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Scraps from the past

[By Doug Gruse](#)



Artist Josh Dorman, a 1988 graduate of Skidmore College, combines antique illustrations with paint and ink. Dorman is one of four Skidmore graduates in “Alumni Invitational,” an exhibit opening Saturday at the Tang Teaching Museum in Saratoga Springs.

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Josh Dorman's studio is like a library of outdated material.

The Manhattan-based artist has stacks of books featuring old topographical maps, anatomical illustrations and industrial engravings, and he frequently scours yard sales, thrift shops and eBay looking for more catalogs and textbooks to add to the collection.

"I have all kinds of strange things, pretty much all from pre-photography times," Dorman said. "I keep getting more, even though I have more than I probably ever will use."

The books, however, aren't just memorabilia or the early signs of hoarding. Dorman incorporates the obscure images into collage-like paintings.

"I just am surrounded by scraps of paper and dozens of open books and ink and acrylic. It often takes its own course," he said of his artistic process.

Dorman is one of four artists in "Alumni Invitational," an exhibit opening Saturday at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs. Dorman, a 1988 graduate of the school, will be featured along with fellow alums Bradley Castellanos, Johnny Swing and Shellburne Thurber.

Although Dorman's book collection might seem eclectic to an outsider, the artist has a method to his accumulations.

"For the most part, I am looking for similar kinds of things," he said. "I have a lot of books of animals, biology and botany, and then I have things that have more to do with engineering and mechanical drawings, like pumping systems."

Dorman draws parallels between the disparate illustrations and engravings.

"I have recurring ideas that have to do with the relationship of those forms - a ribcage from an anatomical drawing is related to a gridwork of a machine," he said.

The natural and industrial worlds find common ground in his imagination.

"It all starts in my head. Occasionally I'll be inspired by some image in a book. I usually have a sketch for the overall composition of the piece, then it becomes intuitive - and I add and subtract pretty freely," Dorman said.

The process melds drawing and painting with cutouts of antique printed illustrations, but Dorman has been reluctant to label the work as "collage."

"I was always resistant to that term, for some reason. It can connote some negative things. Every high schooler does a collage for yearbook. I call them paintings, but they are really a mix of collage and painting," he said.

What started as an experiment has become a major focus of his work.

"It seems to be ongoing," he said of the collage process. "'It's been about seven years or so. I really started with old ledger papers and topographic maps, and the collage has entered more and more. I keep thinking I will move back to oil painting, but I feel like I haven't exhausted the materials or the ideas, so it just keeps building."

A few books have managed to escape the artist's knife.

"I have some books I have decided not to touch. They are too elegant," he said.

Discarded texts and

manuals that long ago lost their purpose, find new meaning through Dorman's art.

"I sometimes feel guilt for cutting them up," he said. "But part of the thrill is that there is an edge to destroying and recontextualizing the images."

The source material has little monetary value, but Dorman does think about

the implications of his process, especially in an age when the printed book is being replaced by digital technology.

"In some ways I think of it as preserving a form of knowledge that probably is going to disappear in the next hundred years," he said.