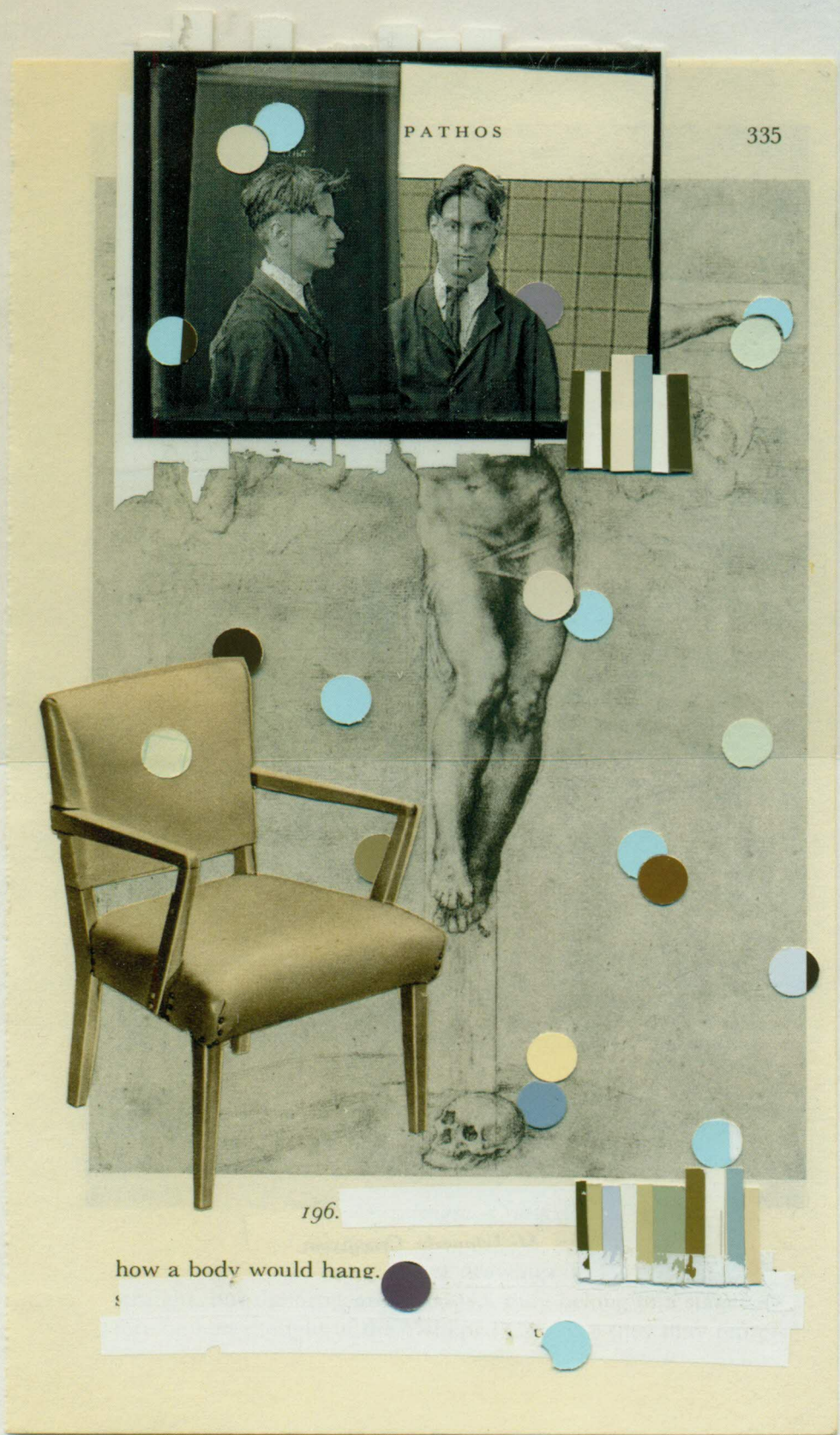


Image Attached:  
The Collages of Cory Peeke





# Image Attached

## The Collages of Cory W. Peeke



Cory Peeke, *untitled (Mickey)*, collage, 2012

Like his work, the creative professional life of Cory W. Peeke is a complex amalgamation: he is an academic, a professor of art, a curator, and an artist--an artist, who despite his formal training in painting and printmaking, has been working throughout his career most intensely in the medium of collage.

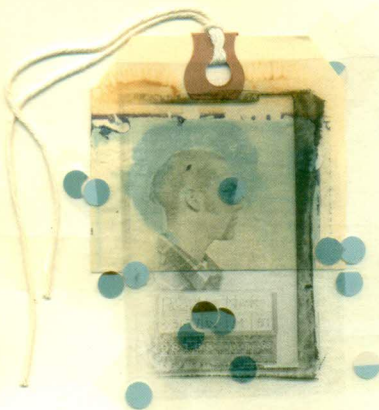
While there has been much written about collage, articles and books on the history of this process and its impact on the history of visual art, considerable time is spent, it seems, trying to justify that collage (often relegated to the lower tiers of "High Art") deserves a significant place in the world of art making. Some of this comes from the fact that collage is such a democratic medium, the medium of preschoolers, scrap-bookers, and visual artists alike, accessible to anyone with paper, scissors, and glue, though now with the advances of technology and computer cut and paste processes, not even these. One need not buy special materials or tools; just a massive amount of space is needed to generate this kind of work.

This democratization leads to another part of the oft felt need for collage's validation. The fact that because of this, collages, such as the kind Peeke makes, formally impeccable, visually powerful, and complex in their communications, are the exception, rather than the rule.

The purpose of this essay, however, is not to use Peeke's artistry to shore up the creative expression that is collage. Rather, it is to look at Peeke's work through one particular aspect of the collage process in relation to his art. In this case, it is the collecting that is inherent in the making of Cory Peeke's pieces that will serve as a lens for viewing his work here.

Walter Benjamin wrote: "Every passion borders on chaos, that of the collector on the chaos of memory." (p. 61, *Illuminations*) This element of memory, or its transference into nostalgia, is particularly apt for considering Peeke's productions. His works draw largely on imagery that comes from a different era. Polaroids from the 1950's, images from archaic textbooks, health manuals, and dated photos from mug shots, all lend a historical feel to his collages. Even the very process of collage itself is tied to the artist's memory. Peeke states:

*My dad used to have his own darkroom in our house when I was a kid. He also worked in the printing industry so he was always bringing home rolls of paper for me to draw on as well as bits and pieces of printed ephemera (logos, different font styles, images of a variety of things). He and my mom also, on occasion, attended printing industry trade shows.*



Cory Peeke, *untitled (tag lady)*, collage, 2012



They'd always come home with bags full of sample items (embossed papers, paper samples, color samples, greeting card samples, etc.). I loved going through it all when they came home. I was awed by the variety and mass of all this disposable material. I also used to collect travel brochures when I would go on road trips with my parents and grandparents. These would often be for places we would never visit, but again, the mass of them and the variety of the imagery was seductive.



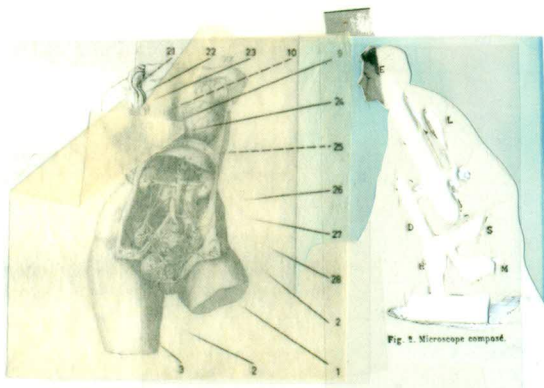
Originally the purpose of Peeke's collages was generated more out of a desire to facilitate inexpensive creative expression and as a means of visual correspondence. In his studio work as an undergraduate and graduate student, his primary focus was painting. However, even here, the need to incorporate disparate elements into a cohesive whole was present, as was the impetus to gather images.

I first really began collecting images and scraps of text to employ in collage in 1993 when I lived in San Francisco. I was completely broke, so collage was the only way to continue to make art. They were easy to create with limited resources and something I could send through the mail. I would send them back to friends in Michigan and folks really seemed to respond to them.

Collage was never something I ever considered in art school originally as an end in itself, though many of my paintings included elements of assemblage. I was tying shovels, umbrellas, etc. to my canvases and such. I was a little too gung-ho on Rauschenberg at the time. Once I started dealing with my sexuality through my work, I began collecting vintage health manuals to use as a reference in my paintings. These manuals soon became fodder for my later collages and this material organically led to me being enamored with vintage imagery in general.



However, for Peeke, his use of these images in his paintings led to a series of rather traumatic events. It was these events that shifted his focus and set the artist on the path to using collage more expressly as the vehicle for his explorations of art and identity.



Cory Peeke, *untitled (examination)*, collage, 2012

When I went to grad school the first time at Wayne State University, I was doing these fairly large paintings of these naked boys (10-12 year olds) with their eyes blocked out, based on images from my collection of old health books and including bits of text, quotes from the manuals, included as sort of captions to the imagery. They had a certain darkness to them (i.e. "concepts the child does not yet understand").

One of the grad professors, an older guy, very traditional painter, took one look at

my paintings, walked out of my studio and refused to ever interact with me again. As he was a senior faculty member, most of the other faculty told me they were interested in what I was doing but they would never agree to be on my committee because it could hurt their careers.

As a result of this, I dropped out. The experience left me shaken, but it taught me a couple things that became a huge influence on my work.

First, large work is easy to dismiss from across the room. Looking at a large work is a communal viewing experience so when the content is difficult, folks often feel intimidated and looking at the work in a group makes for an uncomfortable experience. Small work is an intimate, one on one experience and a less intimidating way to deal with difficult subject matter and content.



Secondly, instead of accentuating the darkness in the text, play up the dark humor of it. Humor is a wonderful attractant and a much better/easier way for people to deal with uncomfortable images/ideas/etc. These two realizations have been very influential on how I've approached my work ever since.

While his experience and these realizations lead Peeke to some significant and positive shifts in his work, it is important to note here that his experience is one that often confronts the queer artist/collector. Too often in collecting, or the display of the objects in one's collection, whether through the objects themselves or the depiction of them (as in Peeke's early paintings) has historically been tied to the need to possess and interpreted psychologically (and incorrectly at times) as an expression of sexual desire. Or to put it as Wilhelm Stekel, an early Freudian, termed it, "collecting is one of the 'disguises of love.'" (*Disguises of Love: Psychoanalytical Sketches*)

While Stekel emphasized the erotic aspect of collecting, there are many reasons for attraction to a particular image or type of imagery. The "desire" here can be an attempt to locate oneself within his or her own history or a larger cultural construction. It can be the longing to express an identity, to gather a community where one is absent, or a harkening back to another time, when things seemed simpler and the world less complex.

In the introduction to *Other Objects of Desire: Collectors and Collecting Queerly* (p.2), editor Michael Camille writes:

"...the (queer) collector's desire has often seemed to strain the limits of the heterosexual matrix and to problematize the logic of oppositions structuring it. It is not just that the unmentionable nature of same-sex desire has often meant that the subject had to communicate the 'secret' in a coded language, but that the fact this language was a system of objects. What could not be said could be spoken through things..."

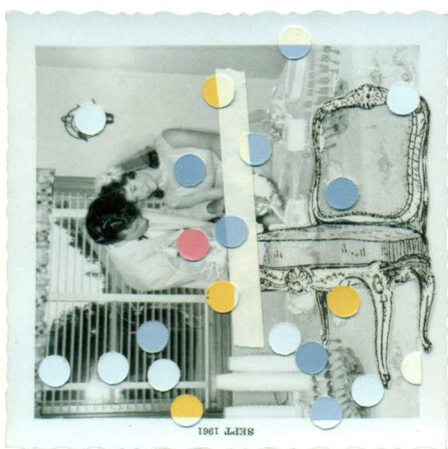
Once we accept that the history of sexuality is less about biological impulses than constructed cultural myths, ideas and images, it often becomes highly relevant to the history of collecting, since the urge to possess then involves an object choice in psychological as well as material terms... In reducing art to a symptom (as Peeke's senior professor

did) or a cure, it fails to integrate the social with the psychological impulse to collect, let alone account for the type of object collected."

*The process of collage, for me it is a very organic experience and has gotten even more so of late. I've let go of a lot of the need to have a defined conceptual agenda. I'm still drawn to particular imagery, male figures and such but don't feel compelled to make work as politically pointed about ideas of gender and sexuality as I used to. Certainly the work is still often directly related to such ideas but now in a more open/ambiguous way. I find this way they are much more engaging for me as a creator and I think the ambiguity is much more engaging for viewers as well...less didactic.*

Within Peeke's collages, in part because of his collected imagery, there is the power of the surreal that was so vital to the first formal collages created and contextualized within the world of fine art. Simultaneously humorous and disquieting, the cryptic visual syntax of queer sensibilities and the integration that Camille writes of can be seen in the way Peek synthesizes his collection of visual images into his collages. While the content within his current work is not necessarily always overt within a single image, seen in mass, the work offers a complex commentary on multiple issues, issues faced in different ways by the queer community, but

(continued on back panel)



Cory Peeke, *untitled (Sept 61)*, mixed-media collage, 2011



Cory Peeke, *untitled (St. John)*, collage, 2012





Cory Peeke, *untitled (How to)*, collage, 2012

pets, photos of grinning relatives, toys for all ages and hours..." is itself a collection. This adds another interesting layer to both Peeke's process and the ways in which his collages can be read. His fragmented images of 1950's middle class trappings; figures with faces covered, forms and compositions strangely unified through oddly disjointed joinings offer images that many, regardless of their sexual orientation, can find resonance with.

Nayland Blake has a quote I like, but that I never get quite right. He talks about changing the captions on other people's family photos. He uses it in the context of queer art: making a community/art out of the bits and pieces of the larger culture. I see collage in much the same way. I, or for that matter most collage artists, take bits and pieces of detritus and give them a new life, the recent works of mine where I build the collage on top of vintage black and white snapshots for example. These photo images have been abandoned, the people pictured in them have been forgotten, I find a way to give them a new purpose. And in that way I hold on to the bit of humanity that was already present in the picture while at the same time putting my own stamp on it and asking people to look at this thing they might normally ignore in a new way.

Within my own life, I came to know some of my family, such as my grandfather who died before I was born, through those images. I think that affinity and connection carries over into my affection for the abandoned black and whites I collect and re-purpose as well as the vintage imagery in general. I want keep these spirits alive in some way.

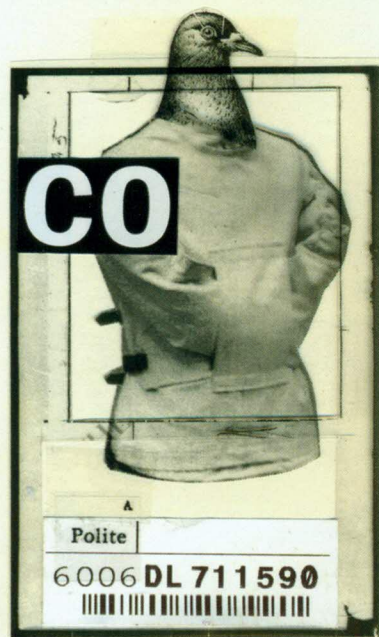
Also, it isn't so much about the individuals in the photos (I often obscure their identity) as it is about the figure pictured being human. I want people to identify with that person, to be able to put themselves in their place instead of trying to put some particular identity/characterization on the figure pictured.

William Davies King also asserts that "collecting is a way of linking past, present, and future. Objects of the past get collected in the present to preserve them for the future. Collecting processes presence, meanwhile articulating the mysteries of desire." (p. 27) This is the crux of Peeke's work and in his most recent works, the artist's desire seems to be far more concerned with articulating this element of "humanness" rather than eros (though a certain libidinous quality is not entirely absent).

Take for instance the proliferation of clinical portraits or mug shots featured in Peeke's new pieces. These images that cannot easily be separated from connotations of criminality or unbalance: elements which hold particular significance for those well acquainted with the

applicable today also to American society at large.

This can be seen perhaps most clearly in Peeke's images that utilize random family photos, obtained either in material form or from the Internet. Like many people, Peeke has gone digital in his quest for and storage of images; still, his work maintains its nostalgic flair. Consider, however, what William Davies King expressed in *Collections of Nothing* (p. 2), his autobiographical reflection on the nature of collections, that previous conceptions of middle class life, "a spouse, a house, a brace of children, a suitable car, a respectable career, cuddly



Cory Peeke, *untitled (CO)*, collage, 2012

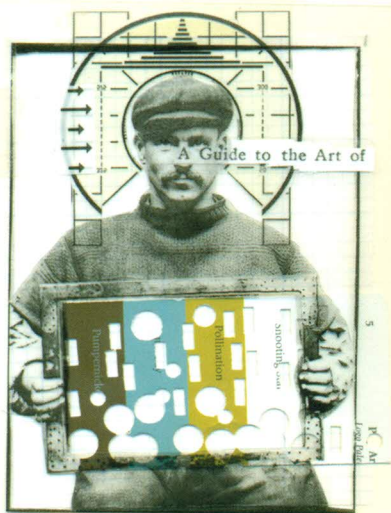


course of queer history. Such aspects are particularly significant within this current social and political construct, where basic human issues such as marriage and benefits for same sex partners are being actively legislated and occupy the media on an almost daily basis.

*In the broadest and most basic sense, these pieces relate to the past (and in some instances current) medicalization and criminalization of homosexuality. The other aspect, especially as related to the mug shots, is the honesty and lack of pose/posturing in the photos. They are very frank, straightforward and capture something more truthful than the standard posed snapshot. They also work as a nice juxtaposition to the idea of the family snapshot, they are the anti-family photo and yet at the same time, often more sincere.*

Sincerity may be a good term not only to encapsulate these particular pieces, but also Peeke's work as a whole. It is this element combined with the artist's acute sense of design and composition that makes his collages engaging, disarming and disconcerting all at the same time. In *Collecting: An Unruly Passion*, Werner Muensterberger defines collecting as "the selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value," proposing, "collecting somehow takes a person beyond rational economy to a realm where intuition and sentiment rule" (*Collections of Nothing*, p. 32). It is wondrous how Peeke, within his collages (these seemingly simple arrangements of collected visual detritus), has been able to draw upon sentiment and his artistic intuition to create another collection of images that are so visually engaging, often darkly humorous, and profoundly articulate.

Daniel M. Forbes  
Director of the Sheehan Gallery  
Whitman College, 2013



Cory Peeke, *untitled (a guide)*, collage, 2012



Cory Peeke, *untitled (smoke)*, mixed-media collage, 2011

## Biography

Cory W. Peeke was born in Sturgis, Michigan in 1968. He received his BFA in Fine Arts from Kendall College of Art and Design and his MFA from the University of Idaho. He has exhibited his work in numerous solo and group exhibits throughout the U.S. His work was also recently exhibited in *Collage Around the World* at Museu Araçatubense de Artes Plásticas in Brazil and the Kaunas Biennial in Kaunas, Lithuania. His collages have also been published in *Mein schwules* (Auge 8) Konkursbuch of Berlin, *Monongahela Review*, *Creative Quarterly*, and other publications. His works are included in the permanent collections of Eastern Oregon University, Lockhaven University, the Solara-Simpson Housing Group and the International Museum of Collage, Assemblage and Construction. In addition to his studio practice he is a contributing writer for the Montreal, Canada based magazine *Kolag*. Cory serves as the Director of the Nightingale Gallery and Associate Professor of Art & Art History at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, Oregon. He is represented by Gallery IMA in Seattle, Washington.

Sheehan Gallery is located in Olin Hall, Whitman College  
Open Monday-Friday 12-5pm, Saturday / Sunday 12-4pm  
Contact: 509.527.5249 or 509.527.5992  
[www.whitman.com/sheehan](http://www.whitman.com/sheehan)