

A VISION ON PAPER Asheville Citizen-Times 04/03/2015

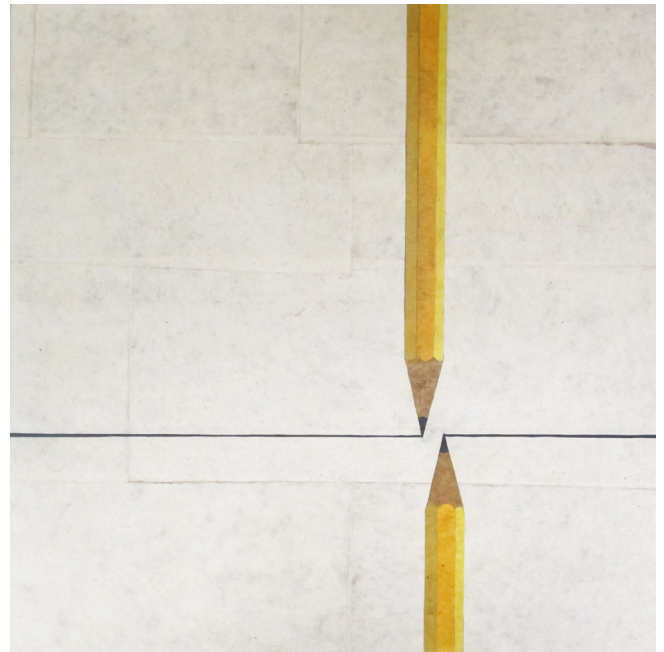
BY ARNOLD WENGROW

CITIZEN-TIMES CORRESPONDENT

'Eureka moment' moves Asheville artist Grant Penny to explore collage

Asheville artist Grant Penny has been a busy graphic designer for 18 years, creating websites and brand identities for medical manufacturing companies. That work is creative, he says, "but it didn't quite scratch that itch, because it's very client driven."

For more personal expression, he turned to painting and printmaking. Then he had what he calls his "Eureka moment" about eight years ago. He was making prints by cutting botanical images into blocks of wood or linoleum, inking them and printing on sheets of paper handmade in Nepal. Then he asked himself, "What if I cut the image out of the paper instead?" A top sheet, with cutout lines of branches or leaves, became a reverse silhouette when layered against a contrasting bottom sheet.



"An Example of How Simple It Must Be to Build a Bridge" is a 36-by-36-inch paper collage on a cradled wood panel by Grant Penny. It is one of his new works now on display at Artetude Gallery in downtown Asheville through May 31.

"I've got something here I really like," the artist said, "so I was hooked. I started doing these a lot, which really did scratch that itch."

Repertoire of themes

Going beyond his early botanical images, Penny now has a repertoire of themes: telephone poles and wires, bicycles, fire escapes, paper airplanes. They speak to his eye for simple, bold shapes. The flat figures emerge from a slightly mottled monochrome plane to create a mysterious space of their own. A recurring motif of a man with an umbrella — standing, striding, holding the umbrella aloft — may stand for the artist himself. He titles the series "Ongoing Inner Dialogue."

A new selection of Penny's works, which he calls paper collages, is on display at Artetude Gallery in downtown Asheville in a group show that opens with a free public reception from 5-8 p.m. Friday. It's part of the Downtown Asheville Gallery Association's monthly Art Walk, which runs during the same hours and includes 23 galleries and shops. For a complete list of participants, visit downtownashevilleartdistrict.org.

Penny, 41, moved to Asheville in 2003 from Sanford, North Carolina, with his wife, now a fourth-grade teacher at North Buncombe Elementary. Their daughter was born in 2011. His mother and stepfather were graphic artists, so "I grew up in their studios," he said. After graphics training at a community college near Wilmington, he worked with them. His uncle, an advertising man in Boston, sent clients their way, and Penny still has many of the same ones.

The couple chose Asheville, he said, because, “It’s a small town with all this stuff we would want in a big city. The art community is strong. People here seem genuinely happy.”

Because he was somewhat isolated in his home studio in East Asheville (“It’s not like I was rubbing elbows with other artists in the River Arts District,” he said), he began contributing work to the annual art auction of OpenDoors of Asheville, a nonprofit focused on lifting children out of poverty. “That’s where I got to meet a lot of artists,” he said.



“Might as Well” is a 24-by-48-inch collage by Grant Penny made of cut and layered handmade Nepalese paper and featuring one of his paper airplane motifs.

Meeting collectors

Penny found collectors for his work when he began showing at the downtown Minerva Gallery, which closed in December.

One of those collectors is Nancy Chapman, the owner of Pendleton Interiors in Arden. The first time she saw his work, she said, “I was mesmerized. I loved the simplicity and the little bit of whimsy that was incorporated into every piece.”

In addition to steering her clients to Penny’s work, she commissioned him to do some pieces for herself. “I asked him to do something he has never done again,” she said. “A lot of what I’ve done has been working with homeowners from dirt to move-in.” Penny made paper collages from blueprints of three of the homes. “It’s very special to me,” she said. “I actually worked on those houses. Many people couldn’t look at that blueprint and see the house, but I can.”

Another collector of Penny’s work is Michelle LeBlanc, a physician at the Western Carolina Women’s Specialty Center. Like Chapman, she said it is important that art in her home has personal meaning. “Buying from local artists,” she said, “and supporting the Asheville art community is a great way to do this.” She bought three of Penny’s small botanical works first and then a large piece of a bike for her husband’s birthday.

“I love that he can take a simple object like a bike or a tree or a paper airplane and have it evoke in me a feeling of freedom and joy,” she said. “I would have bought more if I had any free walls!”

IF YOU GO

What: Asheville artist Grant Penny shows new works he calls paper collages in a group show with Suzy Schultz of Atlanta and Karen Titus Smith of Pemberton, New Jersey.

Where: Artetude Gallery, 89 Patton Ave., downtown Asheville.

When: A free public opening reception will be 5-8 p.m. April 3 during the First Friday Art Walk of the Downtown Asheville Gallery Association. The exhibit runs through May 31; the gallery is open 11 a.m.- 6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

Learn more: Visit www.artetudegallery.com or www.grantpenny.com or call 828-252-1466.

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