

A PEA CAN BE
CHOPPED UP
AND RE-
ASSEMBLED
INTO THE SUN

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PAUL ROBLES
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RHAYNE VERMETTE

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MAY 28 - JULY 31
2021

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CURATED BY SANDEE MOORE

ART GALLERY OF REGINA



A Pea Can Be Chopped Up and Reassembled Into the Sun (installation views)

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY



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This Essay Should Be Chopped Up and Reassembled Into A Pea: some fragmented ideas dissecting *A Pea Can Be Chopped Up and Reassembled Into The Sun*, an exhibition of contemporary collage practices

By Sandee Moore

Imagine a mathematician cutting up a single, tiny, round, green pea.

It's not a real pea, such as one you might find on your plate; it's a theoretical pea.

The mathematician cuts the pea into disjoint subsets (or pieces). Then, she rotates and translates the disjoint subsets and assembles all the pieces into two peas, each identical to the original pea. Ta-da!

The mathematician continues to cut the pea into more and more pieces, then reassembles them into the Sun. This is possible because this theoretical pea is not really a solid object but a collection of points.

It sounds like fairy tale logic: the more the pea is chopped up, the more there is. This counter-intuitive idea, or paradox, is called the Banach–Tarski Theorem. A pea could be chopped up and reassembled into the Sun, seemingly increasing in volume because the volume of these theoretical pieces cannot be measured. Contradicting conventional wisdom, the process of cutting apart a (theoretical) pea is not destructive but instead generates a new object that is greater than its initial pieces.¹

1 "Banach-Tarski Paradox," Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, last modified 15 June 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banach%E2%80%93Tarski_paradox.

Imagine a magician with a guillotine blade in hand. The magician inserts the blade into a box containing a lady. With a loud clunk and a metallic whoosh, the upper and lower halves of the lady are severed, then reunited. Magic! We know that this is just an illusion. Nothing is actually cut up, and the result is simply what the magician started with, nothing more.

Imagine five artists: Jason Cawood and Colby Richardson (known collectively as Phomohobes), Paul Robles, Gerry Ruecker, and Rhayne Vermette, the very artists whose work is exhibited at the Art Gallery of Regina in the exhibition *A Pea Can Be Chopped Up and Reassembled Into The Sun*. In their hands, the artists each hold something magically mathematical – not magician’s wands but cutting tools: blades, saws, scissors, and razors. Like the mathematician, they understand that the cut of a blade is not necessarily damaging but generative.

Or, rather, they understand that reassembling their scattered pieces, sticking them together with glue or tape or screws, creates more than what they started with.

So, what did they start with? Stockpiles of home décor and fashion magazines from the 1970s and 1980s. A trash-bound assortment of amateurish pornographic photos cheaply printed. Scraps of film stock from the cutting room floor. Poorly archived negatives, emulsions marred with blooms of moisture. Broken and chipped bits of grandly ornamented furniture. Picture frames, lavishly coated in glossy varnishes or golden gilt and weighed down by decorative scrolls. Butcher paper intended for single use, to be discarded once the bloody cuts of meat are unwrapped. Collage artists’ materials are practically worthless—almost nothing.

An artist chops up all the valueless junk, reassembles it, and somehow creates something from (nearly) nothing. This is not a trick, nor the illogical logic of theoretical geometry. This is what it means to create. The artist creates more than what they started with. The artist creates value. The artist creates meaning. The artist creates art.

Collage was once regarded as the most radically political of media. The history of 20th Century art is littered with magical transformations wrought by the glue pot in the hands of audacious artists seeking to reinvent art and gum up the works of Capitalism by sticking one image to another. Cubists disrupted the canvas’s illusory space by pasting fragments of the real world — bits of newspaper and wallpaper — onto their paintings. Hannah Höch transformed propaganda into anti-fascist political collages. Pop artist Richard Hamilton poked fun at domestic ideals in the 1960s. From the 1960s to the



Self Portrait, Rhayne Vermette, 2021,
IMAX film collage in frame, 7" x 5"
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Small Husband, Phomohobes, 2019,
digital print, edition 2 of 13, 37.5 x 35.25 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY



*Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the
Last Epoch of Weimar Beer-Belly Culture
in Germany*, Hannah Höch, 1919,
photomontage and collage with
watercolor, 44 7/8 x 35 7/16 inches
PUBLIC DOMAIN

1990s, Martha Rosler conflated luxurious interiors with images of American wars overseas, merging these dual spectacles for consumption. In the 21st Century, the age of the remix and the mashup, collage isn't a one-liner, but a form that acknowledges the complex interplay between identity, making, and material culture.

Phomohobes, while not apolitical, disavow easy indictments of outmoded gender roles and a visual culture in service to industrial Capitalism. "It's easy to fall into critiquing the past from the perspective of the present," state Phomohobes, whose very name cuts up and reassembles the phonemes of "homophobes" to create the whimsically nonsensical collage moniker "Phomohobes." Phomohobes go on to explain, "We're interested in pulling things from the past and giving them a new life by introducing a new narrative. So, it's satisfying for us to create an intriguing mystery."²



Two Views in FunFrame, Phomohobes, 2018/2021,
digital print in collaged frame, edition of 1, 18 x 23 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY



Support System in FunFrame, Phomohobes, 2021/2021,
digital print in collaged frame, Edition of 1, 20.5 x 24 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

What are the pieces being turned around and reassembled by artists? The perverse. The worthless. The Cut. The Rabbit/Duck. The Frame. Infinity. The Impossible.

The Cut

What does it mean to assemble all these pieces into a pea, or the Sun or an exhibition? For that matter, what mental images present themselves when you think of cutting: a hoodlum flicking a knife with menace and intent to harm, or a surgeon who gives new life by wielding a blade to excise the putrid contagion?

Phomohobes are healers with a blade. Although their collages often include headless torsos or disembodied limbs, the artists view the severing of bodies

from the printed page (and their constituent parts) as an act of liberation. The models in their historical source materials' only purpose was to be on display; Phomohobes cut away restrictive gender and social roles. With scissors and glue, Phomohobes assemble chimerical monsters and gods, inventing powerful new lives for these paper bodies that have outlived their commercial use. *Support System* illustrates this approach: a pair of women clad in power suits, complete with broadly padded shoulders, cradle a man swaddled like a long, stiff baby in a sleeping bag. Crisp blond curls frame the absent face of the woman in the emerald green suit; her counterpart, dressed in magenta, has no head at all. And yet, these figures are not lacking. They lift the sleeping man on their fingertips as if he were a soap bubble, and they dwarf the gas giant Jupiter in the background.

Like Phomohobes, Gerry Ruecker characterizes his artmaking as rescuing discards and fashioning a new existence for them. Ruecker searches out parts for his creations among the graveyards of objects that have outlived their usefulness. A torpedo-shaped bicycle light, its white paint blistered with scabs of rust and glass lens cloudy with age, is incorporated, ironically, into a candle holder in a sculpture of the same name. Elsewhere, the needle of a gauge in a bright brass case is forever stilled; now useless, it has become an ornament welded onto the unplumbed copper pipe that forms part of the leg of Ruecker's *Tripod Lamp*. Ornament heaped upon ornament, Ruecker's baroque assemblages feel more like memorials to past grandiosity than the subsummation of many tiny treasures reborn as a new object.



Candle Holder, Gerry Ruecker, 2005, wood, copper, brass, miscellaneous items, 24 x 26 x 10 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY



Tripod Shadow Lamp, Gerry Ruecker, 2017,
tripod, miscellaneous items, 64 x 27 x 27 inches

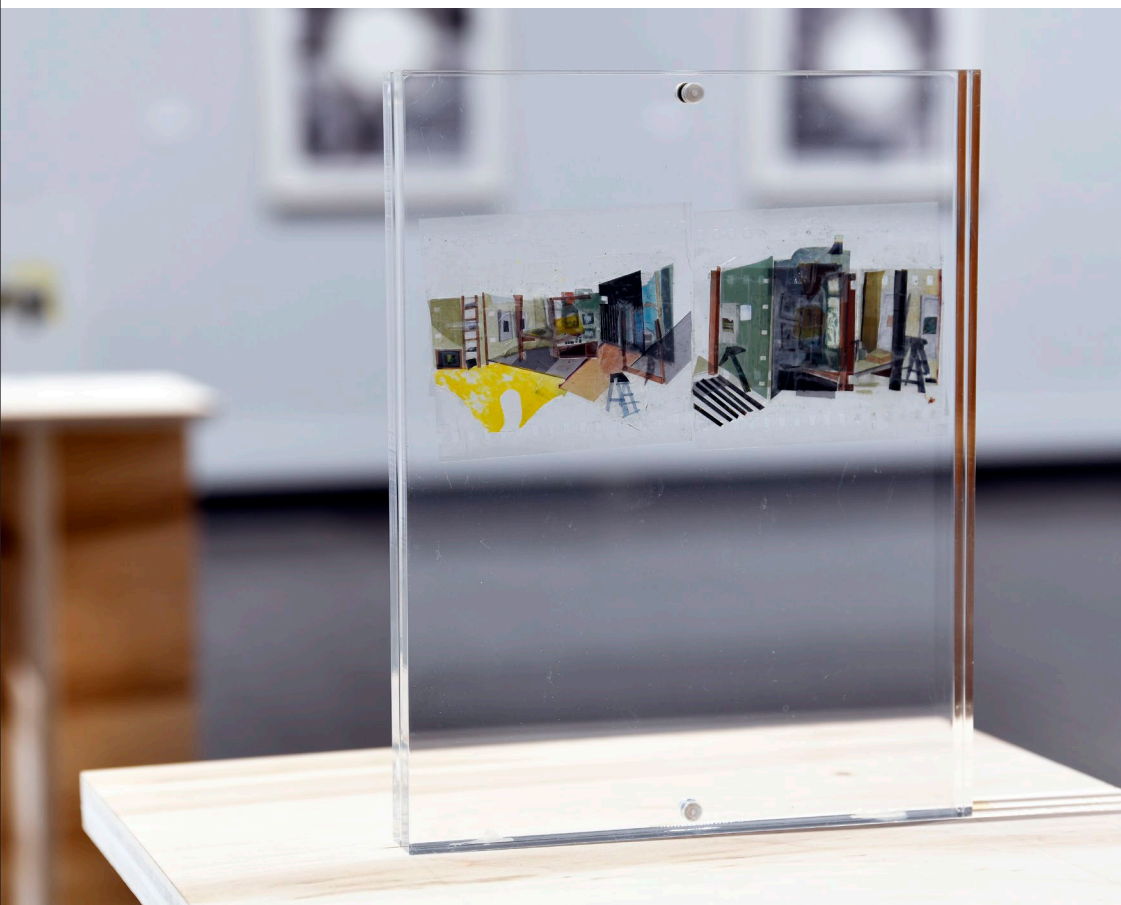
PHOTOGRAPH BY AGR

In working with materials that have an assigned value of nothing, a collage artist is a conjurer creating something wondrous from nothing. Paul Robles inverts this act, snipping thin paper with delicate embroidery scissors; his industrious clipping produces *nothing*. In the wake of Robles' twin blades, paper succumbs to the void — a network of holes that form radiant mandalas or impossibly intricate, intertwined forms of birds, flowers, monkeys, fish and snakes. These visions arise only from the nothing, the negative space of the cut.



Untitled (Orange Crush) [detail], Paul Robles, 2021,
cut origami paper on vellum, 27 x 27 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

Rhayne Vermette relishes the symbolic violence of slicing into an image. Lashing out at the homosocial, male-dominated world of film, Vermette splices thick layers of film together into packets that would surely gum up the mechanism of a projector.³ “I was told it was impossible to make a collage film like this,”⁴ she states. “Watch me” is the retort contained in her small, transparent IMAX collages, glistening layers of celluloid film and tape sandwiched between slabs of clear lucite. It’s no accident that there is no front or back, no right or wrong way to view these transparent, three-dimensional collages.



Protractor Desk, Rhayne Vermette, 2020, IMAX film collage x 2 in frame, 8.5 x 7 inches

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

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- 3 Although film has always been a process of cutting and piecing together, measures are taken to ensure that thick joins and overlapping pieces of celluloid film can pass easily through the projector mechanism. Artists have layered images and incorporated physical objects films, for example Stan Brakhage’s experimental film *Mothlight* from 1963 was a collage film created by pressing insect wings and blades of grass between two strips of splicing tape. Brakhage’s collage was contact printed onto film stock for projection.
- 4 Rhayne Vermette in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

The Rabbit/Duck

Vermette, a Métis artist, characterizes collage as Métissage, a particularly Métis way of making. Collage rejects the easy security of identifying with one term in a binary pair: making/destroying, cut/caress, White/Indigenous, film/sculpture, trash/art. In his 2009 essay *Contemporary Métis Art as Métissage*, David Garneau introduces a drawing first published in the German magazine *Fliegende Blätter* in 1892, commonly known as the duck/rabbit, as an analogy for Métis identity. He describes the dilemma of reading a gestalt image like the duck/rabbit: “It is one thing that can be seen as two distinct and legible other things.”⁵ A Métis person in Canada in 2021 is understood to be a person with both Indigenous and European ancestry—a duck/rabbit continually shifting from one identity to another.

Welche Thiere gleichen ein-
ander am meisten?



Kaninchen und Ente (Rabbit and Duck),
Unknown artist, 1892, scanned page
of *Fliegende Blätter*
PUBLIC DOMAIN

Vermette describes sitting around the kitchen table with other Métis artists, mythologizing and seeking distinctively Métis forms of expression. Collage is a natural expression of an identity that draws on multiple sources and traditions twisted, juxtaposed, and layered to create a culture as impossible to resolve as a duck/rabbit. Vermette herself is complexly multi-layered; while studying architecture at the University of Manitoba, she fell into image-making and storytelling, lured by the illogical and the impossible promised by visual art and filmmaking.

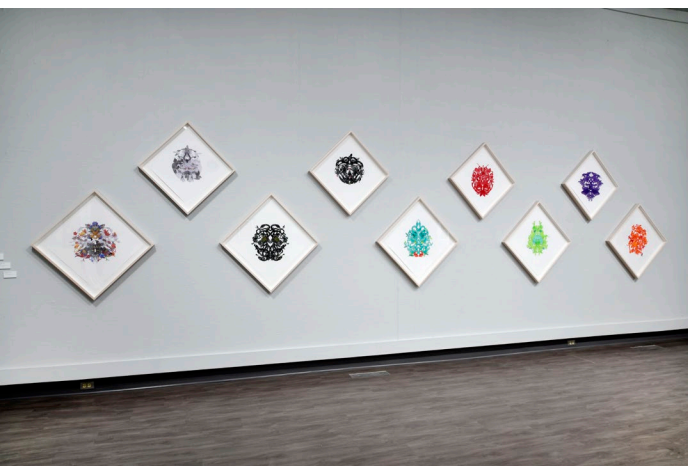
The metaphor of the duck/rabbit gestalt identity is also useful as a lens to consider the work of Philippine-born,⁶ Winnipeg artist Paul Robles. Robles, who is from a Chinese-Filipino family, abandoned his camera for scissors when he discovered the folk tradition of paper cutting while visiting an aunt living in China. He learned paper cutting techniques informally, seeking out craftspeople on the streets, then developing his own distinct style and vocabulary of symbols. Tangles of snakes, birds, skulls, monkeys, fish, and

5 David Garneau, “Contemporary Métis Art as Métissage,” in *Métis Histories and Identities: A Tribute to Gabriel Dumont*, eds Denis Gagon, Denis Combet, Lise Gaboury-Diallo (Winnipeg: Presses Universitaires de Saint-Boniface, 2009), 377-397

6 The Philippine Islands are home to over 175 ethnolinguistic nations; the people living in the islands are a diverse variety of indigenous, immigrant, and mestizo cultures.



Untitled (Blood Choleric), Paul Robles, 2020,
cut origami paper on vellum, 24 x 24 inches, framed
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



The Four Humours (installation view),
Paul Robles, 2020-2021
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY



Souvenir tribal mask from Philippines.
Mass-produced by indigenous tribesman
from traditional forms.

flowers may suddenly reveal themselves as a grimacing face, menacing the viewer with staring eyes and bared fangs. The nine diamond-shaped works collectively reference rows of jagged, interlocking teeth in the Southeast Asian and Kwakwaka'wakw masks that influenced the artist.⁷ The artist's scissors carve out gestalt images that permit contradictions to coexist in a single artwork, person or culture and the possibility of countless new realities.

The Frame

It's perhaps not surprising that artists who cut up and reassemble the prescriptive messages of our image culture also meddle with the coercive structure of the picture frame. The frame is an example of *parergon*, which philosopher Jacques Derrida describes as "an ill-detachable detachment."⁸ In other words, *parergon* is not the art but is inseparable from the art because it confers the status of art upon the framed object.



Because I Am Here,
Gerry Ruecker, 2021,
picture frame, wood, rusted
metal, miscellaneous items
and cast-off materials,
32 x 26 x 5 inches

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

7 Paul Robles in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

8 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth In Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 59.

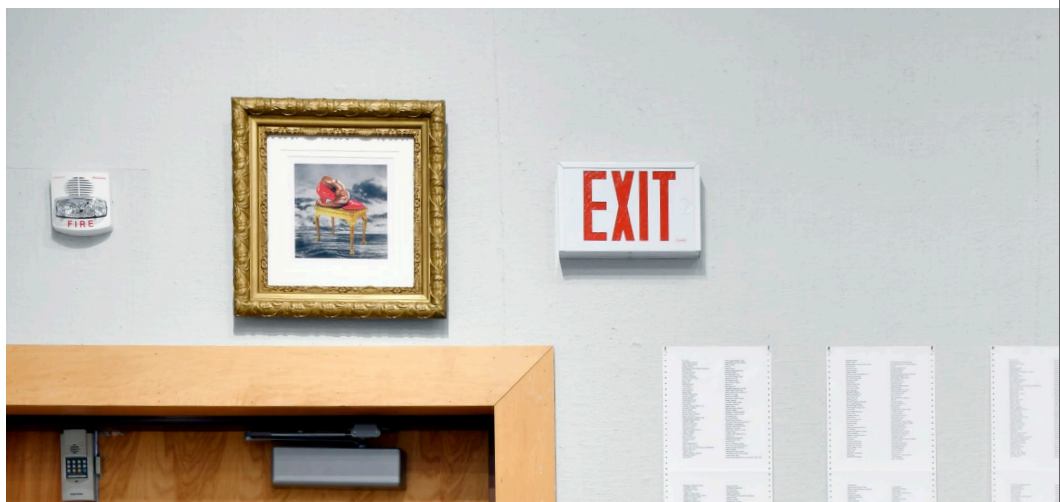
Ruecker's profusion of ornamental frames nested one within another, like Russian dolls, confuse the traditional relationship between frame and artwork. The angle of a heavily ornamented frame cradles not "the art" but another elaborated scrolled corner of a picture frame. *Because I am Here*, for all its gleeful silliness, is weighed down by abundant decorative flourishes - the very things that Jacques Derrida and aesthetic philosopher Immanuel Kant would consider surplus. The joke of using the frame, a kind of sign that declares "the art is inside of here," to frame yet another frame doubles back on itself, evoking a serious question: "what *is* art (or "not art,") anyway?"

Mimicking the branding of mass-produced objects, Phomohobes dubbed their custom-made frames collaged from garish deadstock framing material as "FunFrames." FunFrames represent another clever inversion of the established hierarchy of frame to artwork: a FunFrame is not a supplement; it cannot be separated from the collage it encloses. Phomohobes underscore the indivisibility of Frame from Art with strategies such as aligning the splice joining two types of frames with the horizon line in the image or carrying colours and textures from the composition into their choice of frame stock.



Festivities in FunFrame,
Phomohobes, 2019/2021,
digital print in collaged frame,
edition of 1, 19.25 x 25 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

Phomohobes go a step further, recognizing that the gallery itself is another example of *parergon*; merely placing something inside the gallery makes viewers perceive it as art. The placement of *Shoe Store* high on the wall above the exit door calls attention to the handiwork of various contractors and city workers who have made their own permanent installations in the gallery. Hardly bigger than an emergency exit sign, *Shoe Store* is nonetheless crammed with signifiers of status: a bronzed muscled arm tumbles flaccidly out of a designer pump, which is perched on an improbably delicate piece of antique furniture, all within a genuine antique frame. Sandwiched as it is between the exit sign and emergency light, *Shoe Store* proposes a radical equality between artist and tradesperson; it prompts viewers to treat the ill-considered fitting of safety devices with the same profound contemplation normally accorded to works of art.



Shoe Store (installation view), Phomohobes, 2017,
digital print, edition 2 of 13, 10.25 x 10 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

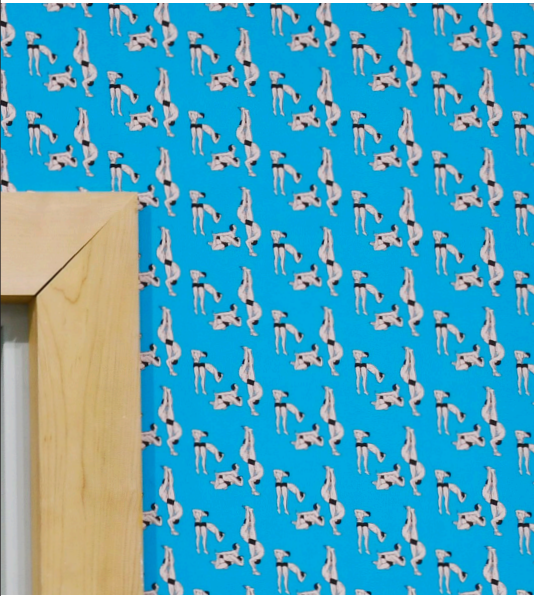
Similarly, Phomohobes interpreted the thick wood band that trims the entire entrance wall as a ready-made frame. The duo co-opted this molding to frame their artwork: a bespoke wallpaper printed with innocuously pervy amalgamation of male figures lifted from a vintage yoga manual. Phomohobes' *Perverved 1950's Child's Bedroom Wallpaper* calls attention to the gallery's architecture as much as to itself; against a vivid turquoise background, the hue of the yogi's skin echoes the colour of the wood trim.

The wallpaper gives the impression of repeating endlessly in a smooth, impenetrable sheet. This infinite pattern is pierced not by a blade but by the gallery's double entrance doors.



Perverted 1950's Child's Bedroom Wallpaper (installation view),
Phomohobes, 2021, wallpaper, dimensions variable

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY



Perverted 1950's Child's Bedroom Wallpaper
(installation detail), Phomohobes, 2021, wallpaper

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY



Violon et verre (Violin and Glass),
Georges Braque, 1914, oil, charcoal
and pasted paper on canvas, oval,
45.5 x 31.75 inches,

PHOTOGRAPH: KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL, PUBLIC DOMAIN.

When an artist rejects gallery standards, we understand that their gesture is one of protest against conventions. Vermette always does things the hard way, even the simple act of framing a digital collage.⁹ Look closely at *House Movie*, and you'll notice that the metal tines that hold the assembly of Ikea frame, glass and matted print together are bent around to the front. "The backwards frame seemed like a way for me to represent myself," Vermette explains.¹⁰ Once, she relates, a gallery hung this piece with the print facing the wall and the frame the right way around. Half amused, half resigned, she just left it like that.



House Movie, Rhayne Vermette, 2018,
mixed media collage in frame, 20 x 20 inches
PHOTOGRAPH BY AGR

9 The frame, in the form of a roughly cut cardboard mat, is exposed in Vermette's piece *Studio Sketch* (2019), as are the cut-up and assembly tactics of film – polyester splicing tape, sprocket holes – normally hidden to maintain the illusion of seamlessness.

10 Rhayne Vermette in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

Infinity

A magician only appears to produce something, like a rabbit, from the black hole of her hat. On the other hand, an artist like Robles, who opens up a yawning hole in the centre of his *Untitled (Punctured/Legs)* collages, creates a space of infinite potential. First, he confers importance on disdained dirty pictures by enlarging them to heroic scale and printing them on fine rag paper. The orifice at once censors and celebrates the holes that are the focus of pornography. Viewed as super-sized glory holes or mandalas, these voids encourage reflection on the sacredness of sex in the cycle of life. The circle ringed by small crescent-shaped cuts is a motif that was embroidered on Robles' father's handkerchiefs. The artist created these works shortly after his father's death, the void at the centre of each composition representing deep loss and longing for a portal to another world, another life, and rebirth.



Untitled (Punctured/Legs #1), Paul Robles, 2019,
cut digital print, 30.5 x 30 inches, framed

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Infinity can suggest existential wonder or unfettered production driven by Capitalism and technology. Phomohobes consider the latter in their variable edition of one hundred – *Works Not Shown*. Exhibited as a triple cascade of continuous feed paper – the sheets are joined with a perforated seam and a sprocket-punched edge to move the ream through the printer – *Works Not Shown* is a listing of artificial intelligence-generated titles for an imagined back-catalogue of Phomohobes' collages. The artists trained the artificial intelligence on a data-set of their literally descriptive titles, such as *Small Husband* and *The Birth of Andre*. Ten-thousand faux Phomohobes' titles, giddily matter-of-fact and believable – *Onion Spirituality* or *Strip Club at the Zoo* – infinitely unfold from each thick slab of paper resting at the base of the wall.



Works Not Shown [installation], Phomohobes, 2021,
dot matrix print on continuous feed paper, varied edition of 100
PHOTOGRAPH BY DON HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

While Phomohobes dabble in infinite productivity, Vermette is dedicated to the infinitely intimate. A single frame of film is physically tiny, the clear acetate as insubstantial as a ghost, flickering across a screen for a fracture of a second before the next image replaces it.

Vermette builds up an accretion of sensuality, autobiography, and symbolism with each layer of hand-scratched emulsion or splinter of celluloid film. “You’re not born with an identity but create a biography and an identity from little bits and pieces,”¹¹ she asserts, describing why she continually ruins, recycles, re-mixes and remakes her catalogue of images. This process is analogous to “the murkiness that historically allowed the Métis to be part of different groups and different languages.”¹² Vermette connects her practice, which she conceives as an overarching, never-ending “movie of my life,”¹³ to the Métis Nation symbolized by the infinity sign – myth, history, and identity continually invented.

The Impossible

The possibility of endless new realities is the bridge from the infinite to the impossible. “If you come at it as an animator, you can be a magician. You can defy space and time.”¹⁴ Indeed, Vermette builds a phantasmagoric architecture from fragments of film – her own studio spliced together with the idiosyncratic and erotically charged apartment of Italian modernist architect Carlo Mollino. Vermette describes Mollino’s bachelor pad as a boat that could carry him through the afterlife and her desk, the animator’s desk, as a craft for travelling to other worlds.

Magical transport through time and space isn’t played out in the huge and luminescent proscenium of the IMAX theatre. Instead, one or two frames of 70 mm IMAX film stock are suspended in clear acrylic – as dangerous as bricks holding the promise of cutting as sharply as glass.

Vermette’s works, hovering between sculpture and film, are like maquettes for Mollino’s impossible environments that, like shells, change and adapt to those they house. This idealized concept of non-static architecture is reflected in how she works with architectural images; in every collage, you can witness Vermette tearing apart suffocating, coercive spaces that dominate how we live our lives and building something from the ruins. “I always think of myself as a thief occupying something made by someone else,” she relates, “changing it to accommodate who I am.”¹⁵

11 Rhayne Vermette in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

12 Rhayne Vermette in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

13 Rhayne Vermette in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

14 Rhayne Vermette in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

15 Rhayne Vermette in discussion with the author, May 20, 2021.

The Sun Becomes A Pea

Imagine a writer whose idea has been chopped up and reassembled until it is as big as the Sun. Working the Banach-Tarski Theorem in reverse, the writer chops up her essay, reassembling it into a pea. Cutting is not destructive; it is creative.

For the artist, The Impossible — layered, contradictory, concurrent meanings — is within reach as long as a blade is within reach. From the discarded, irrelevant, and worthless, the artist can composite worlds and make something, a pea or a sun or an identity that is neither duck nor rabbit, from nothing. ●

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Paul Robles
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