

PAPER ? ... OR PLASTIC ?

by John Faubion

A question long associated with supermarket checkouts is becoming increasingly common in the art world: “Do you prefer paper, or plastic?” Decades ago, when grocers began offering plastic shopping bags as an alternative to paper, their motivation was financial; plastic bags are cheaper. In the art world, the question is driven by aesthetics; an increasing number of artists are discovering that art produced directly on sheets of plastic, often generically referred to as drafting film, yields results that can’t be achieved on paper. These results, expertly displayed in the Western art of Cheryl Harley-Volz, are helping to overcome earlier resistance to plastic as a viable alternative to the use of paper as a fine art substrate.

Having already won numerous awards for her drawings on paper, an excellent example of the results Cheryl can obtain with plastic is her graphite drawing of cattle titled: *Proceeding With Caution*. Drawn on polyester drafting film known as Dura-lar, it is rendered with such a lifelike quality that it’s difficult to stand in front of without resisting the urge to step aside to let the cattle pass. To achieve this effect, Cheryl used two sheets of Dura-lar with a matte finish on front and back, drew on both sides of each sheet, and layered both sheets over a piece of archival paper.

Whether on paper or plastic, Cheryl’s ability to breathe life into her Western subjects owes much to her thorough knowledge of them. A mutual friend, legendary trick-rider Candy Coverdale-Rodewald, introduced me to her at an annual Celebration of Fine Art Show in Scottsdale, Arizona. There, in Cheryl’s exhibition space, hung some of the most spectacular pencil drawings I have seen. The collection reflected experiences gained during summers spent in Cheryl’s youth on her mother’s two Colorado cattle ranches; her award-winning collegiate rodeo years; decades of traveling the professional rodeo circuit winning titles in goat tying, team roping, and barrel racing, and raising and training horses for every task the West demanded of them.

A woman of strong faith (she signs her work with a cross by her name to reflect her belief that she never works alone), Cheryl joked with me about her earliest memories of drawing on paper. “I was an active little wart,” she said. “At church, my parents used to give me pencils and the church bulletins to keep me quiet.” We agreed to consider this a mix of divine, and parental, intervention.

Cheryl was later afforded the luxury of access to art supplies in great abundance. Her father was a successful architectural engineer in her hometown of Independence, Missouri. She recalls



Cheryl Harley-Volz,
“Proceeding With Caution,”
2018, Graphite on Dura-lar over paper, 30 x 24



Cheryl Harley-Volz
“Bravado,”
2015, Graphite on paper, 18”x 23”

hours spent drawing in his study with a seemingly endless supply of pencils, paper, and other tools of his trade at her disposal.

A desire to improve upon her early drawings inspired Cheryl to seriously pursue art studies. “When in high school, my mom would take me on Saturdays to The Kansas City Art Institute for drawing lessons.” She later studied drawing and painting at Western States College in Colorado, and at Colorado State University. There, she obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

While Cheryl’s drawings on film are winning converts, and awards, the acceptance of drafting film as a fine art substrate has been slow to catch on. Why? Blame the reputation of cellulose acetate. Referred to simply as acetate, it was introduced in

the early 1900s as a much safer alternative to the decay-plagued and highly flammable cellulose nitrate film that was being used for photographic negatives and motion pictures. It found favor in the arts as a “Safety Motion Picture Film,” and,

eventually, as a substrate available in sheets for architectural drawings. This latter use is how plastic sheets in general came to be called drafting film. But cellulose acetate has its own decay issues known as “vinegar syndrome.” Eventually, it begins to smell like vinegar, buckles, shrinks, and breaks.

Dura-lar, marketed as “the acetate alternative,” is helping to overcome the lingering acetate stigma. It is archival, heat tolerant, difficult to tear, and has excellent dimensional stability. It was trademarked in 1993, by Grafix, a division of Graphic Arts Systems, a major supplier of plastic films for the commercial art market. Hayley Prendergast, President of Grafix, Consumer Products, told me that, at the time, there was confusion about which specific drafting films were being used by whom. “People called everything acetate at that time and, as we saw the move from commercial uses to more fine art, we realized the best way to differentiate ourselves and the product was to brand it.”

Eventually, plastic will be widely accepted throughout the art world as a fine art substrate of choice. For now, the response Cheryl Harley-Volz gave me to the “paper, or plastic” question was: “Drafting film will never totally replace paper. It is, however, fighting for first place in my arsenal of drawing surfaces.”

John Faubion has researched, written and lectured about Lawrence Tenney Stevens since 1995. He was award-winning co-curator of a major 1996 Stevens retrospective exhibition at the Tempe Historical Museum in Arizona. His discoveries in the Stevens archives contributed to the preservation efforts of the 1936 Dallas Centennial Fair site, and led to the re-creation of three of Stevens’s monumental sculptures there. He is writing a book about Stevens and is planning related exhibitions for 2019 and beyond. He established the Western column in the Journal of the Print World and welcomes your feedback and suggestions for future articles.

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