



Nathan Stromberg—Back To Go Forward



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September 7 – November 9, 2018

Assembly Presentation: Monday, September 24, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.

Gallery Talk: Saturday, October 13, 1:00-2:00 p.m.

Circulus Retro exhibition series, curated by Todd Bartel

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The Cambridge School of Weston

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Cover: Nathan Stromberg, *Primary Tricycle*, 2017, vintage magazine collage, 30 x 30 inches

Thompson Gallery



The
Cambridge School
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Circulus Retro
Nathan Stromberg—Back To Go Forward, September 7 - November 9, 2018
Evelyn Davis-Walker—House + Wife Revisited, December 17, 2018 - March 15, 2019
Jennifer Langhammer • Richard Nocera—Circulus Retro, April 2 - June 15, 2018

Back to Go Forward features the recent collages of Minnesota-based ***Nathan Stromberg***, who cuts up vintage magazines of post-war America as resource material for interpreting the depiction of period objects.

ABOUT THE THOMPSON GALLERY

The Thompson Gallery is a teaching gallery at The Cambridge School of Weston dedicated to exploring single themes through several separate exhibitions, offering differing vantages on the selected topic. Named in honor of school trustee John Thompson and family, the Gallery promotes opportunities to experience contemporary art by local, national and international artists and periodically showcases the art of faculty, staff and alumni. The Gallery is located within the Garthwaite Center for Science and Art, The Cambridge School of Weston, 45 Georgian Road, Weston, MA 02493. M–F 9–4:30 p.m. and by appointment (school calendar applies).
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Nathan Stromberg—Back To Go Forward

*How is it that I feel that I have memories of things and places decades before my birth?*¹
Nathan Stromberg, 2018

Nathan Stromberg—Back To Go Forward, the first of three exhibitions in the **Circulus Retro** exhibition series, presents a selection of 37 collages and two paintings that shed light on **Stromberg's** fascination with the past and his imagery of yesteryear. **Stromberg** wonders: "What value do the objects of mass consumerism hold over the years?" "How do we interact with objects today as compared to 5, 10, 25, 50 years ago?" "What is the value of an object made by hand in a society gone virtual?"² In his artist's statement about the paintings on display, **Stromberg** notes that "attitudes about men and women have changed since I first made these paintings."³ "How we understand the past and relate to it," **Stromberg** points out, "tells us a lot about the ways we engage with the present and look forward to the future."⁴

Nathan Stromberg is a painter who explores everyday objects of the past, with a contemporary attitude for materials. Collectively, his oeuvre portrays American culture through its object manufacturing, shedding light on the artist's memory of the past and how he sees these things differently in the present. Over the last decade, unexpectedly, **Stromberg** traded his paints for another kind of pigment. Specifically, **Stromberg** uses period-specific magazine pages for their antique local-color from select eras.

In the spring of 2012—coincidentally the centennial anniversary Picasso's and Braque's first modernist collage⁵—**Stromberg** made a leap of the imagination and drastically changed the way he approached making art. **Stromberg**

exchanged painting with paint for an experimental process of painting with paper. The idea came to him after discovering an unexpected treasure-trove, lodged inside the walls of his house. While renovating the attic of his home, **Stromberg** "discovered that it was filled with perfectly preserved reams of newspapers from 1941, sewn together as insulation."⁶ Despite being a dedicated naturalist, **Stromberg** took one look at the yellowed ephemera and "knew [he] wanted to use the newspaper in [his] paintings somehow."⁷ Pushing his idea further, **Stromberg** writes in his *Objects of Worth* artist's statement (page 91), "In a direct nod to Pop Art painter Jasper Johns, I had the thought to incorporate clippings of the newspaper into the background of my paintings as a texture." Feeling successful with and inspired by his first collage made with the 1941 newspaper archive, **Stromberg** put his paints on the shelf, took out his X-Acto knife and acrylic medium, and since 2012 has worked exclusively with paper in place of paint.

As he developed his studio practice to a sustained focus, **Stromberg** located his pictures in the imagery of the recent past, gravitating to particular decades at a time—1950s at first, and later embracing the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and then the 1990s respectively. To enhance the idea and the feeling for each object he selects to portray, **Stromberg** limits the use of color to the local color of magazines and books printed in the same era as the manufactured object. In turn, **Stromberg's** collage-paintings present his audiences with an unexpected reunion of color and form. For each object he represents through his papery process, **Stromberg** works with areas of color gleaned from vintage ads and photographs, pirating shapes needed to depict every aspect of an observed item.

During the last decade, **Stromberg** has worked to perfect a method of collecting, scanning, and archivally printing his source materials as needed. Since 2012 **Stromberg** has created more than 100 collages of period objects that capture not only a likeness of objects but also the "color of their time."

Stromberg's use of collage is an inversion of the initial ways modernists applied collage to their paintings. Modernists pioneered various techniques to dismantle the object, break it up into simplified, exaggerated, or edited parts, and thereby undo the traditions of representation to get at issues of abstraction and painterly exploration.

Stromberg uses an accumulative, ersatz approach, and piecemeals found materials to represent objects in the traditional vein of depicting form truthfully without obscuring, augmenting, or editing his illusions.

Stromberg's "collage-paintings" have the look of paintings, but they are not made with paint-proper. From a distance, indeed, his work has the feeling and stature of painted imagery, but upon closer inspection, viewers frequently catch themselves realizing **Stromberg's** works are papered rather than painted surfaces. One question raised by his work is how to classify it? By today's definition, his collage work would not be called paintings in the strictest sense of the term. This first exhibition in the **Circulus Retro** series prompts us to circle back to the definition of what painting is and wonder if the definition as we presently use it is too narrow a term.

Additionally, **Stromberg's** title, **Back to Go Forward**, prompts other kinds of questions as well. What can we learn from the things we used to use not all that long ago? What can we learn from the utilitarian objects we use and take for granted today? Will they be useful decades from now? Will the

design of today's things necessarily evolve, or will they stay relatively the same in two or three decades? Will today's objects seem out of place in the near and distant future? Such questions arise due to the assembly of portrayed things in **Back to Go Forward**, which altogether prompts viewers to wonder about the objects and attitudes of yesteryear that remain useful today and have endured a test of time or have otherwise fallen out of favor.

Looking Back

Born in Springfield, MA, in 1978, **Stromberg** was raised by a loving and traditional family in Blandford, MA, until his family moved to Chicago in 1990, and then to the Twin Cities, MN in 1992, where he still resides today in Saint Paul.⁸ He attended Bethel University, earning a Bachelor's in Studio Art and Art Education in 2000, and then studied Visual Arts and obtained a Master of Fine Arts at the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University in 2010. **Stromberg** is a visual arts instructor at Minnehaha Academy, where he teaches drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, graphic design, and AP Studio Art. Up until 2012, Nathan worked with paint as his primary medium, exploring imagery that addresses the past from various angles.

Regarding his pre-2012 paintings, for example, **Stromberg** began "*appropriating slide imagery*," pointing out the images he was drawn to depict in his MFA work "*were from anonymous family archives that were all digitized and posted on Flickr*."⁹ Two of his paintings from this period—*Prize*, and *Fossils*, both painted in 2009—are included in **Back to Go Forward**. These paintings offer insight regarding the relationship between **Stromberg's** pre-2012 paintings and his recent collages. They also shed light

on his fascination with the past and what he has gleaned from it. And, they provide an example of the various ways he has sought to celebrate the American family. *Prize* and *Fossils* (pages 22-23) were among 52 paintings created for an exhibition he titled *American Iconic*. This diptych series is the first body of work in which **Stromberg** set out to explore American culture and lifestyle as much as honor his strong family bonds.

Stromberg's *American Iconic* paintings always juxtapose two unrelated, but associatively ironic images. When asked about the impetus to incorporate irony in his work, **Stromberg** points to inspiration from two great collage artists, Hannah Höch and Romare Bearden:

*An enormous part of what I love about art is humor and irony. Höch and Bearden incorporated humor and the absurd while dealing with real problems, sexism, and racism, for example. Despite the fact they were dealing with very heavy issues, they were also abandoning the rules of pictorial space when they cut heads in half, and that is not unlike living in a country torn apart by war in Germany or racism in America. Why Absurdity? Because the absurd is a great way to deal with such darkness.*¹⁰

Initially, **Stromberg's** *American Iconic* paintings were not so much about darkness and irony, as much as they are about raising questions about or even contradicting the imagery within the pictures he appropriated. For example, in his artist statement about *Prize* (page 89), he notes:

With Prize, I was trying to play off of the implied narratives of both images. In sifting through thousands of images, I started to notice trends. A popular image

is one of the dad/husband standing in front of a shiny new car. I thought it was interesting to juxtapose such an image next to a couple dancing together. Is she seen as a 'prized' possession in the eyes of her dance partner, or is he the one who is prized? I like that it's left ambiguous and up to the viewer to decide.

And regarding the other painting included in **Back to Go Forward**, he points out:

With the title Fossils, I saw in a single word a connection between the dinosaur and the elderly woman in the kitchen. The term brings to mind fossilized dinosaur remains—physical remnants of creatures long dead. In a very real sense, the source image of the woman that I used to create the painting was also a fossil. It depicts an unknown yet very real person who almost certainly passed away a long time ago. I felt drawn not only to the melancholic mystery and simultaneous humor of the image but also to the memories I have of women always being in the kitchen at family gatherings. Visually there's a great interplay between the strange backwards angle on the large concrete dinosaur and the immediacy of the kitchen portrait. To me, the two images somehow belong together and improve each other.

In the short few years since the creation of these works, however, **Stromberg** recognizes not only a cultural shift, but a personal shift in attitude about gender and identity, and his evolving views, observations, and awareness:

As a white, middle-aged American male, implied gender roles and positions of power are things I often do not have

to worry about, and that is deeply troubling. It can be easy for someone in my position to grow apathetic towards issues that are of utmost importance. For this reason, looking to the past is as important as ever, particularly in times such as these. The recent rise of the #MeToo movement represents a much needed and direct challenge to male chauvinism and the objectifying treatment of women. Only by dragging such long-held societal attitudes into the light can we find ways to shift our thinking. (page 89)

When asked where the impetus emanated to do his thesis work, **Stromberg** further reflects

*I started working with 50s imagery because I found it ironic and preposterous that people were being asked to clean in high heels—but that was the idealized American way. I was really drawn to it for the humor of it and the absurdity of it—that this was somehow expected and portrayed in the media, and what was for women, designed as something you 'should do,' Post-War, after women did all the work, while the men were gone. And then, all of a sudden, it's like, here is your place; this is what you have to do. And that was my entry point into it.*¹¹

Back to Go Forward then, is an exhibition about capturing such cultural and personal shifts mid-stream; it acknowledges that traditions and cultural norms are not necessarily beneficial for everyone. **Back to Go Forward** initiates the **Circulus Retro** series with a reminder to catch ourselves off-guard as we wonder what in our own lives we might shift ourselves, if only we take stock of our surroundings.

Looking Back at Painting

Curious to see if his work could pass as a painting, **Stromberg** applied to a juried exhibition entitled *Art Now 2019: Painting*, juried by Roula David at the Ann Arbor Art Center in Ann Arbor, MI. In their promotional materials for the show they described the mission of the exhibition to "*highlight artists who employ traditional painting techniques, as well as those who move across disciplines and push the boundaries of what defines contemporary painting, including through the application of hybrid processes and use of mixed media.*"¹² **Stromberg's** *Cigarette Machine/You Get A Lot to Like* (page 65) was the only collage to be accepted in the show out of the 45 artists exhibited. We live during a time when the activity of deconstructing, reimagining, and redefining is the norm, which, of course, expands our understanding and our definitions. In our age of post-structural and postmodern discourse and inquiry, the deconstruction of the term "painting" has spurred an open question about what constitutes the activity.

Back to Go Forward is also a reflection upon what painting is. **Stromberg's** surfaces are not traditional canvases with paint upon them, which prompts us to reconsider what traditional "painting" is understood to be. If we look back to the definitions of painting and collage, we find that there is room for reinterpretation.

The OED tells us that paint is:

A liquid which when spread over a surface dries to leave a thin layer of colour or protective coating; the dried film itself. Also: solid matter that may be spread in this way, usually when combined with a liquid vehicle (as water or oil).

Stromberg's approach to making his collage paintings overlaps with only portions of this definition—working with dried films, for example. What this definition does not express are several other aspects regarding paint and the activity of painting that, when considered, provide deeper appreciation than this short description indicates.

In his book *What Painting Is*, the artist and art historian James Elkins points out the roots of modern chemistry in medieval Alchemy, as it relates to issues of painting. The first words of his introduction provide a compelling foundation for understanding the materiality of paint:

Water and stones. Those are the unpromising ingredients of two very different endeavors. The first is painting, because artists' pigments are made from fluids (these days, usually petroleum products and plant oils) mixed together with powdered stones to give color. All oil paints, watercolors, gouaches, and acrylics are made that way, and so are more solid concoctions, including pastels, ink blocks, crayons, and charcoal. They differ only in the proportions of water and stone—or put it more accurately, medium and pigment...So painting and other visual arts are one example of negotiations between water and stone, and the other is alchemy. In Alchemy, the Stone (with a capital S) is the ultimate goal, and one of the purposes of alchemy is to turn something as liquid as water into a substance as firm and unmeltable as stone. As in painting, the means are liquid and the ends are solid. And as in painting, most of alchemy does not have to do with either pure water or hard stones, but with mixtures of the two. Alchemists worked with viscid stews, with tacky drying films, with

*brittle skins of slag: in short, they were concerned with the same range of half-fluids as painters and other artists*¹³

Painting in Elkins' terms is about the physicality of the materials, but also, he points to the importance of alchemical transformation made with such matter:

*Paint is a cast made of the painter's movements, a portrait of the painter's body and thoughts...an unspoken and largely uncognized dialogue, where paint speaks silently in masses and colors and the artist responds in moods.*¹⁴ ... *Substances are like mirrors that let us see things about ourselves that we cannot quite understand.*¹⁵

Elkins' descriptions are helpful when considering a possible expansion of the definition of painting. Much of what **Stromberg** does in his current practice fits well within Elkins' explanations. **Stromberg**, like any painter, works with materials that are made up of pigment and medium¹⁶—his colors are printed inks bound to paper. However, he does not mix his colors in the traditional sense, nor does he use his materials while they are wet. But he does work with substances to record his movements, his body, his thoughts, and his moods to speak in masses and colors. The basic difference between a traditional painter's pallet and **Stromberg's** is the lack of wet materials. **Stromberg's** materials and processes fall into the proper categories—just not while they are viscous.

Paper pulp is wet before it dries into a solid state. Ink is wet as it is printed on the page. All glues are wet or viscous when first applied. And of course, paint is wet as it is smeared across a surface. The difference between **Stromberg's** process

and the accepted definition is that his materials have all dried into solids before he *paints* with them. He can't blend his materials or smudge them or drip them. And, **Stromberg** doesn't use solvents to alter the look of the materials he uses. Thus, **Stromberg's** non-traditional paints are severely limited when compared to traditional paints. **Stromberg** comes closest to conventional painting when he applies Mod Podge to protect his papered surfaces—the only time he works with traditionally wet materials in the process of creating his collage paintings. One could argue that point alone as being an act of painting, but still, there is something else that is essential about his non-traditional painterliness that merits our empathy. Working with dried pigments does not exclude his placed "solids" from being understood as painted strokes or gestures. **Stromberg's** cuttings, which he places directly into desired locations—just as any traditional painter would do with wet paint—results in the accumulation of "strokes." Strokes are an act of hitting or striking something, a blow, or a mark made. **Stromberg's** collage paintings are made with an accumulation of papery strokes or pulp-marks that altogether achieve a semblance of something. Thus, it is only a semantic limitation that his paint was dry as **Stromberg** used it.

If we stretch Elkins' definition of "half-fluids" to include readymade printed solids, or, think of printed ephemera as being *half* paint (ink) and *half* solid (paper) combined, then how **Stromberg** paints is only a small technicality away from what painting is. If all we need to make paintings is a collection of "half-fluids" that dry into solids, then there must be something else at the heart of the activity. Elkins' poignant description of the metaphysical aspects of painting, alchemical transformation, and "*uncognized dialogue*,"

then can be applied to **Stromberg's** process. Creating a slight allowance with the term "painting" in **Stromberg's** instance seems warranted since **Stromberg** is very



Printed ephemera as color palette.



Experimental swatches testing fading and archival effects on different eras of paper with different glues and different varnishes.



Vintage adds scanned and printed to create archival fragments.

attentive to "speaking in masses and colors" and to "responding to moods," when he makes his collage paintings. Indeed, he undergoes "*a lot of research to match the color of the objects*,"¹⁷ he depicts. He researches the manufacture of the objects he selects too because he does "*not want to inadvertently try to assign an object to memory with period paper that is actually something new or a cheap rip-off*."¹⁸

To keep some of the brighter and more fragile colors from fading—given that magazine ink and paper are not typically archival—since 2015, **Stromberg** has used high-quality book reprints of period ads and photos. On occasion, he also uses scanned and printed copies of the magazine pages, which are more lightfast. **Stromberg** paints with a pallet made up any combination of period ephemera, bookplates, and inkjet prints on rag paper. **Stromberg's** color pallet then is the many stacks of ephemera, which he sifts through and pulls from any time he needs an area of a particular color. Despite the static nature of **Stromberg's** "paint," he has achieved fluidity with his materials and his process. On his website,

the artist provides documentaries of his process, creating specific works, and these time-lapse films are eloquent proof of the ease at which he makes his paintings.

Stromberg has developed his technique to the point where he just cuts materials directly while looking at the spaces and forms he needs to establish. He works intuitively and quickly. He works without measuring, tracing, or copying the things he needs to create. He works in an "*unspoken, and largely uncognized dialogue*" with his papery materials, and the finished results command his viewer's attention with high impact.

Stromberg has finely tuned his ability to select and extract a range of acute colors from printed pages to form the semblance of areas of volume. His alchemy of colors is reminiscent of Georges Seurat's (Paris, France 1859-1891) invention of Pointillism. Seurat's color mixing occurs through the fixed proximity of colors placed next to one another as opposed to a more dynamic process of mixing specific hues and tones or otherwise blending between two colors to establish a modulation of tones. Other than having to research and collect materials before he can select appropriate colors, **Stromberg's** process, like Seurat's, is static. But once he has his materials in hand, **Stromberg** "casts" his objects with convincing illusory details and great "feeling" just as any painter would. The results are unified and flowing feelings of chiaroscuro the patina of light and shadow that adorns all his depicted volumes. Regarding his approach to realism, there is a distinct quality in **Stromberg's** collage-paintings that locates his work in the Photorealist approach to naturalism championed by artists such as Richard Estes, Audrey Flack, and Robert Cottingham. Similar to their approach to depicting the contemporary



resource photo for Rollerskates I & II.

world, **Stromberg** is truthful to his illusions in a hyper-realist tradition.

On poetic, literal, and conceptual levels, **Stromberg** creates using materials that *"are like mirrors that let us see things about ourselves that we cannot quite understand."* In this sense, **Stromberg's** studio practice embodies such aspects of being a painter. **Stromberg** is not merely an illustrator; **Stromberg** works out ideas and imagery to get at the human condition and his interests in yesteryear while showing us things that we might otherwise overlook. He shows us something that we cannot see without his hybrid process.

In proximity to **Stromberg's paintings**, we become aware of the "cast" made by **Stromberg's** gestural movements that give "shape" to the forms he constructs while also "causing light and shadow" to appear on the surfaces of his creations via the illusions



Collage painting in progress—*Rollerskates II*, 2018, vintage magazine collage, 20 x 20 inches.

he establishes. The harmonious casts he establishes can be deceiving, though. Because **Stromberg** is limited to the ridged materials he collects, he works hard to obtain all the shades (and shapes) required to create convincing chiaroscuro. For all their apparent semblance and naturalism, **Stromberg's** works are primarily abstractions that lean toward representation at a distance. Up close, the details reveal how **Stromberg** corrals nonobjectivity into likenesses.

Stromberg's process, like most other painter's processes—particularly the Abstract Expressionists—is not immune to the need for revision. Similar to painting over an area in need of alteration with wet color, **Stromberg** dry-paints (pastes) shapes that correct colors. The shaped parameter of a given paper cutout is easily placed on top of an unwanted passage of pastings. Instead of blending colors to mask and fade

into the changed areas while the paint is still wet, **Stromberg's** "blending" occurs by proximity to other colors pasted nearby. Thus, **Stromberg's** retinal color blending occurs at a distance, much in the same way Georges Seurat's pointillist paintings achieve a convincing composite reality the further away viewers see a given work. Joseph Albers called this "the interaction of color," noting that the same color square on two different colored backgrounds appears to the eye to be different, despite being cut from the same hue. **Stromberg** traded accidents with painting for accidents found by layering paper. **Stromberg** has evolved his practice as a paper-painter due to the sheer frequency of exercising skills of selection. As he works, he adroitly looks at zones of available colors on any page and intuitively if the shade and shape of the area are well-suited for pasting onto his collaged surfaces.

Collage, Cubo-Pop, Retro-Pop

*A history of collage in the serious art of [the twentieth] century properly begins, as does the meaning of the word, with the cutting and pasting of paper into pictures.*¹⁹
Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh, 1962

*You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards or playing cards, candelabra, pieces of oil cloth, collars, painted paper, newspapers.*²⁰
Guillaume Apollinaire, 1913

*I do not make my pieces openly celebrating consumer culture.*²¹
Nathan Stromberg, 2018

With the evolution and proliferation of abstraction came the fracturing of the world. And with that fracturing, came the rise of consumerism. In turn, post-consumer waste

increased to the point where it became incorporated into the art of the times—each decade, reflecting the look and feel of the culture at large. Over the last one hundred plus years, many painters before **Stromberg** shifted their approach to painting by incorporating quotidian collage, assemblage, and readymade fragments of the world. For example, by the first two decades of the twentieth century, Kurt Schwitters (b. Hanover, Germany, 1887-1948) had already dedicated himself to all things collage—or Merz (a shortened form of "commerce") as he referred to it: "*The waste of the world becomes my art.*"²² **Stromberg's** work belongs to a lineage of art-making that uses ephemera to depict reality.

Modern composite paintings and collage on paintings came into existence in the studios of Pablo Picasso (b. Málaga, Spain, 1881-1973) and Georges Braque (b. Val-d'Oise, France, 1882-1963) in the early years of Cubism, during the spring, summer and fall of 1912. Both artists are given joint-credit for the expansion of painting to include materials not created by the artists themselves, which subsequently spurred a pictorial "revolution" (Diane Waldman) by many critics and historians' accounts. The significance of adding actual bits of reality to interrupt depictions of worldly things gave way to the erosion of seamless narratives. Collage initiated an invocation for pluralism and non-linear representation, readily welcoming any combination of materials and the collapse of time and space in modern imagery.

The first defender of collage in painting—as Guillaume Apollinaire (b. Rome, Italy, 1880-1918) in 1913, who understood painting's expansion immediately because he had already pioneered a similar approach in his

poetry. Among many things, Apollinaire was a writer, and an "accumulator of avant-garde ideas" to quote MoMA curator William Seitz's momentous catalog essay, *Assemblage*.²³ Seitz points toward his extensive influence: "*Prophet and merchandiser as well as poet, he was both seismograph and tuning fork, simultaneously absorbing and propagating vibrations that ranged from symbolism, cubism, and Futurism to Dada, Surrealism, and abstract art.*"²⁴ By 1912 the same year as Picasso's and Braque's experiments with papier collé, Apollinaire saw in poetry the potential of using found ephemera to generate new approaches to writing: *...[C]atalogs, posters, advertisements of all sorts. Believe me, they contain the poetry of our epoch.*²⁵

One thing that inspired the Cubists to move forward toward a radical kind of abstraction was their interest in visually taking apart forms and combining edited observations in their drawings and paintings. What prompted the Cubists to play with form in this way are several factors including the inventions of photography and moving pictures, the appearance of Asian and African artifacts in Europe, the practice of Grangerization or extra-illustration in books, the proliferation of scrapbooking, and, the pioneering paintings of Paul Cézanne (b. Aix-en-Provence, France, 1839-1906). It was Cézanne's attitudes about form that provided them with a way to divide up the world pictorially. Cézanne painted in a stylistic manner that appealed to Picasso and Braque; Cézanne observed objects in nature employing a kind of visual simplification. Reducing complex objects to the common underlying forms "*by means of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone*"²⁶ inspired Modernist abstraction.

Seitz points out, Cézanne "*had canonized*

the willful deformation and fragmentation of objects and human figures, and had provided the authority to supplant 'pictorial composition' by another kind of structural order."²⁷ Cézanne's short and choppy brushstrokes avoided on-canvas-mixing and blending in favor of angular and planer descriptions of objects. Such abstractions inspired the pioneering Cubists, who, in turn, latched onto the ideas of reducing complex forms to simple shapes. Braque and Picasso were interested in bricolage—something constructed or created from a diverse range of available things. They were also involved with double-entendre and faux materials, and such interests gradually led Braque to add "matière" to his paint, such as dirt, sand and coffee grinds, and wallpaper to his drawings.²⁸ The Cubists broke up their observations of forms and spaces into edited depictions from various perspectives and then combined only partial views unto a single canvas with a general hunger for additive possibilities. The Cubists ultimately pushed at Cézanne's radical ideas until the advent of collage graced the picture plane with parts of the actual world not just materials added to paint.

In a backhanded way, ***Stromberg's*** work recalls Cézanne's unblended, semi-abstract paintings for a similarity in the ways both artists break up forms to describe a whole. By comparison, ***Stromberg's*** paintings are abstracted with short, chopped-up source materials, which gives a "choppy" appearance to the forms he creates, but result in a look set apart from Cézanne's paintings. ***Stromberg's*** paintings also share Braque's and Picasso's interest in stand-in materials. ***Stromberg*** constitutes his forms using materials that "can" represent something, but do not initially do that in, and of themselves. For example, ***Stromberg*** used 1950s ads and photographs of red-

colored magazine areas to make his painting *Primary Tricycle* (catalog page 55), but nowhere in the materials he used can you find an image of a tricycle, nor did he look for a picture of a tricycle in magazines to cut up and reconstitute. **Stromberg's** model is a vintage tricycle he owns and photographed, and he used the resource photo to guide the creation of his collage-painting. The pages, images, and ads he scavenged were cut up into color swatches and then rearranged to constitute an image of the tricycle through the local placement of fragments. On occasion, whenever possible, **Stromberg** sometimes incorporates images and text that "point" to the object, as in the case of his *Cigarette Machine* (catalog page 65), in which he used cigarette ads and parts of images and articles that are related in some way to the depicted object. And yet, while his constructed forms are not present in the collected ephemera, they are nevertheless harkened back to because they emanate from the same vintage as his literary sources.

Picasso and Braque had gradually "limited the deep space by which artists had represented the world since the fifteenth century"—by their "innovations playing back and forth between recession behind the canvas surface [illusion] and projection forward from it" [collage].²⁹ By contrast, **Stromberg** restores the semblances of the objects in typically blurred backgrounds that also depict limited spaces. One Hundred years later, **Stromberg's** appetite for Apollinairean found (visual) poetry of broken up, forward projections of ephemera are a reversal of modernist abstraction.

Similar to Cézanne and the Cubists, **Stromberg** paints forms abstractly, with the intent to be true to the original objects, and his end-byproducts are abstracted

and referential at the same time—retro-Cubist, neo-realist works. One hundred years later, however, **Stromberg** creates for the opposite purposes as his modern predecessors. His works are born of an inherently accumulative abstract process and result in constructed semblances rather than being editorial and deconstructed reductions. On several planes, **Stromberg's** work is a series of moves *back to go forward*.

Stromberg uses accessible, "popular" materials, although they are not from the present time. When asked if he counts himself as a Pop artist, **Stromberg** is swift to point out that his work is not about celebrating consumerism: "*I pull from the ads of American culture with great interest to understand myself as living within consumerist society.*"³⁰ Defining what Pop art isn't, in his preface to the Phaidon publication, *Pop*, Mark Francis writes:

*Pop was not a movement or a single group of artists, or a style; nor is it confined to a historical movement, though it flourished in certain historical and social circumstances. Its earliest definition, in a letter by Richard Hamilton in 1957, actually describes not the art that would be produced in the name of Pop, but the salient characteristics of modern popular culture itself, the ads, comics, movies and objects which were of such fascination to artists. Pop has a subject—the epic and the quotidian, the real and the surreal—and it has an attitude to this material, an art of attention to the world at hand, in particular to the apparently trivial, insignificant, or overlooked. This is then treated in a relatively uninflected manner so that the resulting work is capable of sustaining complex, even contradictory, readings.*³¹

Francis' description is helpful to ground **Stromberg** in the Pop genre because other than the surreal, which it is not, his work explores the "quotidian real," the "trivial," the "insignificant," and the "verlooked." Richard Hamilton, defined the characteristics of mass culture that would eventually lead to the use of the term Pop in a letter to Alison and Peter Smithson:

*Pop Art is: Popular (designed for a mass audience) • Transient (short-term solution) • Expendable (easily forgotten) • Low cost • Mass produced • Young (aimed at youth) • Witty • Sexy • Gimmicky • Glamorous • Big business...*³²

However, there is also another aspect of Pop art, which Hal Foster points to in his *Survey* within the same Phaidon publication. Foster defines the historical style that became known for how it drew on popular imagery:

Pop art was an Anglo America affair that thrived in the latitudes of London, New York and Los Angeles, the primary capitals of the consumer society that developed in the West after World War II...what unites the different strands of Pop art [was] a common recognition that consumerism had changed the appearance of the world, perhaps even the nature of appearance, and that art must draw on new contents and develop new forms accordingly. (Ironically, this imperative came at a moment when abstract art had won general acceptance for the first time—another point of resentment for some artists and critics opposed to Pop.) Semblance as such appeared to be mediated and Pop found its primary subject in this new look of the world, in an iconic visibility...The consumerist superficiality of images and seriality of objects also affected

*the mediums of painting and sculpture structurally, and Pop registers these alterations as well.*³³

While **Stromberg** is not interested in "consumerist superficiality," Foster's definition helps to establish **Stromberg's** variance from, and alliance with the Pop artists of the late 1950s and 1960s. At present, for example, **Stromberg** is also not interested in reflecting big business, glamorous, gimmicky, or sexy themes, particularly since the originators of the genre did that so readily.

Stromberg's iconography is partly rooted in a celebration of "good form," as he has pointed out, "Design is rooted in time, and I appreciate the care that went into each object I select to recreate in my work."³⁴ "One of my favorite painters and a direct influence on my art practice is Wayne Thiebaud. I so admire the way that he can present something so simple as a cake or a gumball machine with such a humorous and beautiful bluntness and immediacy."³⁵ But, he points out, it is also rooted in how the things we have around us add to our experiences and even our identities. "I have no interest in the retreading of the pictures of celebrities or that sort of work. I prefer the humor of something that is not a high art object and making a meticulous, carefully rendered object, and that gives more meaning to these things we would otherwise ignore."³⁶ Additionally, **Stromberg** is asking questions about how what it is we purchase and live with affects our sense of beauty in the world. "I am more interested in objects that the average person might have owned, and in this way, perhaps my work celebrates a working-class aesthetic."³⁷

Similar to Pop art, **Stromberg's** paintings depict objects that bespeak the times he

is interested in, and they acknowledge "consumerism," changing "the appearance of the world." For example, to create his earliest collages using 1940s newspapers, which led him to construct *"the grilles of cars because they quickly indicate the periods they came from with signature looks."*³⁸ He began exploring 1950s materials because of his love for the color of that time, which led him to the expansion of his idea to mine his formative years to depict more personal objects.

Today, **Stromberg** explores possessions from his "youth," to better understand himself through the mass-produced objects that were a part of his life. *"I mine from a list that I keep. On the list are things from my background, tapes and portable turntable and Fisher-Price cash register were all from my childhood."*³⁹ **Stromberg** makes use of period ephemera that existed throughout the Pop period, but his harkening back to these times is a kind of reckoning. While they do acknowledge that "consumerism...changed the appearance of the world," they also say something about the human condition under the circumstances of two-plus centuries of industrialization.

Stromberg admits that he wrestles with issues of sentimentality in his art. *"I am not a sentimental person, but yet I am drawn to the nostalgia of finding something I played with, and I look back to...I want to look back on some of my memories through the objects that I played with and saw around me."*⁴⁰ And at this point in his practice, which is still relatively new for him, he is unsure where this may all lead. A person forms through their play, which is, of course, linked to their family context, location, and proximity to others. And, like the familiarity of these forays into the artist's past, he is intuitively moving forward with great interest

and attention to detail.

Stromberg's work serves as a reminder that consumerism and abstraction grew into each other until they blended to the point where art movements were born out of the materials that were abundantly available as culture evolved toward mass production/ mass spending. That is a journey we are all on and know not where it will lead.

Back To Go Forward

More than just being a semantic case, **Stromberg's** paintings build off the history of art that breaks up the world into smaller bits and reconstitutes new pictorial realities. Embedded in this tradition, but working past it, **Stromberg** has pushed collage to become a stand-in for paint in the traditional sense—while he peels away at what painting is at the same time. All the while, his work returns to pictorial reality, established in the centuries before modern collage while still employing the potentials of collage. **Stromberg's** work pushes the meaning of the word "painting" to a more inclusive definition while it also blends several established Modernist genres. His studio practice is inherently conceptual and Postmodern regarding the questions he raises. He presents us with an essential equivalence between what is primarily regarded as two separate activities: "collage" on the one hand and "painting" on the other. In **Stromberg's** hands, however, painting and collage are the same activity.

Stromberg asks how it is possible to have memories of things that occurred before he was born. We absorb things without knowing we are taking things in—intangible inputs surround us at every turn. The feelings he grew up with, passed onto him by his parents and his surroundings, that in turn,

he recognizes in the objects he once touched or reexamines now are the very things that drive him to create and to wonder about his past. In this exhibition, we catch **Stromberg's** evolution as a painter, and as a critical thinker midstream, he is still in the process of looking back to move forward. As he points out,

*"We can't change the past, but we can seek to understand how it shapes us."*⁴¹

Todd Bartel, Curator, Gallery Director

1. Nathan Stromberg, July 27, 2018 telephone interview with Todd Bartel
2. Nathan Stromberg, August 10, 2018 telephone interview with Todd Bartel
3. Nathan Stromberg, *Back to Go Forward*, artist's statement, 2018
4. Stromberg, artist's statement
5. Note: Pablo Picasso's painting, *Still-Life with Chair Caning*, 1912; Georges Braque's papier collé, *Fruit Dish and Glass*, 1912
6. Nathan Stromberg, *Objects of Worth*, artist's statement, 2017
7. Ibid
8. Nathan Stromberg, transcript, telephone interview with Todd Bartel and *Circulus Retro* artist Evelyn Davis-Walker, July 30, 2018, 00:20:36 minutes
9. Stromberg, August 10
10. Ibid
11. Stromberg, July 30 transcript, 00:20:36 minutes
12. Ann Arbor Art Center, past exhibitions website, <https://www.annarborartcenter.org/exhibitions/art-now-2019-painting/> retrieved August 17, 2019
13. James Elkins, *What Painting Is—How to Think About Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy*, Routledge, New York, 1999, pp. 1-2
14. Elkins, p. 5
15. Elkins, p. 45
16. Note: technically speaking, there are up to three parts to paint—pigment (color), binder (glue), and sometimes a vehicle (a wet solution). The vehicle allows the overall mixture to be distributed in a wet solution while also allowing for the possibility of dilution. Sometimes, the vehicle is also a binder, as in egg tempera in which the yolk of the egg acts as both the vehicle to distribute the color while it also keeps the pigment particles glued in place once dry.
17. Stromberg, August 10
18. Stromberg, August 10
19. Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh, *Collage—Personalities, Concepts, Techniques*, Chilton Company, Book Division Publishers, Philadelphia, 1962, p. vii

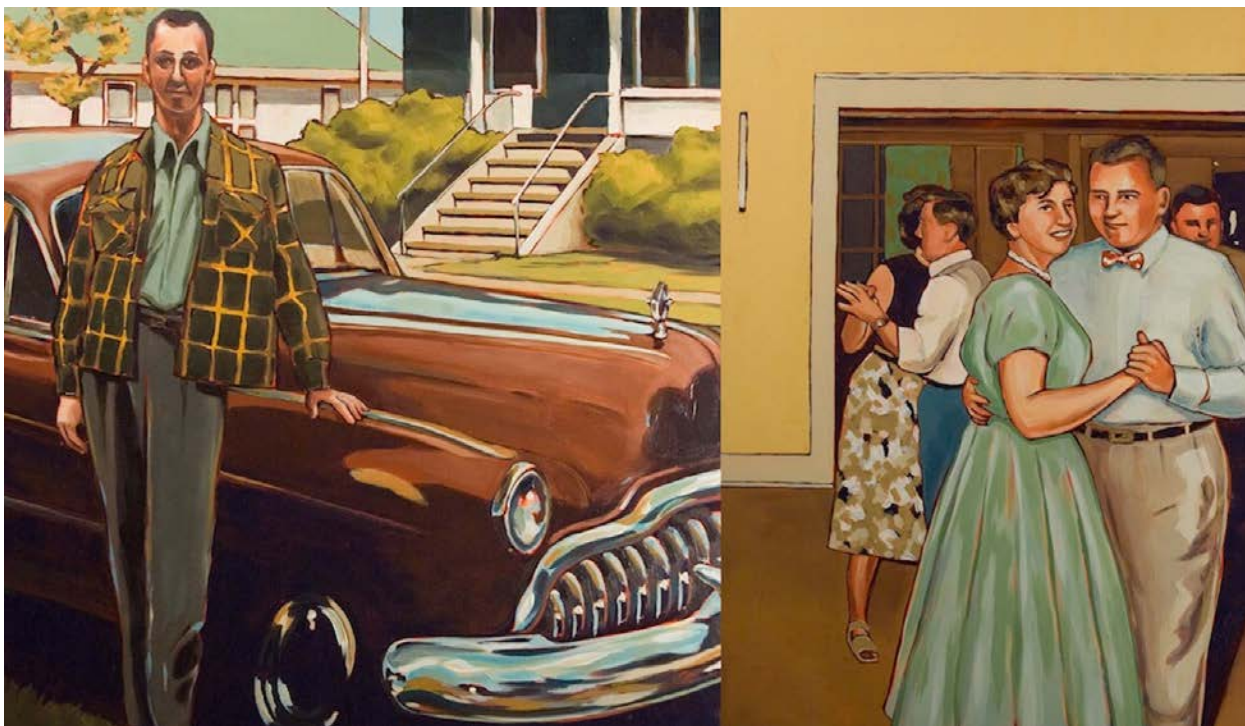
20. Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters, Aesthetic Meditations 1913*, trans. Lionel Abel, Wittenborn, Schultz, New York, 1949, p. 23, appears in *The Art of Assemblage*, William Seitz, MoMA, New York, p. 14
21. Stromberg, August 10
22. Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh, p. 1
23. William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, MoMA, New York, 1961, p. 14
24. Seitz, p. 14
25. Guillaume Apollinaire (1912) quoted by Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1958, p. 259, appears in *The Art of Assemblage*, William Seitz, MoMA, New York, 1961 p. 15
26. Paul Cézanne, *Letter to Emile Bernard*, April 15, 1904, <http://arthistoryproject.com/artists/paul-cezanne/letters-from-paul-cezanne-to-emile-bernard/>, retrieved October 12, 2016
27. Seitz, p. 21
28. Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art*, Thames & Hudson, New York, NY, 2004, p. 17
29. Seitz, p. 22
30. Stromberg, August 10
31. Mark Francis, Preface, *Pop—Themes And Movements*, Phaidon Press Limited, NY, 2005, p. 11
32. Richard Hamilton, Letter to Alison and Peter Smithson, 16 January 1957, found in *Survey*, by Hal Foster in *Pop—Themes And Movements*, Phaidon Press Limited, NY, 2005, p. 15
33. Hal Foster, *Survey—Themes And Movements*, Phaidon Press Limited, NY, 2005, p. 16-19
34. Stromberg, August 10
35. Stromberg, August 17, 2019 email
36. Ibid
37. Ibid
38. Ibid
39. Ibid
40. Ibid
41. Stromberg, *Back to Go Forward* statement



Nathan Stromberg at The Cambridge School of Weston,, preparing for a class presentation, September, 24, 2018.



Nathan Stromberg—Paintings



Prize, 2009
oil, wood panels
16 x 28 inches
photo credit: John Raleigh



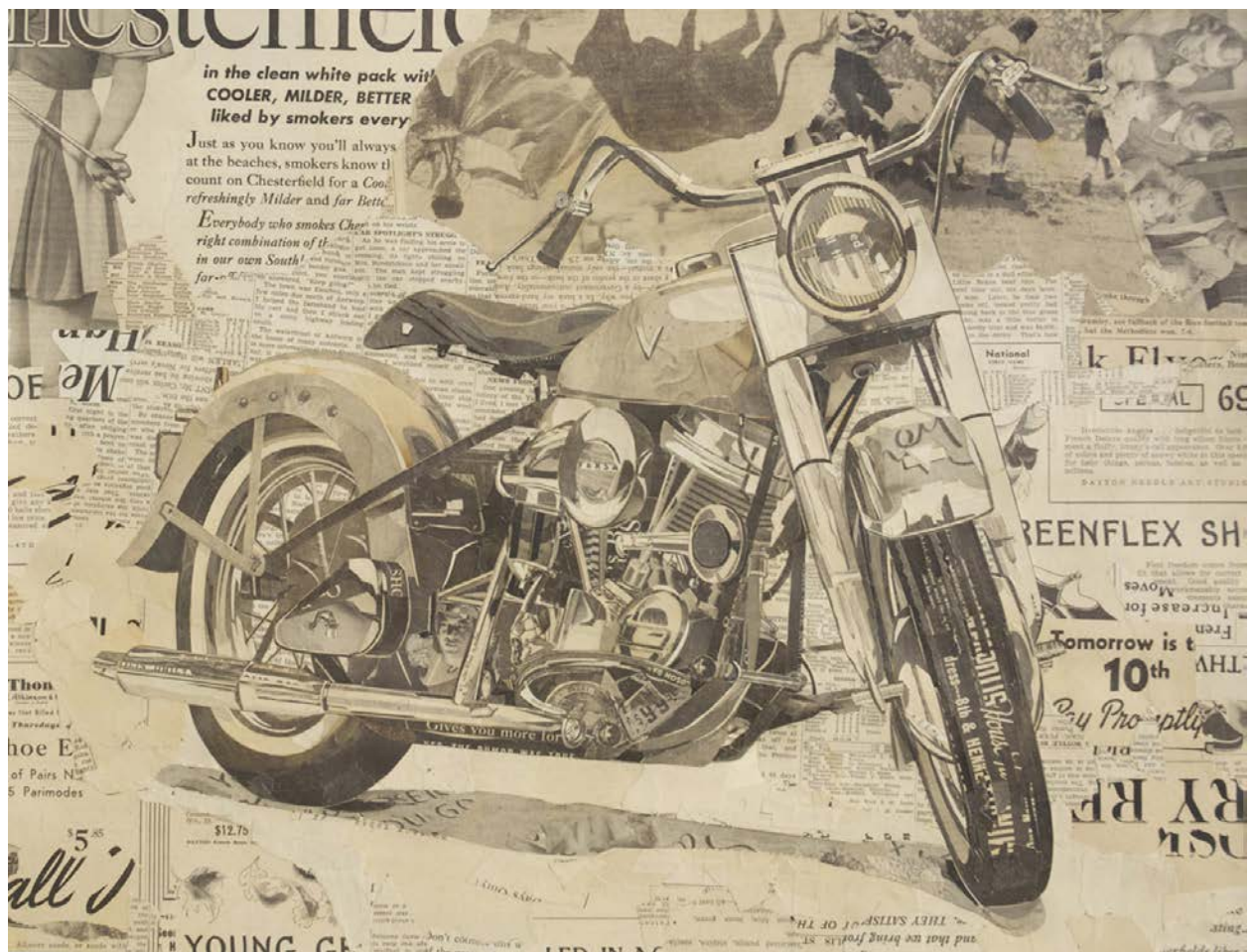
Fossils, 2009
oil, wood panels
18 x 42 inches



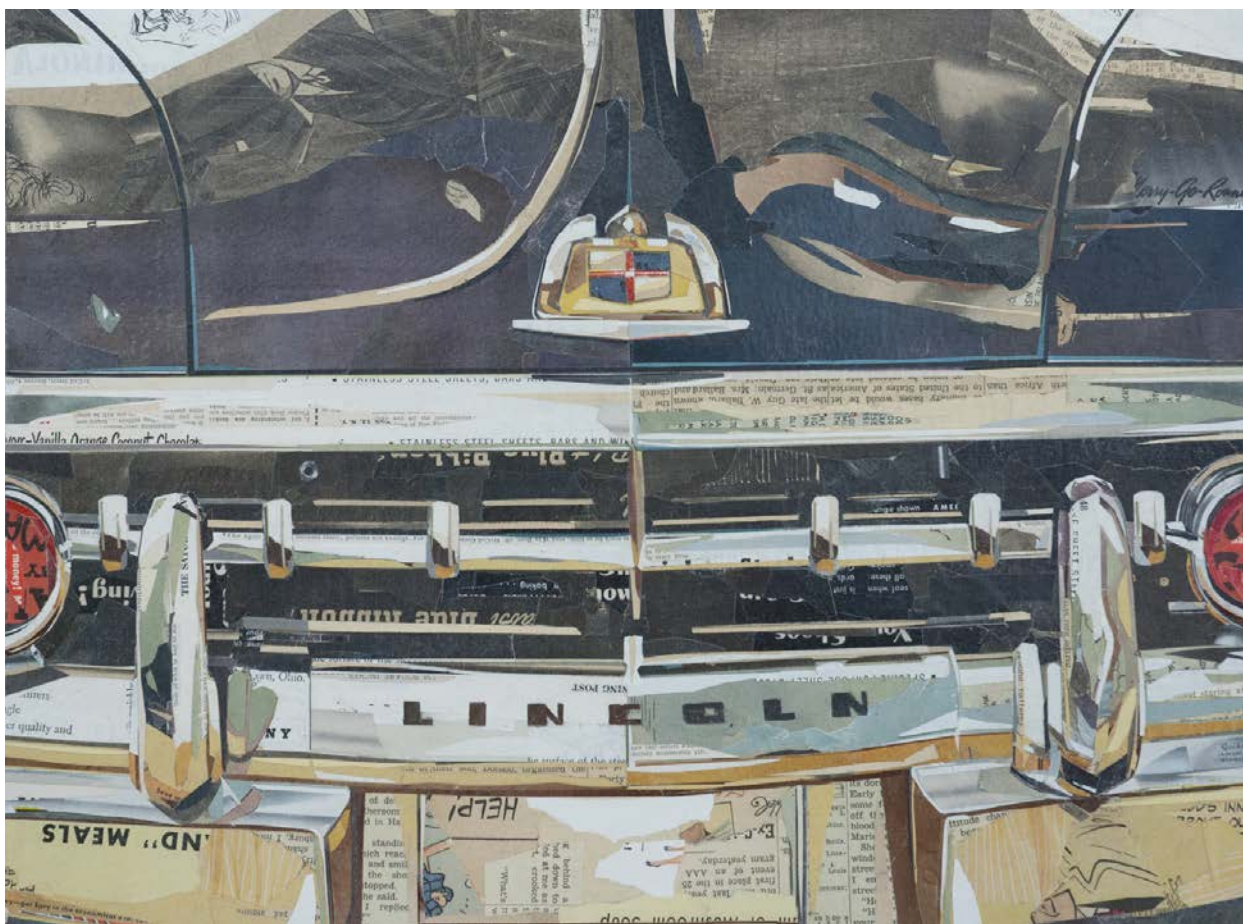
Nathan Stromberg—Collage Paintings



56 Chevy Pickup, 2011
1941 newspaper collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
19.5 x 32 inches



55 Harley Davidson Panhead, 2012
 1941 newspaper collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
 16.5 x 21.5 inches



'50 Lincoln (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



'51 Packard (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



'52 Oldsmobile (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



'53 Buick (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



'54 Hudson (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



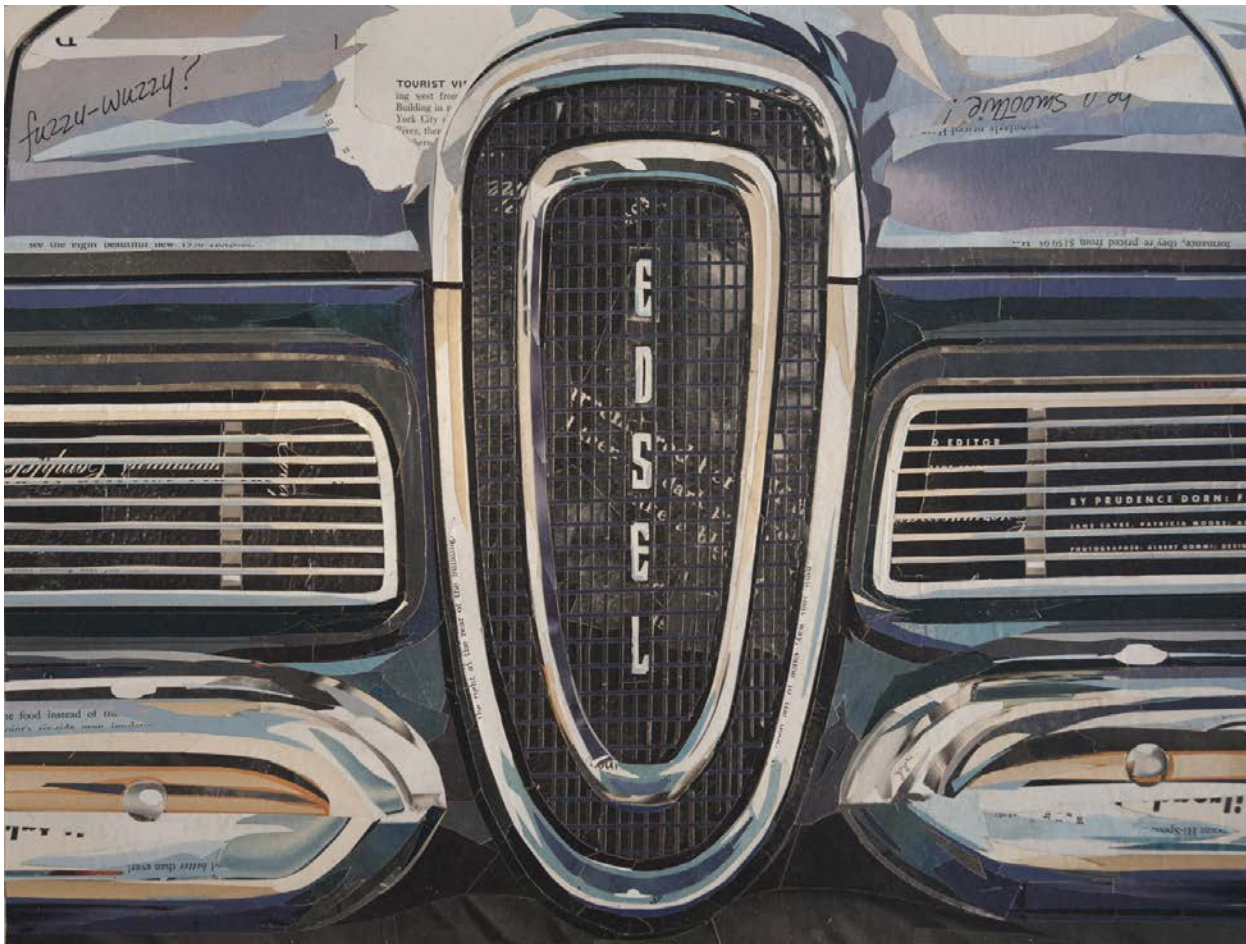
'55 Pontiac Sun Chief (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



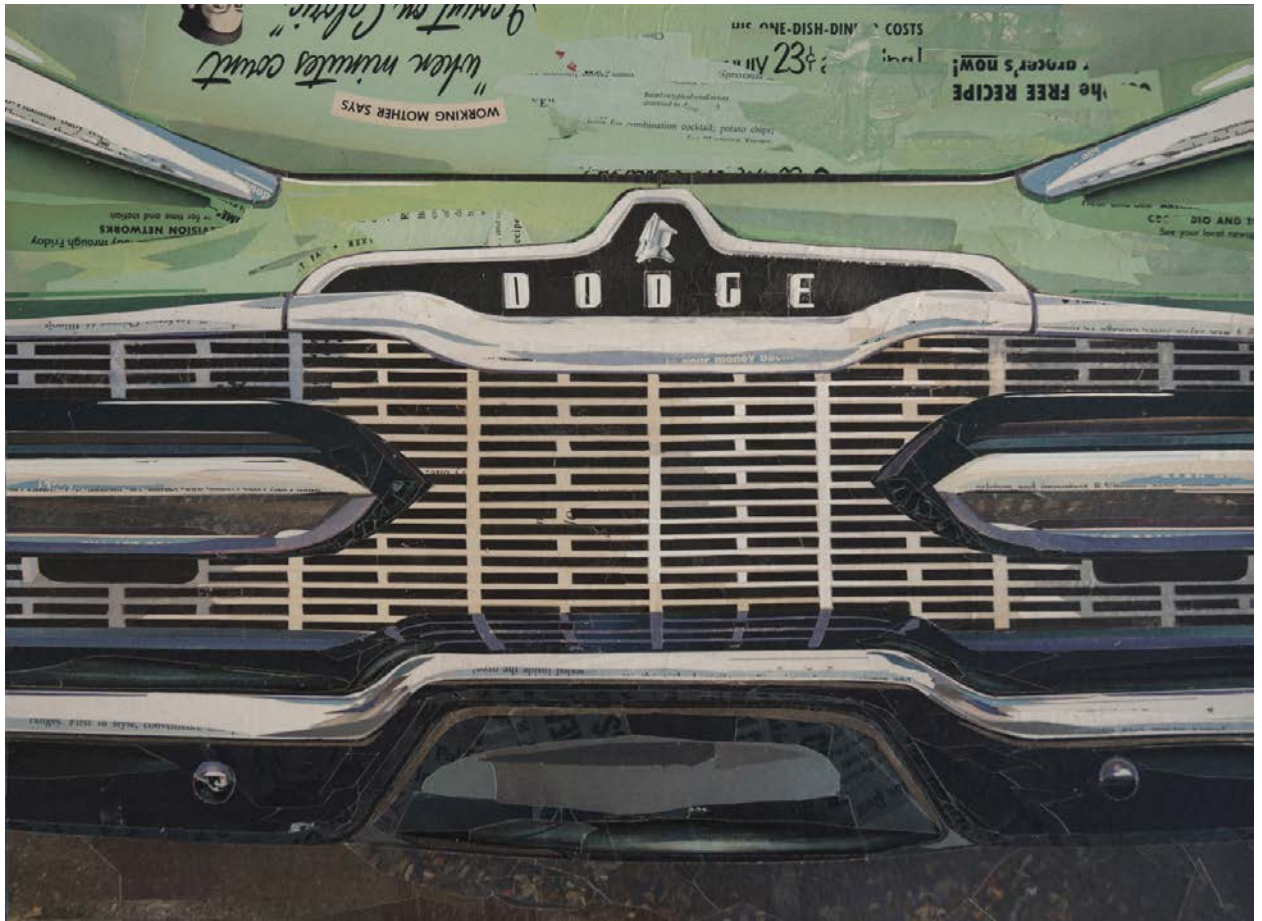
'56 Cadillac (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



'57 Ford Fairline (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



'58 Edsel Ranger (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



'59 Dodge Coronet (A Decade of Grills '50-'59), 2013-14
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
each 12 x 16 inches



18 Chairs, 2014
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
12 x 27 inches





Magic/Cons, 2014
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
13.5 x 16 inches



Air Jordans, 2015
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
13.5 x 18.5 inches



Portable Turntable in Mustard Yellow, 2015
 vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
 21.5 x 19.5 inches



Glass-Bottomed Table Lamp, 2015
 vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
 16 x 12 inches



Golf Clubs in Stiff Orange/Blue Leather, 2015
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
27.5 x 12.5 inches



Armchair in Crushed Orange Velvet, 2015
vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
26 x 19.5 inches



Fisher Price Cash Register, 2015
 vintage magazine collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
 11.5 x 12.5 inches



8 Mix tapes, 2017
 vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
 7.5 x 20.5 inches





Three Hollow Body Guitars, 2017
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
12 x 28 inches





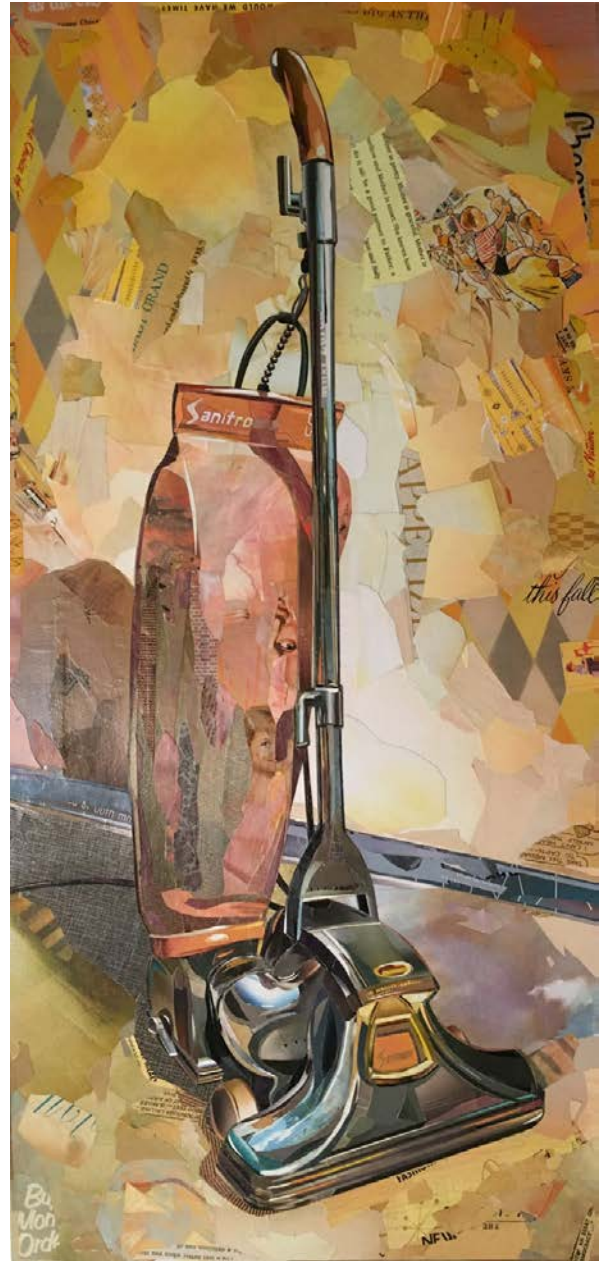
Polaroid Camera, 2017
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
12.5 x 14.5 inches



Primary Tricycle, 2017
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
35 x 30 inches



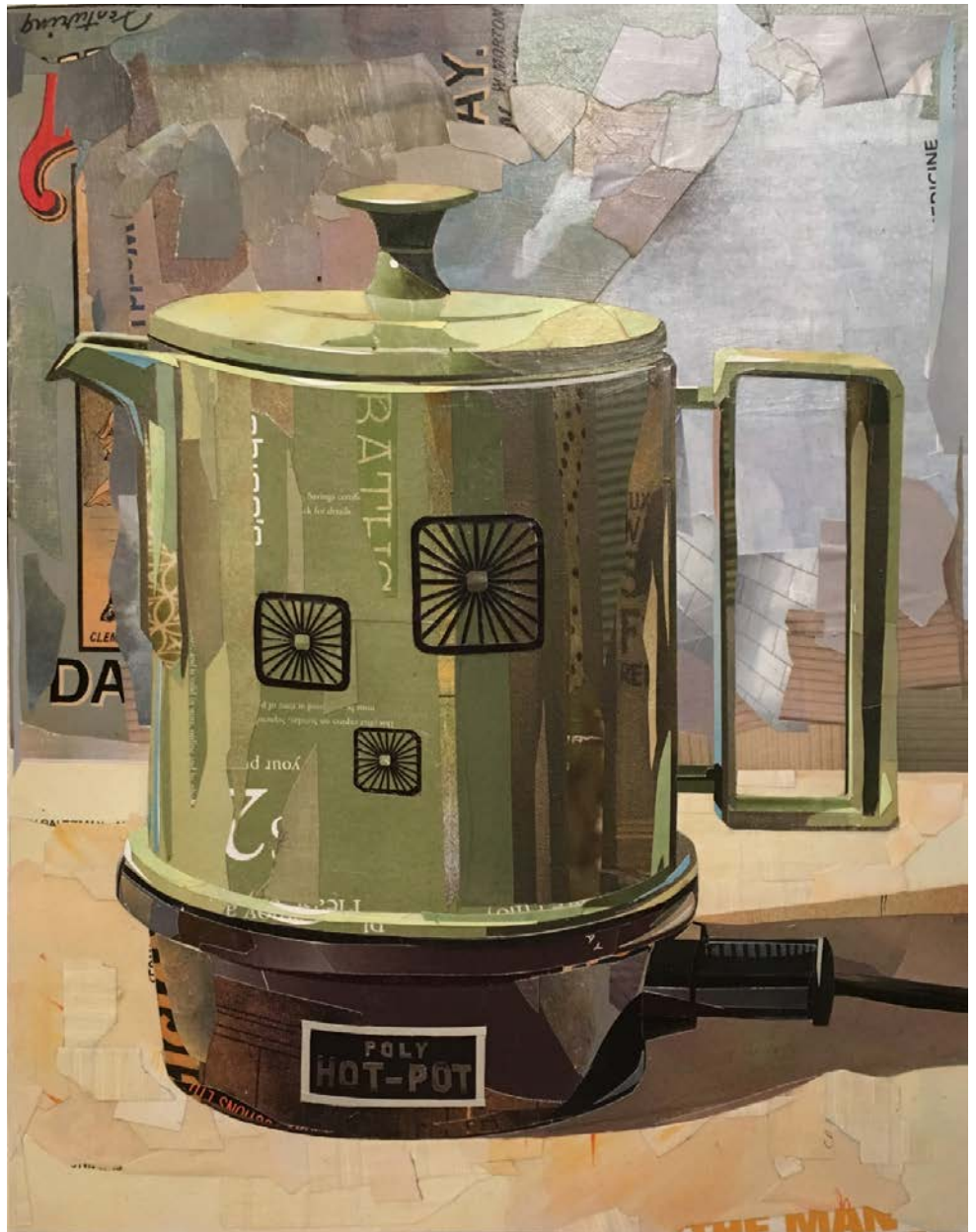
Tackle Box/Minnow Bucket, 2017
 vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
 20.5 x 26 inches



Kirby Dual Sanitronic, 2017
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
31 x 14.5 inches



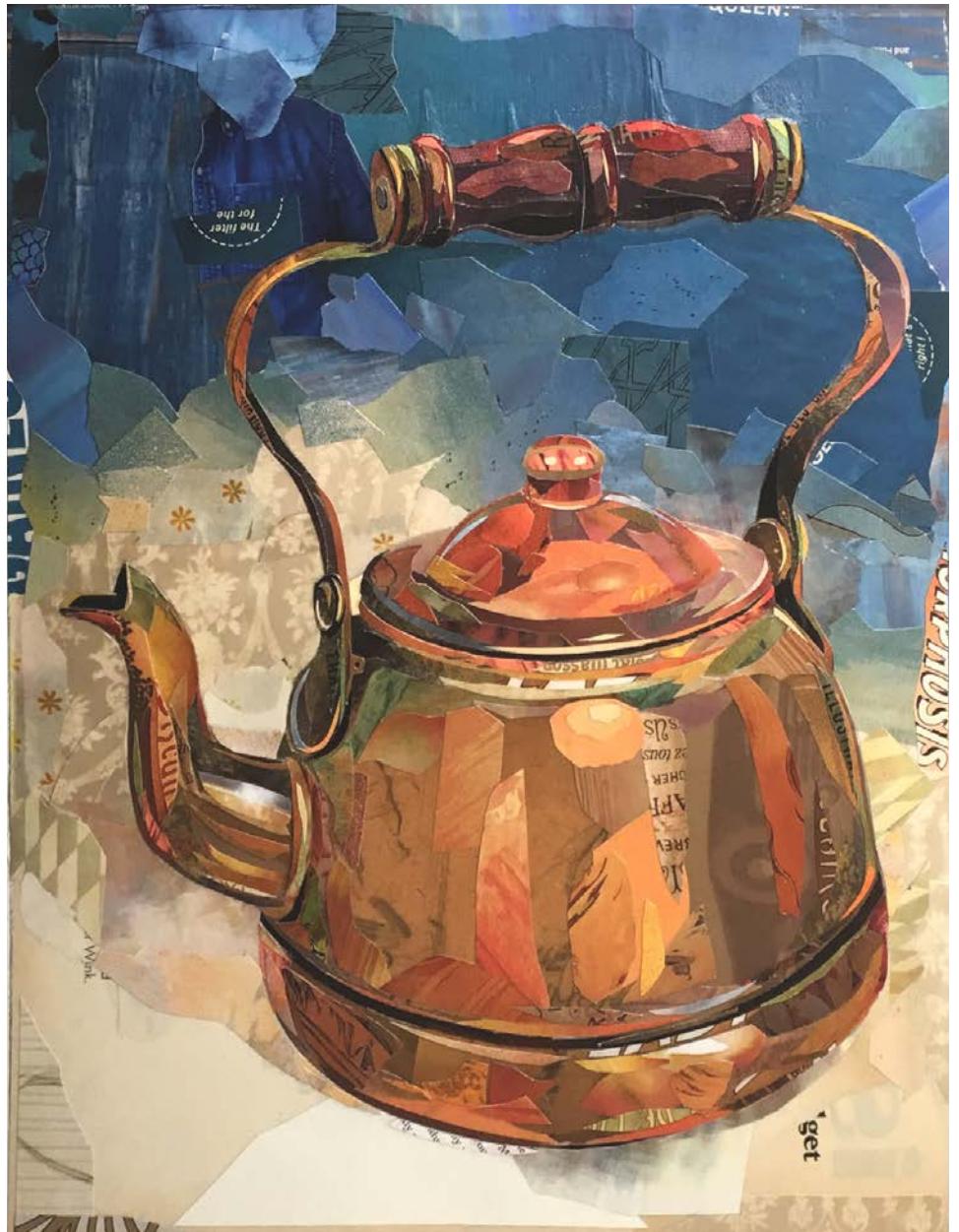
Kettle #1 (Yellow Stovetop), 2017
 vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
 11 x 14 inches



Kettle #2 (Avocado Hot Pot), 2017
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
11 x 14 inches



Kettle #3 (Rosemaled Kettle), 2018
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
11 x 14 inches



Kettle #4 (Copper Kettle), 2018
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
11 x 14 inches



Kettle #5 (Enamel Percolator), 2018
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
11 x 14 inches



4 Bundt Pans, 2018
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
18 x 20 inches



Avocado Range, 2018
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
26 x 18.5 inches

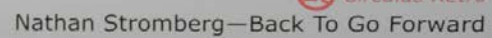


Cigarette Machine/You Get A Lot to Like, 2018
vintage magazine and book collage on 400lb Fabriano watercolor paper
27 x 20.5 inches



Nathan Stromberg—Exhibition Installation









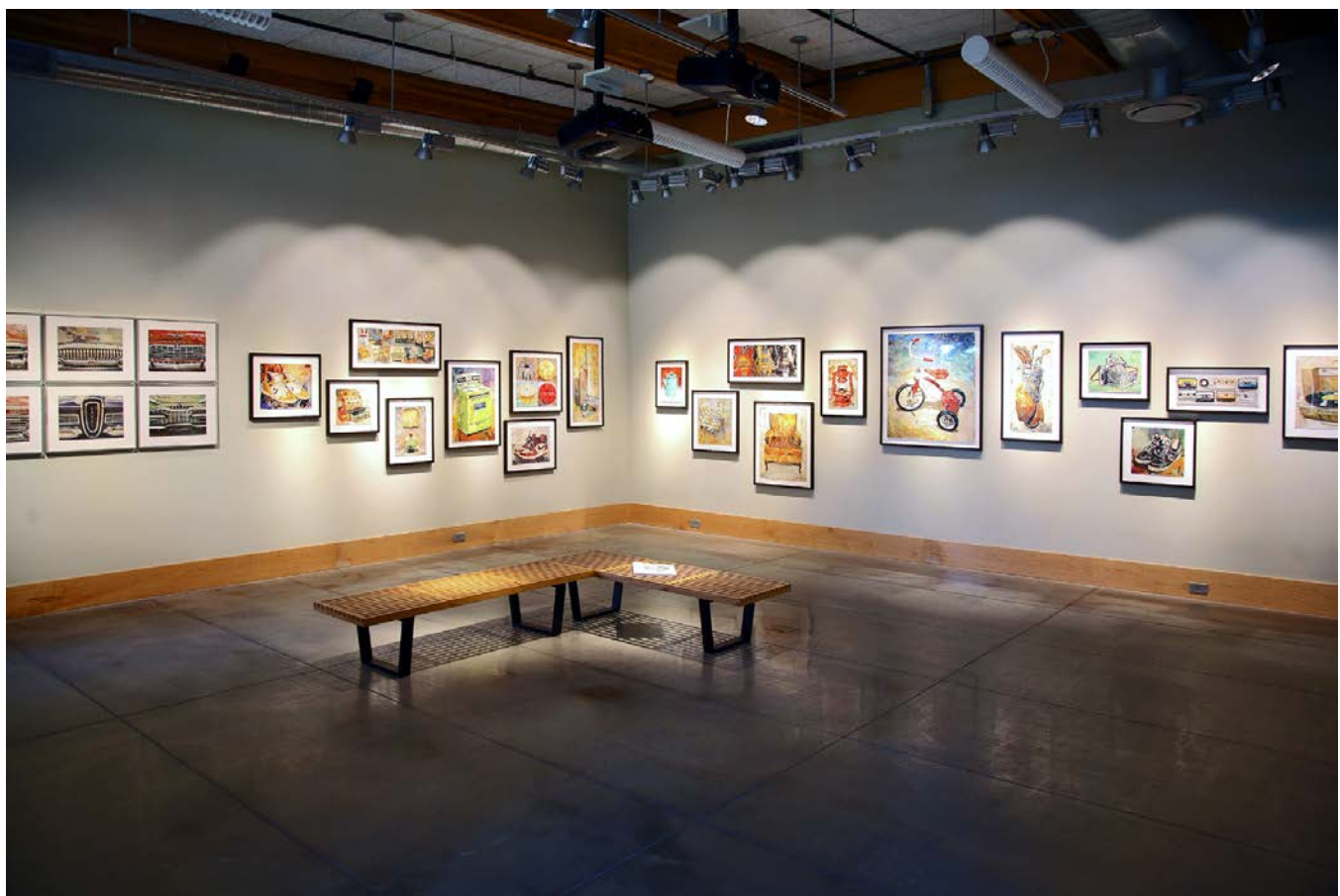




























Nathan Stromberg—Artist's Statements

Back to Go Forward

How can a relationship with the past exist in which memory functions as an active process, allowing continual reconsideration, rather than as a form of entombment, to which archives and museums are sometimes compared?

Renee Green, *Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae*, 2002

The past is never a static thing.

Interpretation of past events is as wide as the vast range of human experience. Some revel in the past and wish that they could somehow return to mythic times when life was simpler. Others look back and only see archaic ways of thinking and being. This vast chasm of understanding makes for loaded and endlessly compelling art-making, and it also addresses the very root of present day societal division. How we understand the past and relate to it tells us a lot about the ways we engage with the present and look forward to the future.

What is our relation to the past and why does the past matter? We can't change it, but we can seek to understand how it shapes us. Perhaps my fascination with dated objects has been brought about by reflecting on the process of aging, or the fact that as a teacher I work and associate with young people who do not have living memories of 9/11, an event which still seems so jarringly recent.

Philosopher George Santayana famously wrote that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This is an ominous warning about the very real dangers of ignoring our past mistakes. Certainly we've seen our societal failures and

history repeating itself. This year marks the 50th anniversary of 1968, a year when the country appeared to be coming apart at the seams with nationwide protests surrounding civil rights and the sexual revolution, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, a growing distrust in national government and the horrors of the war in Vietnam played out on the nightly news. In hindsight, we were perhaps too quick to believe that we've learned from our collective failures. Now more than ever, it's essential that we look to the past, to trace the present back towards its cultural roots—not so we can dwell there—but rather to reconsider what it means to live in the present and create the future.

Nathan Stromberg, 2018, Saint Paul, MN

Prize and Fossils

These two diptych paintings were made in 2009 for a solo exhibition entitled American Iconic. Many of the 52 images I made for that show, including these two, were created from images salvaged from discarded Kodachrome slide film. Thus, the people in these images were real and the image a re-representation of a moment in the past. I made the artistic choice to turn my images into diptychs and provide the titles in order to play with the implied narrative and provide what I saw as a humorous and thought-provoking commentary on the image.

With the title Fossils, I saw in a single word a connection between the dinosaur and the elderly woman in the kitchen. The term brings to mind fossilized dinosaur remains, physical remnants of creatures long dead. In a very real sense, the source image of the woman that I used to create the painting was also a fossil. It depicts an unknown yet very real person who almost certainly passed away a long time ago. I felt drawn not only to the melancholic mystery and simultaneous humor of the image, but also to the memories I have of women always being in the kitchen at family gatherings. Visually there's a great interplay between the strange backwards angle on the large concrete dinosaur and the immediacy of the kitchen portrait. To me, the two images somehow belong together and improve each other.

With Prize, I was trying to play off of the implied narratives of both images. In sifting through thousands of images, I started to notice trends. A popular image is one of the dad/husband standing in front of a shiny new car. I thought it was interesting to juxtapose such an image next to a couple

dancing together. Is she seen as a 'prized' possession in the eyes of her dance partner, or is he the one who is prized? I like that it's left ambiguous and up to the viewer to decide.

In looking back on these images nearly 10 years after they were created, I'm surprised at the blunt nature of the titles and the visual choices I made. It was not my intention to in anyway demean or devalue anyone, but I have to acknowledge that they do imply a very limited and chauvinistic point of view. The women in these paintings are seen in the kitchen and in a comparative position with a man and his new car. As a white, middle-aged American male, implied gender roles and positions of power are things I often do not have to worry about, and that is deeply troubling. It can be easy for someone in my position to grow apathetic towards issues that are of utmost importance. For this reason, looking to the past is as important as ever, particularly in times such as these. The recent rise of the #MeToo movement represents a much needed and direct challenge to male chauvinism and the objectifying treatment of women. Only by dragging such long-held societal attitudes into the light can we find ways to shift our thinking.

When seen through a contemporary lens, images such as these can function as humorous commentary on the changing of time and attitude while simultaneously forcing us to seriously confront fossilized ways of thinking. We're led to reconsider how far we've come and how far we have yet to go. In the context of this exhibition they are a great example of the importance in looking to the past in order to really understand how to move forward.

Nathan Stromberg, 2018, Saint Paul, MN

Objects of Worth

Actually this is just a place for my stuff, ya know? That's all—a little place for my stuff. That's all I want; that's all you need in life, is a little place for your stuff. Ya know? I can see it on your table, everybody's got a little place for their stuff. This is my stuff; that's your stuff; that'll be his stuff over there. That's all you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That's all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

George Carlin, *A Place for my Stuff*, 1981

In my memory I'm 9 years old in the back corner of a rural Wisconsin flea market, lost in a large pile of rusty lures, license plates, musty-smelling old books, and table after table of dated colored glassware and porcelain trinkets. There are boxes of browned baseball cards with softened corners depicting sub-par players I've never heard of. There are old bicycles with flat tires and piles of auto parts, tables of collector dolls, racks of old clothing and stacks of vinyl records. These Saturday flea markets are the kinds of places where one can still occasionally find a hidden gem among the piles of worthless objects. All of it begs the question: What exactly IS "worth," and who decides it? How is it that we assign meaning to objects and what do our objects say about us? What objects are your memories wrapped up in?

We care deeply about our stuff. It means much more to us than simply what it's made of: plastic and glass, wood or metal. We care because there's something American in our DNA that leads us to assign memory and meaning to our stuff. I'm curious to know why this is, especially in an era when our system of consumerism is rapidly

turning away from the traditional retail store. We now buy things without holding and examining them first, and the aesthetic design of our things has become increasingly less important. And yet, there are a slew of products that look old but are brand new. Vinyl records and record players have seen a resurgence, and it's even possible to buy a device that transforms a smartphone into an oversized Polaroid camera. These are just two examples of the ways we crave connection to a simpler time when things were certainly less convenient, but perhaps more memorable.

With my art I've tried to pose the open-ended question: What is the role of stuff in our lives? Since 2012, I've worked exclusively in the medium of collage. It was a scary transition after years spent years trying to become a better oil painter, but a new idea worth exploring is worth diving into. It all happened because of an accidental discovery.

I live in small one and a half story home in Saint Paul, Minnesota. My house was built in 1941, and when we purchased the place in 2001 it was in need of many repairs. Over the years I started working on one project at a time, eventually starting a full gutting and remodeling of the upstairs attic. In removing a wall, I discovered that it was filled with perfectly preserved reams of newspapers from 1941, sown together as insulation. I've learned since that this was a common practice for a long time, and that many old houses have time capsules of newspaper in the walls. It was fascinating to look at the papers and to read them. The papers pre-date the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of that year, and are filled with op-ed articles about how America should stay out of Europe's War. There are great old advertisements with terrifically tacky

illustrations of overly-happy people. There are grocery store sections and full-color comic funny pages with Superman cartoons. There are also cartoons of dopey-looking figures in blackface, which are shocking to come across. You can read the paper and sense immediately the divide of decades, how very different things are today and yet in some ways exactly the same. I knew for sure that I wanted to use the newspaper in my paintings somehow.

In a direct nod to Pop Art painter Jasper Johns, I had the thought to incorporate clippings of the paper into the background of my paintings as a texture, so I got to work. I drew out a picture of a classic car and instead of painting it, I collaged the image with torn and cut fragments of the paper. I matched each tone found within the parent image with appropriate dark and light pieces, placing mainly black sections from ads with the occasional words and headlines into the shaded sections of the car. Almost immediately, the image worked. I never intended to get detailed with the fragments, but the more I added the more interesting it became. After a few days, I mistakenly added a layer of transparent glaze over the top, to hopefully add texture to the paper, but the addition completely ruined the picture. It was immediately evident that the image of the classic car had a lot to say when defined by pieces of advertisement from a vintage newspaper. I've never been so happy to have failed. My painting supplies went to the shelf, and out came X-Acto blades and clear acrylic medium.

If there's one character trait a collage artist should probably possess, it's patience. The process is slow and arduous and not for those expecting quick results. This became clear as I started making a large car collage for the first time. The entire process of

working was one that I had to figure out for myself, so as a painter I naturally started to obsess about finding the perfect pieces to cut and add, just a like a painter might spend hours trying to mix and match the perfect color. I realized that this way of thinking wasn't going to work without having each piece take hundreds of hours to complete.

I've since learned through much trial and error that the real challenge in collage-making is to avoid overthinking the piece. It's far easier and more efficient to paste down the intriguing pieces and then paste over them if they don't work than it is to obsess about getting it right the first time. Occasionally, happy accidents happen just as they do with a painting. The process is really all about discovering how scattered and busy you can leave an area and have it still work in the context of the larger image.

Even when working efficiently, my pieces still take a long time to make, and this created a real obstacle: How was I going to create a consistent body of work based on so much experimentation when each piece took 80-100 hours? Even working at a good clip, that was a piece a month for me, and I knew I had to settle on a consistent subject matter to link the works together. For me, the classic car was the perfect subject. I don't know much about collector cars and even less about how to fix them, but I do love the way that these objects genuinely appeal to people. Classic cars are only shapes in chrome, glass, plastic and metal, yet those shapes immediately speak to unique designs and personal memories.

The car just worked as a motif, so I spent 14 months making monochromatic newspaper collages of the cars in advance of a show I titled *Chrome Remnants*. The end effect of

seeing the collages framed in the gallery was like coming across a sepia-toned photograph, only to get closer and notice an entire world of words and images. These collages were enormously fun to make, and I could tell that I was improving all the time. In starting out, cutting a highly specific shape would take a very long time, but after months of repetition and observation I could view a shape that I needed, look away from the piece entirely, and perfectly cut the shape in one go on my side cutting board.

It was inevitable that I would try sooner or later to make a realistic collage in full-color. I was both dreading it and looking forward to it, and when the time came to go that direction it involved rethinking the process all over again. Creating a monochromatic collage is considerably easier to do; it involves only using dark and light values. Working with color involves finding the dark and light values within the highly specific hue that's needed. The end result is a lot of image searching. Objects seemed like the next obvious progression, so after a year of gradual experimentation with color in the car series I decided to go that direction. This is where I returned to my memories of those summer flea-markets in Wisconsin when I was a kid. There was a lot to pull from there, many ideas of potential objects that could each work in a new series exploring our connection with stuff.

After early frustrations with matching colors, I hit on the idea of using period-specific magazines as the source. If the object was a chrome coffeepot from 1958, perhaps using magazines from 1958 would give the consistency in color I was looking for. I purchased bundles of old magazines on Ebay, including every edition of Collier's from that year. It worked like a charm. Almost immediately the pieces felt united

through the fading of the paper and the period colors. It never occurred to me that the quality of the ink and paper in these magazines would be an issue, that specific glues would react with and alter certain pages, or that 6-9 months after completion some areas would change color completely. It's been a big challenge to combat fading and make my work archival. Presently I have the majority of my pieces scanned and re-printed on high-quality archival paper, and then I cut the high quality prints instead of using the color fugitive (non-archival) period paper. It's time consuming and expensive, but it's worth it to maintain precise colors.

A collection of full-color collages were exhibited in a 2016 show I entitled Significant Stuff. In every other show I've been a part of, certain pieces emerge as favorites and clearly stand out over the rest. With this show, nearly every person I had the chance to talk to had a different personal favorite, and those preferences had everything to do with personal memories and emotional responses to the objects themselves. I chose most of the objects purely for their design, and then did a lot of research to understand their importance and get the best possible reference imagery to work from. I did, however, manage to sneak in a few objects that do mean something more to me. I grew up in Massachusetts in the 1980s, and idolized Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics. His black Converse All-Stars Sneakers pretty much sum up my youth. The challenge in making them into a collage was to go one step further and include images and articles about Larry Bird as much as possible. Another was the Fisher-Price Cash Register, a toy I played with countless times as a kid.

We care deeply about our stuff, and there's an endless list of ideas to work from as I

look ahead. I've had the privilege to create personal commissions of other people's prized stuff, and even to make work for a major sports franchise. I feel like I've only scratched the surface of what there is to do and I know I can always get better. Ultimately, the same inquisitiveness that fueled me as a 9 year old at the flea market drives me today. Where does value come from, and who determines it? What happens to our stuff when we're long gone and what meaningful memories once existed around all those rusty flea market finds? I'm sure that I will never know the answers to my questions, but that's just fine by me. The process is worth it.

Nathan Stromberg, 2017, Saint Paul, MN



Nathan Stromberg—Curriculum Vitae

NATHAN STROMBERG

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EDUCATION

- 2010 MFA, The Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University (Visual Arts)
2000 BA, Bethel University, (Studio Art and Art Education K-12)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 *Circulus Retro I/III: Nathan Stromberg—Back To Go Forward*, Thompson Gallery, The Cambridge School of Weston, Weston, MA
2017 *Another Man's Treasure*, Robbin Gallery, Robbinsdale, MN
2016 *Significant Stuff: New Object Collage*, ARTISTRY/Bloomington Theater and Arts Center, Bloomington, MN
2014 *Chrome Remnants*, The Phipps Center for the Arts, Hudson, WI
2010 *American Iconic: New Paintings by Nathan Stromberg*, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hopkins, MN

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 *Art Now 2019: Painting*, Ann Arbor Art Center, Ann Arbor, MI
2018 *Revolutionary Paths: Critical Issues in Collage*, Antenna Gallery, New Orleans, LA
All That You Can Imagine, Core New Art Space, Denver, CO
The Beautiful, The Center Gallery, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI
The Beautiful, Roughhewn People, Park Ridge, IL
The Beautiful, The Center for Lifelong Learning, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA
The Beautiful, St. George's Gallery, Colorado Springs, CO
The Beautiful, John Brown University Gallery, Siloam Springs, AR
2017 *Two Point Five Children*, Gallery 19, Chicago, IL
2016 *Minnesota Regional group exhibition*, Manifest, Cincinnati, OH
Significant Stuff—Alumni Spotlight Exhibitio, Bethel University, Saint Paul, MN
PLY, 3-person show, Banfil-Loc e Center for the Arts, Fridley, MN

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS (continued)

- Cut It Out*, Gallery One Visual Arts Center, Ellensburg, WA
- 2015 *2015 Minnesota State Fair Exhibition*, St. Paul, MN
Re:Classifie, LUCAD MFA Biennial Exhibition, Cambridge, MA
Nathan Stromberg, Glam Doll Donuts, Minneapolis, MN
- 2014 *Nathan Stromberg*, Corazon, Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN
Dust Jacket, Altered Esthetics, Minneapolis, MN
Healing Arts Program, Hudson Hospital, Hudson, WI
- 2013 *Croixdale Healing Arts Program*, Phipps Center for the Arts, Bayport, MN
Uncanny Folks, 2 person show, Good Question Gallery at Skylight Gallery, New York City, NY
Objectifie, AIB MFA Biennial Exhibition, Washburn Hall, Cambridge, MA
- 2012 *Open Door 8*, Rosalux Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
2012 Minnesota State Fair Exhibition, Saint Paul, MN
- 2011 Terzian Galleries, Park City, UT
Art 4 Shelter Benefit Exhibitio, Circa Gallery, Minneapolis MN
- 2010 *Minneapolis Art-A-Whirl*, Thorp Building, Minneapolis, MN
Art Institute of Boston MFA Thesis Exhibition, Boston, MA
- 2009 *Urban Arts Academy Benefi*, Fredrick R. Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN
- 2007 *Nathan Stromberg*, Watson Art Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 2000 *Nathan Stromberg*, Eugene Johnson Gallery, Bethel University Graduate Exhibition, Saint Paul, MN

AWARDS

- 2018 Finalist, *Manifest Grand Jury Prize*, Manifest Gallery, Cincinnati, OH
- 2007 *The Miracle at Stinky Bay*, Children's Book Illustration, Honorable Mention, London Book Festival

LECTURES/PRESENTATIONS

- 2018 *Nathan Stromberg—Back To Go Forward*, The Cambridge School of Weston, Weston, MA
Studio Here Artist Series, Minnesota State Fair Visual Arts Studio, ST. Paul, MN
Materials & Sources, artist presentation, KolajFest, New Orleans, LA
- 2016 *Significant Stuf*, Artist talk, Bethel University, Saint Paul, MN

PUBLICATIONS/PRESS

- 2017 *Where Does the Squirrel Sleep?*, Red Pine Press, Children's Book
Illustrations
Packers Life, TV show, artist segment, Green Bay Packers Collection
Minnesota Artist Exhibits at Lambeau Field, Feature story, Fox 9 News
Objects of Worth, Artists on Art Magazine, July/August
- 2013 *Featured Artist of the Month*, wickedquick.com
- 2012 *Nathan Stromberg: New Illustration Work feature*, AllanPeters.com

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

- 2017 Green Bay Packers Art Collection at Lambeau Field, Green Bay, WI



Thompson Gallery