The Art of Paper

Works not on, but built from, paper

by CRAIG LAMBERT

In 2000, a turning point came as Laurie Krasny Brown, Ed.D. ’78, sat in her studio on Martha’s Vineyard, holding a contract to write two more children’s picture books for Little, Brown & Company. Starting in 1986, she had collaborated on 14 such books with her husband, Marc Brown, the prolific children’s-book illustrator and author (best known for his Arthur the Aardvark series). The couple had created nonfiction books explaining health, death, divorce, travel, and more through the eyes of dinosaurs (e.g., When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death), plus similar books on sexuality (What’s the Big Secret?) and friendship (How to Be a Friend: A Guide to Making Friends and Keeping Them). She wrote the books, and her husband could use as she saw fit. She had also done a solo book, The Vegetable Show (1995), that presented its subject in the guise of a vaudeville show starring zucchini, tomatoes, and other vegetables. She illustrated it with her own cut-paper collages, and took a special satisfaction from that project.

But Krasny Brown, too, has a lively visual imagination—“You have to picture what is on every page to write these books”—and always provided art notes that her husband could use as he saw fit. She decided not to sign the book contract. “I needed to do art full time,” she explains. “I would feel remorse if there were things lurking in me that I never tried.” So she turned to making art in her favorite medium: paper.

Her abstract, tightly organized, colorful geometric collages and assemblages of cut paper call to mind quilts, basketry, weaving, and often boxes and other containers. “Paper is a material that is accessible, flexible, beautiful, and sometimes forgiving,” she says. “Paper can be full of mystery. I like dyeing it, painting it, manipulating it.” She buys rolls of white French archival paper.
Each life, obviously, confronts an ultimate exit. But there are plenty of lesser exits—departures, if you will—along the way. In her new book, Exit: The Endings (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $26), Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Fisher professor of education, deploys her skills as sociologist and storyteller to probe these transitions. From the introduction:

I have always been fascinated by exits, endings, leave-takings—by the ways in which we say goodbye to one another, to the lives we’ve led, to the families we’ve been part of, to the children we’ve nurtured, to the organizations we’ve worked for, to the communities where we’ve belonged, to the identities that have defined us, to the roles that have given us purpose and status. My curiosity includes exits big and small, those goodbyes that are embroidered into the habits of our everyday encounters as well as those that are forever memorable and rock our worlds. Those that go unnoticed and underappreciated and those that are accompanied by elaborate rituals and splendid ceremony. I have been just as intrigued by the ordinary exits that punctuate our days—goodbyes at the door as our children leave for school each morning…, hugs at the airport as we leave to go on a trip, farewells to our students at the end of the school term—as I am about the leave-takings that become the major markers of our lives: the rupture of a long friendship; the dissolution of a marriage; the death of a parent; the departure of our children for college; the decision to leave a lifelong career; the abrupt firing of a veteran employee; the exits from the “closet,” the priesthood, our countries of origin.

I think there must be some relationship between our developing the habit of small goodbyes and our ability to master and mark the larger farewells, a connection between the micro and the macro that somehow makes the latter smoother and more bearable because one has successfully accomplished the former. I certainly believe that the art of attending to, practicing, ritualizing, and developing a language for leave-taking in the most ordinary moments and settings augurs well for taking on the more extraordinary exits that life is sure to serve up.

…I am particularly curious about how people revisit and reconstruct their moments of decisionmaking, the setting in which they make the decision to move on or have the epiphany that something is over and done. What actually happens—in the noise and the silences—that provokes the moment? What are the events that anticipate the climax and precipitate the exit? How is the decision communicated and to whom? What is the tone and texture of the encounter? Is there anger, sadness, relief, or resolution in the aftermath; ambivalence or closure; feelings of loss or liberation? Whom do people turn to for support, reassurance, and validation?

and colors it with gouache, typically immersing a sheet in a bath until it turns the desired hue. Krasny Brown also makes her own paper, and this fall is part of a show, The Art of Handmade Paper, at the Featherstone Center for the Arts on Martha’s Vineyard, where she and Marc have long had a home.

The notion of “making art in an informal way” appeals to her, and she has always drawn inspiration from American folk art, which is often anonymous. Nineteenth-century piecework quilts, for example, gave her the idea of executing similar designs two-dimensionally in paper. In 2009 she had a solo invitational exhibit at the American Primitive Gallery in Manhattan, which specializes in folk and “outsider” art (works created outside the “official” art culture). “I’ve been begging to be considered an outsider because I’m self-taught, and I love a lot of the outsider work—it’s less self-conscious,” she says. “But the gallery owner at American Primitive says I’m not an outsider, because I know too much!”

She enjoys simplicity and repetition with variations. A pianist who attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City and remains a student of classical piano, Krasny Brown says she takes “clues from composers like Bach and Beethoven—the way they do variations on a theme. The simplest melodies can be modified over and over again, and the piece as a whole becomes greater than the sum of its repetitions. I find that brilliant, and try to bring some of that sense of subtle and worthy variations to my art, working with simple shapes: the circle, square, cube, sphere, triangle, cone, pyramid. Why not notice those small changes?”

Krasny Brown studied child psychology at Cornell and then earned a master’s degree in educational psychology at Columbia. She worked as an educational toy consultant to FAO Schwarz and had a consumer-research job for children’s goods in New York. But there, the goal was always getting the child “to ask Mom to buy this,” she says. “I felt that this was going to rub me the wrong way ethically.”

After decamping for the Harvard Graduate School of Education, she joined the staff of Project Zero, the research group on learning and creativity, and co-directed a grant with Hobbs profes-
In 2005, while waiting to pay in the Bob Slate stationery store in Harvard Square, Thomas P. Wolf ’05 spotted a Moleskine composer’s notebook with gray-lined staves on the pages. “It was something I wanted to mess around with,” he says. He bought it. Though no composer, he began to doodle in the notebook—with words. “Like a musical score, you could use it to display things happening simultaneously,” he explains. “Like people interrupting or talking over each other. You could show characters thinking things while saying other things.”

Years later, the doodling has evolved into Wolf’s first work of fiction, the recent novel Sound, published under the pen name T.M. Wolf. Its format is innovative: like a musical score, pages have horizontal lines that underline verbal “audio tracks”: dialogue among the characters (identifiable by typeface), ambient noise, song lyrics heard on radios (especially hip-hop), play-by-play broadcasts of New York Yankees baseball games, and characters’ unspoken thoughts. Like a musical recording, the layered tracks overlap. “If you’re going to try something new, you want to go all out,” Wolf says. “Still, it’s such a structured form—there are certain things you can’t say. You can’t write straight dialogue, for example.”

The layered tracks force a kind of immediacy on the reader, heightening awareness of sound and time. Furthermore, “Space on the page is important,” Wolf says, “and can be manipulated.” Paragraphs of conventional prose intermingle with the “audio” sections. For example, Wolf describes the seaside New Jersey town where the novel takes place:“Paper is not so durable, and people get nervous about it,” she explains. “But it holds up pretty well.” And paper remains her Muse. “If I worked in fabric,” she says, “I would make it look like paper.”