

Upcycling Cardboard

Milford-area artist uses throwaway material to create abstract collages

BY LYNN R. PARKS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT NATHAN



Mike Fleishman is always on the lookout for cardboard. And it's everywhere!

At a favorite bar, where drinks are served atop round pieces of decorated paperboard (otherwise known as coasters). At a pizzeria, where the star of the menu is placed on a circle of corrugated fiberboard and then into a protective cardboard box.

Along the side of the road, in piles of garbage and recycling that people have put out for pickup. Even at the breakfast table, where the cereal is in paperboard containers.

"Now I've become known as the cardboard guy," Fleishman says. "People always ask if I want boxes because they know that I use them. And no box is safe on the side of the road."

Fleishman, who has a master of fine arts degree in painting and drawing, has been working primarily with cardboard for the last four years. This past

winter, he had his first show of cardboard art, "Kitsch in Synch," at the Mispillion Art League in downtown Milford. (In addition to cardboard, the artist is also always on the lookout for a good play on words. One of the pieces in the exhibit, a representation of a fierce flying dinosaur, was titled "Tear a Dactyl.")

"I've always loved to do different kinds of work, making art out of different materials," he explains. "I like to recycle and upcycle" — that is, transform waste into objects of value. "And cardboard is a medium that's adaptable to any shape and that's wonderful to draw on. Cardboard is the bomb."

Fleishman started working with this material after he and his wife, filmmaker Joanne Caputo, moved to the Milford area from Yellow Springs, Ohio, near Dayton, a change prompted by a desire to "get out of Dodge," he says. (He and Joanne were considering Lancaster, Pa., for their next home, but when they decided to give southern Delaware a look, they liked what they saw.) >

Milford-area artist Mike Fleishman started using cardboard in his work after moving to Delaware from Ohio and having 300 boxes to dispose of. Above, he shows off "That's Still Good," cardboard on wood and colored with gel pens and markers.



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They used 300 boxes in the move from Ohio, and when the 2015 relocation was over and everything put away, the boxes had to be disposed of.

“I tore down most of them. I was holding the cardboard in my hands, experiencing the weight and feel of it,” Fleishman recalls, “and it came to me that it felt like a great surface to work on. I guess you could say that all of the art I have done since then is an homage to those boxes, and to our move to Delaware.”

The Pittsburgh native attended Taylor Allderdice High School in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of that city. “I wasn’t an athlete or a brainiac, but I could paint and I could draw,” he says. “I was the one who was always drawing comic books for the other kids.”

He obtained both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. After teaching in elementary and high schools for three years, he moved on to instruct at the college level. His most recent position was at Edison State Community College in Piqua, Ohio, where he taught commercial art and graphic design as well as basic design and drawing. He has been a guest lecturer at the Savannah College of Art and Design and at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and was a featured presenter in *How* and *Design World*, magazines for graphic designers, and at ICON, a national conference for illustrators. He is also a former contributing editor at *The Artist’s Magazine*.

And there’s more: Fleishman is the author of eight books, including “Starting Your Career as an Illustrator,” published in 2016 by Allworth Press. Since moving to Sussex County, he has been a writing tutor at Delaware Technical and Community College in Dover. He also teaches classes at the Mispillion Art League, including one in making art with — what else? — cardboard.

Fleishman’s cardboard art, all of it abstract, draws on his fondness for mechanical systems (one page on his

website, michaelfleishman.com, features pen-and-ink drawings of Dr. Seuss-like contraptions). “In my work, there is a recurring theme of pipes and ductwork,” he says.

The first cardboard piece he created, on display in his basement studio, is a loosely-put-together design, with open spaces between many of the cutout pieces of cardboard and no colors other than cardboard-brown and black. More recent works are tight constructions of overlapping cardboard layers,

cut into different shapes and much of it colored with markers, including those that leave behind a metallic sheen. “I have a big glue and scissors budget,” he says.

“And a big marker

budget! Why use just black marker when you can use all the markers?”

Recently, he has started using different materials in his work. One piece in his studio features a double arch, cut from plastic foam and colored red with black dots. Another has two black computer keys, “Ctrl” and “Option,” taken from a keyboard and glued onto the surface of the collage. The pterodactyl (“Tear-a-Dactyl”) is built on a fence picket that was headed for the garbage dump.

And more changes are yet to come, he predicts. “What really strikes me is: What other materials can I use? How can I draw other things in? What can I do with color to complete my vision of mechanical things?”

He has found that each piece grows organically, leading him to make it into whatever it should be.

“We’ll just see where this one goes,” he says, looking at a coaster that he’s covered in corrugated fiberboard. “This is something that just takes a lot of looking. I spend a lot of time sitting in my chair, staring at my work and wondering, ‘What’s next?’”

But if an artist follows the lead of an artwork, how does he know when it’s completed?

“You just keep looking at it,” he answers. “Is it balanced, in color and in

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Artist Mike Fleishman's cardboard collages, with designs that look like buildings, pipes and ductwork, reflect his interest in mechanical systems.

shape? Is there too much blue, or red, or white? There has to be a visual balance. And it has to feel right, in your head and in your heart. You can't be afraid. You've just got to go for it."

Fleishman doesn't remember when, but he feels that somewhere in his training he must have worked in cardboard. "I had some exploratory, experiential teachers who would have enjoyed this," he says. Some other teachers, though, more interested in realist art, "would have thought that it is junk."

Some of them may even have gone so far as to ask: Are pieces of cardboard, cut into shapes, colored with markers and glued together into abstract collages, really art at all?

"I'll turn that around," he says. "Why isn't it art? How are you defining art? Something that makes you feel better, more whole, that gets you thinking? If that's the case, this is certainly art."

What's sure is that Fleishman is having a lot of fun creating his cardboard collages. "I absolutely love it," he says. "Every day, I can't wait to get into the studio, and I can sit here for hours. In the studio, one thing leads to another, if you're open to it." ■

LYNN R. PARKS is a longtime contributor to *Delaware Beach Life*.

To Learn More — and How

Some of Michael Fleishman's works are on display at Gallery 37 in downtown Milford. For information, visit the gallery's Facebook page. ■



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