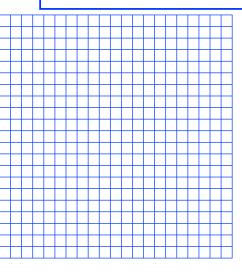
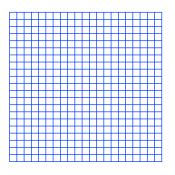
Paper as Protest: Drew Cameron's Anti-War Activist Printmaking

©[Drew Cameron]'s Combat Paper project takes on the active responsibility of reflecting on war, of refusing the proliferation of war, and seeking healing.

by Yunfei Hua





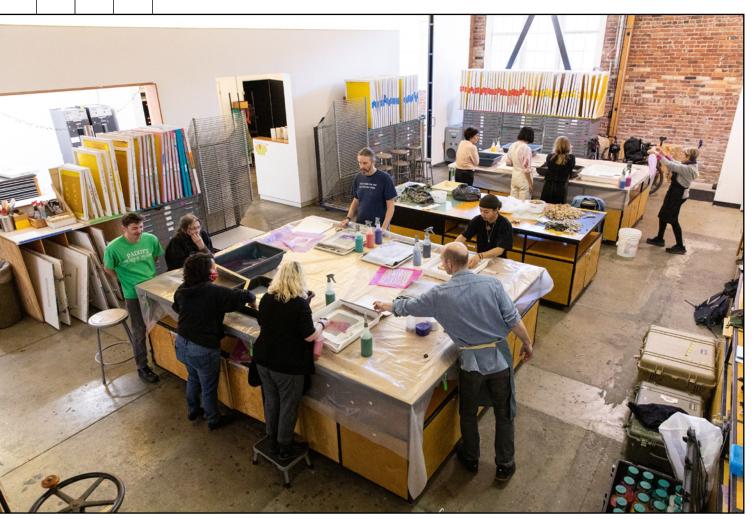


Drew Cameron teaching a Graduate Intensive at RayKo Studios (CCA Campus) in Spring 2024: Pulp Printing with Combat Paper

Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno



For 29 years, the Yozo Hamaguchi Printmedia Scholarship Award has been awarded annually to outstanding BFA students working in printmedia at CCA. On the evening of March 27, 2024, the CCA Printmedia Program celebrated this year's recipients and hosted the annual Hamaguchi Lecture in Printmedia. At the beginning of this year's event, Anthea Black, the Chair of the Printmedia Program, expressed sincere gratitude to the scholarship's donors, Yozo Hamaguchi and his wife Minami Keiko, and recognized the students who applied for their efforts, regardless of whether or not they received the scholarship. This year, six recipients of this year's scholarships were announced. Black then introduced the speaker, papermaker and artist Drew Cameron, and cited the reason for inviting him to hold this lecture and other workshops at CCA: the job of printmakers, papermakers, and book artists is to engage political expression with materiality, and Cameron's work has become a wonderful model for that.

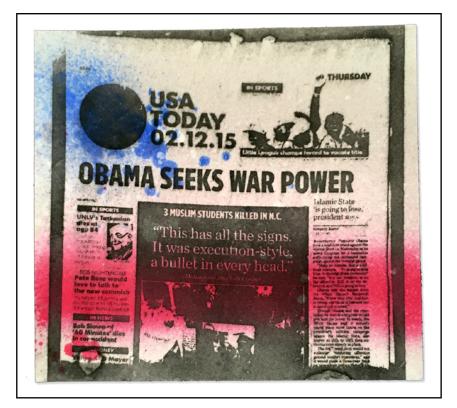


Graduate Intensive with Drew Cameron at RayKo Studios (CCA Campus) in Spring 2024: Pulp Printing with Combat Paper Photo courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

Cameron has traveled for 17 years to many different places, teaching papermaking and working as an activist. He used to live in San Francisco and recently came back to teach workshops and lectures, expecting "conversations and difficult questions." He began the lecture by sharing his experience with war. Cameron was born on a military base; he felt a call to be a part of a subset power society after taking a military class in high school. He decided to join the army and served in the Iraq War. Like many veterans, he was shocked by the destruction and suffering that he saw there, caused by war. After leaving the army, he took part in an anti-war protest in 2006 where he "found his voice." He came to the conclusion that the reasons he thought he had fought the war were false, and that war itself was unjust. At the protest, he met other people who had similar experiences and were now doing anti-war activist work. That protest changed his life. "Never underestimate the power of a protest," Cameron noted. "We all have to start somewhere." Eventually, he joined an anti-war advocacy group called Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), and began to speak out publicly. His seminal project, Combat Paper, started from there, too.

After making paper for several years, Cameron felt a kind of healing power in the process. He decided to perform a symbolic act and turned his old army uniform into paper. Dressed in the same uniform he was in when he returned from the war, he cut it off from his body, beat the pile of rags into a pulp, and made sheets of paper from it. Other veterans from IVAW began to participate in the project with him, similarly making paper from their own uniforms. Not only aiming to heal veterans, Combat Paper is also a project that preserves traditional crafts and encourages participants to slow their pace down within the modern age of industrialization. As a mobile social practice project, Combat Paper travels with a portable Hollander beater, a critical tool that has allowed Cameron to set up papermaking studios in unlikely places, and provide workshops to participants everywhere. He takes materials full of history, transmuting them into vehicles of catharsis, and expressing participants' honest responses to war. When reflecting on the shortcomings of Combat Paper, Cameron pointed out that the project is largely based on the perspective of US veterans, which he acknowledges is a limited point of view compared with the vast population of victims and refugees of militarized violence across the world.

Cameron went on to introduce the following series of the Combat Paper project. Having once used a PO Box as his address, Cameron often paid extra attention to the newspapers he saw on his way to the post office. To record moments from changing topics in the news, Cameron made prints of newspaper headlines on the paper made from uniforms. According to Cameron, many of the headlines were in fact, lies, and when people look back at them now, after nearly a decade, we have the perspective to see how ridiculous they were. The prints show a recurring loop of themes and the cyclical repetition of history. In Beyond Zero: 1914-1918 (2014), he presented visual pieces for a commissioned film under the same name, showing images from the photographic archive of World War I. Prints are made on paper handmade not only from uniforms, but also from bed sheets, flags, US currency, and T-shirts. Cameron wanted to make a "paper recipe that composites us, the war we serve, where we sleep, where we eat, and what we wear." With images full of people in this piece, he emphasized the idea that the real war is "us against ourselves."



Drew Cameron, part of the *Top of the Fold* series (2015) Photo courtesy of the artist

Combat Paper takes on the active responsibility of reflecting on war, of refusing the proliferation of war, and seeking healing. Through in-person workshops, Cameron has been interacting with his participants directly, while developing the possibility of putting archival material in libraries and exhibitions in order to give access to a wider public. Under the shifting protections of free speech today, this generation of veterans appears more willing to talk about their mental health. The Combat Paper project in particular gives them a creative avenue by which to translate their feelings into objects and processes of action.



Drew Cameron, part of the *Top of the Fold* series (2015) Photo courtesy of the artist

Paper is made from fibers, and fibers can weave symbolic portraits of people. With fiber provided by people or their family members, series such as *Burial Flags* and *Paper Blank* embody participants' stories and feelings. Cameron has promised to keep this project alive for as long as he continues to receive uniforms from participants. Papermaking is also water-bound, and in this way, it connects nature with civilization. In his ongoing series *Riparian Sheets*, Cameron uses a paper-making frame the size of traditional sheets of paper made in Baghdad to make paper in various waters around the world. Feeling the sound and vibration of water when making paper is a gorgeous and transcendent experience, which helps him build an intimate relationship with water.

The Q&A portion of the lecture ended up being more of a conversation; participants exchanged their comments and responses to each project that Cameron had introduced during the lecture. They talked about how paper used to be a technology, the most informative media, but is now a traditional one, used to "slow information down." They also shared their thoughts about water, comparing water as an elementary material in a technique, and water as a metaphoric motif in art creation. However, my favorite part was when a participant asked if he had ever been confronted by others during the project. Cameron responded by describing the experience of being rejected by a veteran who did not want to participate. According to Cameron, the veteran had said emphatically that he would "never" turn his uniform into paper. Cameron explained however, that he was okay with that because the goal of the project is, at its core, to foster conversations about war. When a belief is explained, its accuracy is no longer assumed. This prompts questioning and reflection by the believer, which can be the catalyst of significant change, just as Cameron's experience has proven.

Cameron believes that all military uniforms should be turned into paper. "There are way more uniforms than I can ever imagine making into paper, we need help," Cameron states. "The more people do it, the better." When asked about how to encourage people to keep on fighting, Cameron says that every small action is important, and everyone can make their contribution. "I'm a paper maker, so I can make paper, that can be my contribution."



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Yunfei Hua (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2025) is a writer and researcher currently based in San Francisco, who studies visual culture with an interest in subcultural communities and their cultural productions. She has written about self-motivated resistance that happened in post-epidemic China and is now working on research on fandom communities.