

Arturo Herrera

*How to drown while looking at a piece of paper*



Dieu Donne Lab Grant Program: Arturo Herrera  
*How to drown while looking at a piece of paper*  
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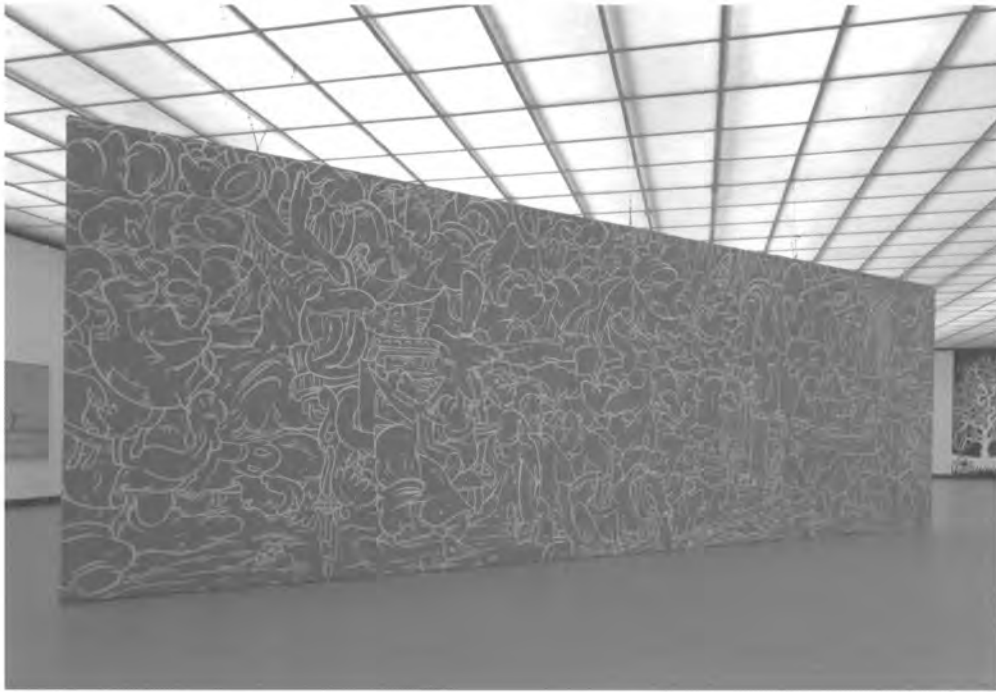


## How to drown while looking at a piece of paper BY LORI WAXMAN

Watermarks, to papermakers, are translucent designs hidden within the thickness of a piece of paper. By fastening a metal wire form to the paper mould, a small amount of pulp is displaced, producing a finished paper that is relatively thinner along the lines of the given shape. When held up to the sun or a light fixture, the dry sheet reveals that design via the greater amount of brightness that passes through the paper along the space left by the long-gone wire form. Historically, watermarks have served to control the quality of paper and to identify the mill as well as the period in which it was produced; likewise they can be used to retroactively date documents. The earliest known mark belongs to a specimen produced in Bologna, Italy, in 1282; it features a cross with four small circles at each of its extremities and a fifth, larger circle overlaid at center. The Swiss expert Charles Moïse Briquet of Geneva (1839-1913), in his *Les Filigranes* of 1907, recorded over sixteen thousand tracings, among them designs for celestial signs, animals, human portraits, mystic symbols, flora, and papermaking tools.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional watermark achieves a unique, paradoxical identity: constituted by a negative amount of paper, it offers a most positive thing, an image made of light. The mark appears as a pale outline, visible through either side of a darker ground. Arturo Herrera's edition created during his residency at Dieu Donné Papermill, an untitled work measuring 24 x 40 inches and produced in a run of fifteen, essentially reverses this effect. Though drawn by the negative trace of fine, laser-cut vinyl shapes appliquéd to the paper mould, his watermark does not appear as if made of light; on the contrary, its delineations are colored an intense cadmium orange, the effect of pigment, not light, leaking through from the other side, a thousand bleeding cuts through paper flesh. For this edition consists not of a single color but rather a slab of saturated orange couched by layers of watery, colorless skin. This pale stratum holds the buried watermark, and only across its side of the paper is the design visible, not by light passing through but reflecting off the pulpy surface. No evidence of marking appears on the edition's solidly colored backside. The net effect is less that of a watermark—an ephemeral outline cast in light—than of a standard drawing, where dark lines describe form against a lighter ground. Unlike a drawing, however, here line and ground cannot be separated: watermark is to paper as shadow is to human body, a delimiter of shapes, cast in the crooks that light refuses to illuminate.

Historically and still today, watermarks provide a basic, factual identity to the materiality of important documents. Bank notes, birth certificates, and other government-issue papers bear increasingly complicated markings as part of their constitutive structure, guarding against duplication and other forms of fraud. Marks on high-end company stationery and artists' papers attest to elevated levels of production and material quality. But what does the convoluted watermark created by Arturo Herrera guarantee? Certainly nothing is meant to be printed atop it, unlike other marked papers, whose internal designs serve only to authenticate the words and pictures layered over their surface. The ontology of Herrera's edition therewith diverges dramatically from that of the traditional watermark, for it in itself is the *raison d'être*, and not merely the proof, of the paper in which it is embedded. If not atop, then within these overlapping, intertwining non-lines must we look.



Unlike the pure abstractions of Pollock's splashes or children's scribbles, Herrera's mess of curves and dashes holds recognizable shape in its confusion. Tree trunks, puffed sleeves, bulbous hats, clasped hands, chipmunks—these and other fragments rise and sink across the jumble of the paper's front half. Once one element solidifies, the eye can hardly help searching out others. A similar urge percolates at the surface of many of Herrera's collages, black-and-white photographs, murals, felts, and MDF cut-outs—the familiar form is jumped on, teased out, followed until exhausted. Because Herrera cuts most of the ground material for his production from common printed matter—Audubon sketches, animation cells, children's coloring books, and, as here, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* illustrations—the desire to recognize individual elements inevitably arises, but he works to frustrate that easy impulse. Layer upon layer of overlap, fragmentation, doubling, tripling, painting, turning, and slicing pull new strings from old toffee. Each successive step in his process—collage being the first—achieves a greater and greater distance from the original narrative-bound image, until most traces of it are obliterated, though never quite all. Successive applications of abstraction obscure the otherwise associative quality of the carefully found pictorial materials with which Herrera begins; the degree to which abstraction transforms this base visual matter determines the rhythms and rhymes of the finished piece of art.

A consideration of works related to the *Dieu Donné* edition bears this out. *All I Ask*, a mural-scale panel from 1999, comprises a single version of the image that appears doubled in the former, reversed to white lines on brown ground. An untitled work of 2003 offers an impossibly dense triple version, this time of graphite on white paper. In *All I Ask*, every-which-way lines melodiously resolve into tidy, elegant fragments of body and forest parts; in the 2003 piece, the same lines, thrice overlaid, slash a crescendo of dense noise, cacophonously drowning out whatever dwarves and mushrooms they once defined. The *Dieu Donné* work rests at a symphonic midpoint between these two earlier works, riotously abstract in its layering but not so much so that the resulting din completely overwhelms the constituent notes.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, something more than metaphorically kin to musical notes resounds from the cutting and suturing Herrera performs, as if his X-acto knife were wired to a set of speakers. Like sounds are found elsewhere in singular instances, as in an untitled cut paper series from 2002, whose tracings of a kneeling woodcutter, a lit candleholder, and an arm gripping an axe share a figural starting point with the above three works but ring in tighter, higher-pitched keys. Drawn out of lines



meticulously cut from single sheets of printed paper, these forms, when jumbled together in *A Knock*, from the same year, produce their own unique composition of bells and whistles, one unattainable by black on white, orange on peach, or white on brown, whatever the chromatic scale may be. Finally, in an untitled collage, also from 2002, four flying bluebirds, and a white cloth held aloft in their beaks, appear not in outline or fragment but rather feathered and whole, integrated into a picture alongside an illustration of a pajama-clad man in a blue bathroom, leaves and berries on a branch, and what looks to be the tail feathers of another bird—also blue. Here blueness and resolved oval shapes (leaves and feathers) dominate a delightful, fluttering sound completely unlike that produced within the works described above.

If, in the end, the work Herrera has created with *Dieu Donné* sounds and acts nothing at all like a traditional watermark, confounding rather than clarifying, made of color not light, it may be useful to consider a second meaning of the word. Watermarks, to residents of desert floodplains, are not internal paper designs but tall wooden sticks wedged into the ground by the side of the road, giant rulers standing straight and tall. Numbers measured along the sticks' lengths indicate the height to which floodwaters can rise in a particular wash. Many watermarks bear digits in excess of average adult height, raising the specter of drowning were one to find oneself in that place at the wrong time. Related to this kind of watermark are the lines of sediment and rot left on the sides of houses and the trunks of trees in a flooded area. After the waters have fallen, the high water level can be gauged by measuring these horizontal tracings. Allow me, if you will, to suggest that Arturo Herrera's edition perversely derives from both the papermaker's definition of the watermark and the flood watcher's: a paper drawing formed by layers of displaced pulp, sediment left in the wake of a drowning tide of images, a tide whose high water mark is measured by a ruler made of cadmium orange paper.

<sup>1</sup>For a brief history of the watermark, see Armin Renker's introduction to *Art in the Watermark* (Zurich: Graphis Press, 1952) and the Baron F. del Marmol's *Dictionnaire des Filigranes* (Namur: Jacques Godenne, 1900).

<sup>2</sup>I owe these musical metaphors to Friedrich Meschede's discussion of "spheres of resonance" in *Arturo Herrera: You Go First* (New York: D.A.P., 2005).

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ARTURO HERRERA was born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1959, and lives and works in New York and Berlin, Germany. He received a BA from the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Herrera's work includes collage, work on paper, sculpture, relief, wall painting, photography, and felt wall hangings. His work taps into the viewer's unconscious, often intertwining fragments of cartoon characters with abstract shapes and partially obscured images that evoke memory and recollection. Using techniques of fragmentation, splicing, and re-contextualization, Herrera's work is provocative and open-ended. For his collages he uses found images from cartoons, coloring books, and fairy tales, combining fragments of Disney-like characters with violent and sexual imagery to make work that borders between figuration and abstraction and subverts the innocence of cartoon referents with a darker psychology. In his felt works, he cuts shapes from a piece of fabric and pins the fabric to the wall so that it hangs like a tangled form resembling the drips and splatters of a Jackson Pollock painting. Herrera's wall paintings also meld recognizable imagery with abstraction, but on an environmental scale that he compares to the qualities of dance and music. Herrera has received many awards including, among others, a DAAD Fellowship and a 2005 John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. He has had solo exhibitions at Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva; Dia Center for the Arts, New York; Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, among others. His work appeared in the Whitney Biennial (2002) and in *Drawing from the Modern, 1975–2005* (2005) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



ABOVE: Paul Wong and Rachel Gladfelter editing Arturo Herrera's, *Untitled*, at Dieu Donn  Papermill, NYC.

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donne Papermill, Inc. is a non-profit artist workspace dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art using the hand papermaking process. In support of this mission, Dieu Donne collaborates with artists and other partners, presents exhibitions, conducts educational programs, and maintains an archive of paper art.

The Dieu Donne Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donne Papermill. Through this program, Dieu Donne intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past participants in the program include Melvin Edwards, Jane Hammond, Jim Hodges, Dorothea Rockburne, Robert Cottingham, Glenn Ligon and Jessica Stockholder.

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