecting with the memory of the Shakers' remarkable craftsmanship. Still, these works are surprisingly un sentimental. With their impressions and perforations, the images do not rest on the paper's surface, they emerge from it.

"A white paper is a quiet space," says Hatoum. "This is how I see it. I like to animate this paper without putting in a lot of noise." For her "Hair Drawings" and the work made during the quiet space of a 2003 residency in Oaxaca, Mexico, she mixed her own skin, nails, and hair into the paper pulp.

"There was this element of chance," she says, "in what emerged through the paper's surface." Referring to Untitled (grey hair grid with knots 3) (2002), from an earlier but related body of work, she adds, "The gray hair is my own. I pick it off the floor when it comes off my head." For another 2002 series, "Clouds," Hatoum used discarded paper food trays from a local Turkish take-out restaurant--d her favorite brown pen-to map food stains left behind after her meals. "These stains," says Hatoum, "become a record of your life, evidence of your presence." Paper was particularly well suited for these projects because it is absorbent and impressionable.

Tom Friedman agrees that a kind of record, or diary, is expressed by his physical and emotional interactions with materials. "What drives my work-what really leads me," he observes, "is the investigation between the external world and my world, whether that's mental, emotional, Of physical. There's a general curiosity, an openness to possibility, an awareness, as I'm walking down the street, of paper objects mutilated by cars, how they tear apart or fade away. Or to a piece of advertising that you just pick up." Like Hodges and Hatoum, Friedman uses his body as a subject in his work. For his recent show at Feature Gallery in Manhattan, he made an untitled work consisting of pillow stuffing affixed to a wall. The pillow stuffing formed the shape of a human body-his own-made while he was lying on the ground. Another untitled work from 2000 features a paper representation of him- self "violently torn apart and lying across the floor." Evidence more of self-parody than actual violence, the work has been fabricated from brightly colored construction paper carefully cut and spliced together, with jagged red cutouts serving as a drolly inflated metaphor for spilled blood.

In its openness to external experience, Friedman's work- while not without irony--expresses delight and wonder in the simple fact of being alive. To make an untitled work from 2000, for example, he cut out the paper surrounding the squiggly lines of an ink drawing, leaving only the lines, and then hung the piece from the ceiling with monofilament. A feat of discipline and virtuosity, the work is also surprisingly delicate. For another work from 1999, he carefully affixed the spindly legs of spiders to paper. And for another from 2001 he cut hundreds of finely cut circles of colored construction paper to fashion a reclining figure. Friedman shares Hodges' and Hatoum's fascination with possibilities of, the ordinary. "My first use of paper," he recalls, "was based on an 8 1/2-by-11 inch standard sheet, a very familiar thing that everyone uses." Friedman poked the paper many times with a pin, then hung it with the same pin. The reveals the history of his interaction with it, but it illustrates that beauty, for Friedman, is often arrived at through a combination of craft and a series of repetitive gestures. There's a playful inventiveness about the final outcome, a childlike sense of "look what I can do!" Referring to his painstaking process, he admits, "It begins as very enjoyable, then it turns more toward tedium. Then, finally, it turns back to a kind of pleasure in seeing the process and the outcome."

Hodges' process is not immune to a similar sort of tedium. "Making art takes discipline," he laughs. For a recent billboard project, Don't Be Afraid, he invited a hundred United Nations ambassadors to write on a template the phrase "Don't be afraid" in their native language. "They all had the same size paper," he recalls, "so the scale would be proportional." The responses were compiled in two installments, over a couple of months. "Their handwriting," Hodges says, "was a metaphor for their voices." The billboard, which originated at the Wooster Museum in Massachusetts, before appearing in Miami, in London, and most recently, at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, measures 35 by 70 feet. The artist's hope was to create a global chorus.

Two decades ago, Montano's storefront palm reading encouraged Hodges to be vulnerable, and to expose that vulnerability to the world. Now a teacher, able to offer his own advice to younger artists, he tells his students: "You don't have to be outrageous." Looking back on his initial anti-object approach to art, he remarks, "There is so much that is beyond my judgment. I can only retain or hold onto the evidence. In so many cases, I feel as if I'm holding onto something no longer there."