



To Piece Together

Loraine Mohar, Jennifer Murphy, Monique Vettrano



Jennifer Murphy, *Cuckoo*, collage made from photographic images found in used books sewn together with thread.

A Heap of Broken Images

By Matthew Ryan Smith

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

-T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" (1922)

This, T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," is regarded as one of the most important poems of the 20th century. It's also a collage poem. It speaks to the Post-War culture of London, a city reeling from the loss of a generation, and makes use of appropriation, collaboration, and external references like musical lyrics, the plays of Shakespeare, and newspaper articles for symbolic meaning. "The Waste Land" is an assembly of disjointed elements compiled into a singular expression. It serves as a powerful metaphor for the exhibition *To Piece Together* and inspired its title.

Collage is a powerfully durational and meditative process that sees incongruent images harmonize together like a satisfying puzzle, creating layers of unexpected meaning. It's one of the oldest and most popular art forms in history—its inception dates back to 12th century Japan, when poets and calligraphers tore verses from coloured paper then reassembled them on scrolls or screens. Composed of paper and photographs from found-books and other recycled material, the work of artists Loraine Mohar, Jennifer Murphy, and Monique Vettraino approach collage as a form of visual poetry, a dynamic interplay of emotion and imagination through multidimensional imagery. In their pictures, human and animal bodies are shredded, torn, cut, then painstakingly reassembled into fantastical landscapes, surrealist dreamstates, and ecological allusions using paste and thread. These broken images are pieced back together and renewed.

Being universal, inexpensive, and accessible are the profound strengths of collage, traits it shares with other art forms like street art, knitting, and comic books. Likewise, this ties it to creative categories like low-art and kitsch while also anchoring it to socio-economic conversations about class. The Situationist Guy Debord wrote of the way that human interactions were fast-becoming mediated and corroded by the glut of corporate images in public spaces and everyday life. "The images detached from every aspect of life," he writes, "fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished."¹ Debord might say that by cutting the images that push people apart, like those found in commercial advertisements, collage may be a means of putting back together what society has lost. In this sense, we may ask if some of the work in *To Piece Together* is both an act of resistance and a vessel for human connection?



I remember the assignment from long ago: gather old magazines or books from home, bring them to school, cut out interesting images or words, then affix them to coloured cardboard with glue. Like everything else, it was soon magnetted to the fridge. Voila. I could never get far away from collage, even a decade later – during graduate school, I took a seminar on the topic of collage in contemporary art led by curator David Moos. For months we scrutinized not what collage was or wasn't, but what collage *could* be. In our expanded field of awareness, we found collage aesthetics in the most unexpected places—in architecture, performance, poetry, and vernacular life. This is why I could see collage in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* as I could in Kurt Schwitters' *Merz* series.

At that time, I was drawn to the idea of what the physical act of cutting meant to collage, let alone because this carried an 800-year history. The cut seemed so elemental to everything that collage could be. So, I turned my final seminar paper on "The Cut in Collage" to a publishable version that found its way into the now-defunct *ArtUS Magazine*.² *To Piece Together* marks a pragmatic continuation of previous theoretical explorations of collage—the tensions between figure and ground, the abstraction of flatness, art vs. life, collage-as-sculpture, audience interaction, and the destruction / creation dichotomy, to name a few. The work of Mohar, Murphy, and Vettraiño represents how rummaging through old books then cutting, tearing, and manipulating paper is as foundational to collage as the impulse to create new things out of stale material. Murphy echoes this sentiment by explaining:

These acts of scavenging, slowly going through the materiality of the pages of the used book to discover certain images, the act of cutting with small scissors again and again, the material passing through my hands multiple times, the act of arranging the composition and the sewing of delicate paper together obsessively like a last reminder of something so tenderly loved approaches a prayer state.³

Yet perhaps more importantly, these artists also push the aesthetic possibilities of collage, reconsidering the ways that collaged images and iconography reflect contemporary issues and present-day human conditions.

During the First World War, Dadaists like Jean Arp responded to the incomprehensible futility and absurdity of trench warfare by making irrational, nonsensical art. His *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Law of Chance* is a strong example. Here, Arp tears coloured paper to pieces and lets them fall to the ground where they were then pasted onto a coloured backdrop. It's hard to believe this story, unless he dropped the paper from an inch above the ground, since the final outcome is too harmoniously composed. Still, Arp produced his collage using the laws of chance. In some ways, this approach to collage continues today; namely, what viewers don't see in the final image is collage's tedious process of experimentation, fraught with mistakes, flukes, and accidents. To fight against this, Mohar, Murphy, and Vettraiño employ a form of intuition and knowhow that comes from years of engagement with collage.

To this end, it was largely the Surrealists who tapped into evasive subconscious impulses as a means of expressing an alternative interpretation of physical reality. Not all of the artists in *To Piece Together* directly quote the Surrealist movement as an influence, yet their work is informed by the kinds of incongruous, unanticipated symbolism or connotations that Surrealism expounds. What unfolds in this web of illogical, bizarre associations is an attempt for the conscious mind to make sense of it, to clarify it. This is partly why viewers are able to discern themes such as the Anthropocene, Feminism, life/death, climate change, COVID-19, isolation, and others arising in their work. In their collage, we are invited to question what is both visible and invisible, perceptible and imperceptible, obvious or hidden. Part of this process begins even before the work is made—at home or in the studio, where years of gathered books and pictures live physically but also in the subconscious, where they shape artistic choices fluidly, intuitively.⁴

There's a telling verse in Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" that reads: "A heap of broken images." Some scholars extoll the verse for its applicability to what they call the "fragmentary experience of modernity."⁵ On the other hand, there might not be a better way to describe what many cut-paper collages begin with: a heap of broken images. Coincidentally, it might also describe what a finished collage might appear like. The artists gathered in *To Piece Together* reflect on how the "broken image" can be cut or torn away from its original context then meditated on or experimented with to fix it in a different order. That once broken image is made anew by the artist, who reanimates it into something different and unique and wondrous. Regardless of all that can be said about it, collage seems to be about the process of transformation itself. It is about something destroyed then saved.

Opposite page left:
Jennifer Murphy,
Limonite Moth,
collage made from
photographic images
found in used books
sewn together with
thread.

Opposite page right:
Monique Vettrano,
Ornithophobia,
mixed media.

Right: Loraine
Mohar, *Sheep and
Goats*, hand-cut
collage.



About the Artists

Lorraine Mohar is a Hamilton-based collage artist whose work explores facets of femininity and forces of creation and destruction, along with a tongue-in-cheek tale of the tragic experience of life. Mohar has shown in solo and group exhibitions at Hamilton Artists Inc., The Artists Project, Elaine Fleck Gallery, and DIY Event Space. Her work is featured on the album cover for Adult Future and the cover for Anne-Marie Turza's book *Slip Minute*, published by Baseline Press.

Jennifer Murphy is a Toronto/Tkaronto based artist working in collage, assemblage, and sculpture using upcycled and reclaimed materials. She examines the interconnectedness of nature and ideas related to ecological mourning through lenses of beauty, chance, transformation, and materiality. Murphy has exhibited both nationally and internationally including exhibitions at White Columns (New York), The Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver), Galerie Kunstbuero (Vienna), The Power Plant (Toronto), MOCA (Los Angeles), Oakville Galleries (Oakville), Gallery 44 (Toronto) and 8eleven (Toronto). She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards and has been long listed twice for Canada's prestigious Sobey Art Award. Murphy has been an artist in residence at the Banff Centre's A Paper A Drawing A Mountain thematic residency and recently attended the Alternative Art School's Culture of Nature: Animals in Art led by Mark Dion. She is represented by the Clint Roenisch Gallery in Toronto.

Monique Vettrano is a Toronto-based artist whose autobiographical work examines ancestry, specifically through a female lens, raw exposure, magic, the inexplicable and otherworldly, escapism, and seeking light as well as that which continues to remain buried in the dark. Her collage works have been shown in exhibitions throughout North America and Europe, including the John B. Aird Gallery, Portland State University, and The Scandinavian Collage Museum, among other institutions. It has also been featured in several publications including *Lived Magazine*, *Disintegration*, a collection of visual art and poetry, */DRI:M/SPACE Magazine*, a publication dedicated to elevating collage arts, and Edinburgh Collage Collective publications.

Notes

1. Debord, Guy. 1983. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red, 3.
2. Smith, Matthew Ryan. "The Cut in Collage: Pollock, Fontana, Matta-Clark, Ono." *ArtUS Magazine* 22 (Spring 2008), 58-61.
3. Murphy, Jennifer. 6 December 2022. Email to the author.
4. Ibid.
5. Edward, Aaron. 2018. "Broken Images: T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land and the Inevitably Fragmentary Experience of Modernity." *Poetic Plethora: An Annotated Anthology of Select Victorian and Modern Poems*. Ed. Nilanko Mallik. New Delhi: Educreation, 141-155.

Cover image: Monique Vettraino, *Our Paths Will Cross*, mixed media.

Back cover image: Loraine Mohar, *Why Are Wasps*, hand-cut collage.

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