



Ann Alaia Woods, *When Sea Laps Land*, 2007, 8 x 10 inches, charcoal/graphite pencil on handmade paper; suminagashi on Asian brush-calligraphy paper embedded in handmade abaca paper.



Timothy Barrett & Thomas Ingmire, *Untitled*, 2007, 10 x 8 inches, Chinese ink on UI Center for the Book BHG hemp book paper, partially burnished.

Foreground Meets Background: The Collaboration of Calligraphy and Papermaking

ROSE FOLSOM

The following essay accompanies *Hand Papermaking's* recently published limited-edition portfolio, *Calligraphy and Handmade Paper*. In addition to Folsom's essay, the portfolio includes 15 handmade paper works incorporating calligraphy (all reproduced here) and statements by the contributing artists outlining their aesthetic and technical considerations along with biographical and contact information. Ed.

When I first met with Tom Bannister to discuss this portfolio, he brought along some bait that was sure to interest me in the project: the *Watermarks in Handmade Paper* portfolio from 2001. It is a marvelous collection of work; mysterious for the marks and images which emerge from the depths of the paper itself, revealed by light showing through the paper fibers.

But why would a calligrapher be so entranced by work that does not involve marks imposed on paper? It is because of the unspoken and intimate relationship that a calligrapher develops with paper over time. It can seem that the scribe only changes, defaces, or covers up the pristine paper; or relegates its passive surface for the glory of the writing. But every calligrapher knows that paper is the calligrapher's quiet yet vital partner. A calligrapher must come to recognize the inner life of paper to do good writing. If the paper does not like the pen or ink you have chosen, the slant of the writing board, or even your own hand, you are sunk: the calligraphy will not be good without the paper's consent and participation.

Paper reveals itself slowly and will not give up its secrets without time to warm up. The scribe is gradually invited in and must approach with patience. After some time with a new paper (it can be hours or days), its particular working properties of tooth, resistance to pressure, and absorption of ink will emerge. When it is ready, the paper will reveal how quickly it wants to be written on, how much hesitation at the beginning and the end of strokes, how much pen pressure it wants, and what viscosity it prefers the ink to have. To the naked eye, the paper is the passive object of the calligrapher's actions, but the scribe knows it is rather an active participant in a dance and conversation in which it pushes back, talks back, and responds in its own way to every move of the pen. In the calligraphic world, paper often has the last word.



Annie Cicale & Claudia K. Lee, Poem, 2007, 8 x 10 ½ inches, letterpress printing on handmade paper (50% unbleached abaca, 50% Belgium flax), pigment, gold leaf.



Susan Skarsgard, Wesley B. Tanner & Kathryn Clark, Woodcut Alphabet, 2007, 10 x 8 inches, woodcut print on watermarked and pigmented cotton rag paper.

This welcome portfolio of works visibly demonstrates the partnership of paper and calligraphy, going well beyond their normal relationship. With notable exceptions—such as Nancy Leavitt and Katie MacGregor who have been working together for years—papermaker and scribe rarely meet, let alone collaborate. It is fun to see how each piece reflects the back and forth between the artists as they decided how best to incorporate their voices into one visual statement. I imagine that each artist learned much about the possibilities of the other’s craft. Even in the three works for which papermaker and calligrapher are the same person, there is still the question of how to make the two crafts work together for the sake of the finished piece.

We should take a moment to recognize that in delving into the seemingly innocent combination of “calligraphy and papermaking” we have entered the minefield of text as artistic medium. Words present a dilemma in that text is literal, while art is symbolic and suggestive. Words by their nature imply information or data, which can be antithetical to the subtlety and multi-layered quality that keeps us coming back to discover more meaning after we have finished “reading” it. Images, shapes, and colors comprise the more usual and easier vocabulary for art.

Many calligraphers today have all but abandoned the use of easily read words because, as artist Jenny Hunter Groat has put it, “When even one word is put into a painting, viewers begin to read, and words are so powerful that they overwhelm all else.”¹ Critic David Tannous has written, “If there are images besides writing on the page, the great challenge is to make sure the words do not run ahead of the other elements. You need to avoid a design where the words are seen so immediately that the viewer overlooks the other elements. There are many ways to do this, but what you’ve got to do is handicap the words: to put extra weight on that jockey in order to slow down the perception of the words.”²

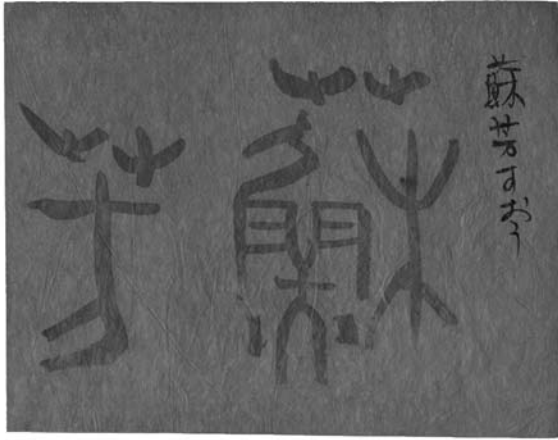
Because the original assignment for this collection was “to focus on the inherent artistry and meaning of an individual letterform,” the challenges of making text work as art were lessened. It is worth noting how some artists who did use legible words “put weight on that jockey” to slow down the perception of the verbal meaning so the words would not overwhelm the other visual elements.

Karen Gorst & Mina Takahashi chose a word that is legible, but obscure in meaning. Thomas Ingmire ran water over his boldly written word, slowing down the reading process. The haiku composed by Ann Alaia Woods is very legible, but does not overwhelm the rest of the design because it is written in graphite, so that the words echo the line quality and color value of her marbled paper.

Cynthia Thompson & David Charles Chioffi have printed their text in small type running from top-to-bottom rather than the more easily read left-to-right. Marina Soria’s hand-lettered words incorporate elements from traditional cattle brands (making the forms less instantly legible) and are also presented on a vertical writing line. Cheryl Jacobsen has used the small color-value difference between ink and paper to minimize the visual impact of the writing, allowing the prominent watermark to have greater visual importance. Miriam Londoño has used swift, informal handwriting so that a bit of effort is needed to discern the words out of the loopy, interconnected lines.

Both Annie Cicale and Nancy Culmone were unapologetic in making their texts stand out boldly from the paper in their respective collaborative pieces, perhaps with confidence that the power of the text, the quality of the writing, and the interest of the paper would keep the viewer coming back for more.

One wonders why artists bother to use language elements at all if no verbal communication is intended. But, as in a song, the verbal aspect is only one part of writing’s content. The movement



Tatiana Ginsberg & Shibata Reiho, *Suō*, 8 x 10 inches, letterpress printing on kozo paper dyed with *suō*.



Rona Conti, *Obi*, 2007, 10 x 8 inches, sumi ink on machine-made Japanese paper laminated to pigmented cotton handmade paper.



Pamela Paulsrud & Andrea Peterson, *Landscape Narratives III from the Beach*, 10 x 8 inches, debossing and stenciled blue-pigmented cotton rag pulp on shaped handmade paper (cotton linters with orange cotton rag flecks and pearlescent pigment).

and intensity of line communicates a great deal, as in *chansons sans parole* or scat singing. Critic Nancy Ungar has explained it this way: “The very fact that it is writing conveys a message. Writing suggests and assumes language. Human language suggests people. You now have humanity in this work of art just by using letters, even if illegible. It’s a metaphor for the existence of human life in the universe.”³ Calligraphic marks can also be, like dance, a unique expression of an individual’s soul at the time the mark was written; fleeting and never to be precisely repeated.

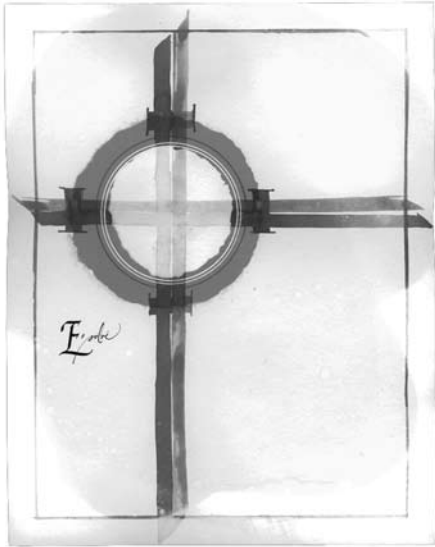
Although an early goal of the portfolio was that paper and calligraphy share equally, we know that when a work of art gets underway it develops a will of its own. Artists must respond to the needs of a project and stay flexible when the project pulls them one way or the other. It is interesting to notice how much influence each element had throughout the collaborative process and the resulting presence of each in the finished artworks.

On one end of the scale, pieces such as those by Rona Conti, Annie Cicale & Claudia K. Lee, and Ann Alaia Woods retain the paper’s traditional role as enhancer of the meaning of legible words. Similarly, Andrea Peterson’s irregularly-shaped, debossed paper serves mainly as a lively supporting partner for Pamela Paulsrud’s marks which are stenciled with pigmented wet pulp during the making of the sheet. On the other end of the scale is the piece by Tatiana Ginsberg & Shibata Reiho in which the writing, although very good in itself, serves to enhance the paper’s narrative; a story deeply resonant in Japanese language and culture.

Three pieces demonstrate the equal importance of paper and writing. The most remarkable, by Miriam Londoño, presents a lacework of words written with paper pulp applied from a squirt bottle. The pulp is applied onto cheesecloth, and the interlocking mass of paper words are peeled off when dry and sprayed with clear lacquer. This is more than a total merging of writing and paper, it addresses questions of what happens when the block of text is no longer “protected” from the outer world by margins; what happens when the lines that make up the letters are made even more vulnerable by the voids between them. This vulnerability can be seen to echo the text, which is made of women’s first names.

A second work that puts equal emphasis on writing and paper, by Katie MacGregor & Nancy Leavitt, shows a single letter ‘m’ flowing from top to bottom, but deeply hand embossed into the cushy white paper. The surprise of a forceful, unhesitating line done in such a laborious medium makes for a surprising and powerful effect. A third such piece, by Karen Gorst & Mina Takahashi, illustrates the partnership of paper and writing in an unusual way, by exploring the chemical interaction between ink and paper. They consulted color manuals to discover the combinations that painters have been warned to avoid for more than a thousand years, and used these forbidden pairings to interesting effect. Takahashi’s cadmium-pigmented paper interacted with Gorst’s handmade verdigris ink to produce spontaneous color modification as the writing crossed various passages in the multi-colored paper.

Thomas Ingmire has written one large word on Timothy Barrett’s fifteenth-century-style paper; writing which the scribe has partially obscured by running water over the ink. This makes for dappled writing and unpredictable washes of ink over other parts of the paper. The lower part of the piece is burnished, to



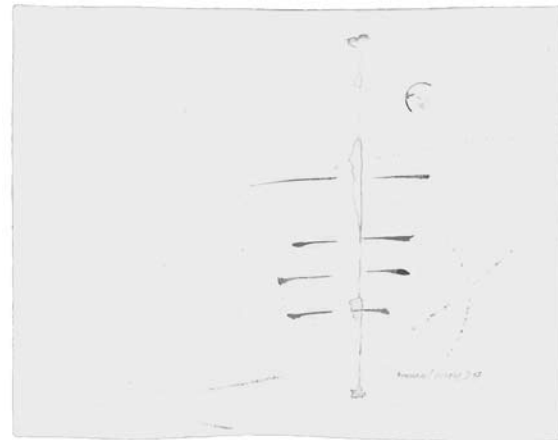
Karen Gorst & Mina Takahashi, *Corrupted*, 2007, 10 x 8 inches, malachite, verdigris, white, and black inks on handmade paper (75% second-cut cotton linters, 25% abaca), painted with cadmium-pigmented linen pulps.



Katie MacGregor & Nancy Leavitt, *Movement*, 2007, 10 x 8 inches, embossed cotton muslin paper, lightly pigmented.



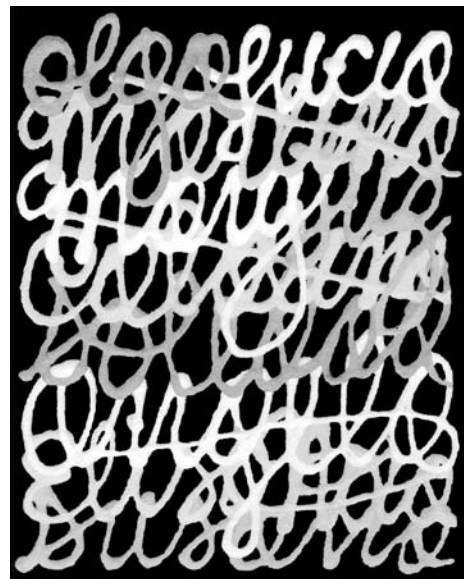
Nancy Culmone & Tom Leech, *central panel detail of PAPER IS A VERB!*, 2007, 8 x 20 inches (open), letterpress printing on kenaf paper with mica and printed kenaf bond-paper inclusions.



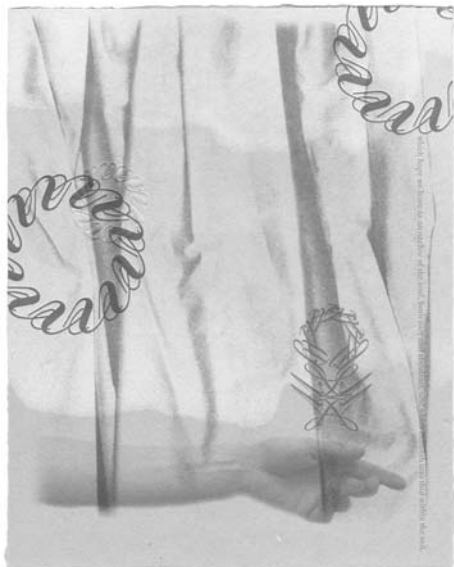
Neal Bonham & Suzanne Moore, *The Journey*, 2007, 8 x 10 inches, gouache and freehand gold tooling on watermarked cotton paper.



Gretchen Schermerhorn & Marina Soria, *Untitled*, 2007, 10 ½ x 8 inches, calligraphy, photo intaglio, and stenciled pigment on handmade paper (agave leaves and sisal cordage).



Miriam Londoño, *Untitled*, 2007, 10 ¼ x 8 ¼ inches, pigmented pulp (50% cotton linters, 50% flax).



Cynthia Thompson & David Charles Chioffi, *Within the Veil*, 2007, 10 x 8 inches, letterpress printing and blind debossing on pigmented cotton paper.



Jessica White & Cheryl Jacobsen, *The Birds of North America*, 2007, 11 x 8 ½ inches, white gouache ink and burnished watermarked image on gampi paper.

reflect the artists' belief that greater care for craftsmanship and integrity of purpose was practiced in times past. The top part of the paper is left unburnished to represent a perceived coarsening and crumbling of integrity in recent times. The work derives its meaning from a rock-solid word eroded, diluted, and distorted by water. The visual and intellectual result is powerful, mysterious, and beautiful. This work is an all-too-rare example of how text, writing, and materials can come together in a complete and satisfying work of art that is more than a one-liner, but keeps drawing the eye and imagination back again and again by its beauty, depth, and simplicity of purpose.

The pieces by Cynthia Thompson & David Charles Chioffi and Gretchen Schermerhorn & Marina Soria use pictorial elements, with attention paid to how the paper plays off the layers of imagery to achieve an evocation of people and places of the past. In these works, letters or marks are important in evoking historical and cultural resonances, but do not command primary attention.

Three of the pieces are seen to their fullest when held up to the light. The collaborative teams of Susan Skarsgard, Wesley Tanner & Kathryn Clark and Neal Bonham & Suzanne Moore produced pieces with calligraphic watermarks overlaid by calligraphic marks. The former is a woodblock-printed alphabetic image, playing counterpoint to the rhythm of the watermark; the latter uses hand-written marks to echo the watermark. Jessica White & Cheryl Jacobsen's watermark design on translucent tan paper has text written in white ink. Thus, the piece has three distinct views depending on whether it is held up to the light, placed on a contrasting background, or regarded at a particular angle where the writing disappears and only the watermark remains visible.

The piece by Nancy Culmone & Tom Leech gives equal delight to calligrapher and paper aficionado. The playfully absurd text,

"Paper is a verb!" reflects the way paper retains all the energy and attention that has gone into its making; the text also reflects the artists' lively collaboration, which resulted in bits of Nancy's calligraphy cut up and sprinkled into the wet pulp. In a story that will sound familiar to every working artist, Tom got the idea to make their paper from some grasses growing in Nancy's yard. The plan was foiled by a blizzard that made the grass inaccessible, so they had to move on to Plan B. In Nancy's hand, calligraphy is certainly a verb. It has the quality that Donald Jackson used to describe some lively medieval writing: "It looks as fresh as if the ink were still wet."⁴

Papermakers can live without calligraphers, but calligraphers cannot do without papermakers. Because of the scribe's reliance on good paper to write on, and the pleasure it must give a papermaker to see the paper's virtues enhanced by beautiful marks, it is surprising that collaboration of this kind has happened so rarely. I hope that this joint project, in which one craft is guided by the requirements and possibilities of the other, will spawn further inquiry into how the two crafts can work and play together to expand both realms.

NOTES

1. *Comments by Jenny Hunter Groat from a self-promotional pamphlet, 2007, available by contacting her at hermitfarm@earthlink.net.*
2. *David Tannous, quoted in "The Critic's Eye" by Rose Folsom, Letter Arts Review 17, no. 1 (2002): 14.*
3. *Nancy Ungar, quoted in "The Critic's Eye" by Rose Folsom, Letter Arts Review 17, no. 1 (2002): 31.*
4. *Donald Jackson, from a lecture, Georgetown University, 1976, Washington, D.C.*