



Chelsea Now photo by Geoff Smith

From, left, Dieu Donn  artistic director Paul Wong with Kat Savage (archive, admin. & studio assistant), Steven Orlando (creative projects director), Catherine Cox (residency & studio programs director) and Moirin Reynolds (studio manager). In the background are various works on Dieu Donn  handmade paper created by artists for "Per Square Foot," Dieu Donn 's inaugural exhibit and benefit auction.

Fashioning art from paper, Dieu Donn  opens in Garment District

By Stephanie Murg

An explosion of cut-out letters envelops a horse sculpture that has been tagged with an Emily Dickinson quote. Flower shapes emerge from a glistening leaf of 23-karat gold. Colorful splotches of watercolor, gouache, graphite, and thread colonize a white square with the zeal of bacteria. This diverse trio of works, on view through October 8 at the newly opened gallery of Dieu Donn  on W. 36th St., initially seems to have little in common, but closer inspection reveals each to have the same material at its core: handmade paper.

"Per Square Foot," the exhibition that both inaugurates the papermaking non-profit's new 7,000-square-foot workspace in the Garment District and showcases the 178 works up for bid in its October 18 benefit auction, reveals the myriad possibilities of paper, whether bleached, pigmented, molded, sewn, collaged, painted, treated with urethane, dusted with crushed pearls, infused with high-voltage, electrostatically-charged carbon pigment, or simply sketched on with pencil.

"While it is a benefit auction, it's not just a bunch of donated C-prints," says Peter Russo, Dieu Donn 's program manager. "It's all brand new work created on paper that we produced here in the studio, so the work is made especially for the event." Among Russo's favorite works is the horse sculpture mentioned above. New York artist Lesley Dill's "Dieu Donn  Exploding Word Horse" transforms paper made at Dieu Donn  and archival glue into a small horse from which explodes a veritable alphabet soup. The 10-inch construction is inscribed with an Emily Dickinson quote: "How ruthless are the gentle."

“It is so rare to receive an auction donation that an artist put so much effort into,” says Catherine Parker, gallery director at Dieu Donn , who also notes that it is in step with Dill’s recent sculptural work. For Russo, “Exploding Wood Horse” helps to explode some of the misconceptions about works created on or with paper. “When people think of paper, they typically think of flat, two-dimensional drawings, and we do things that are sculptural and incredibly vibrant,” he says.

“‘Per Square Foot’ echoes the literal dimensions of the works and the notion that adding square footage can positively impact the creative process,” notes Dona Warner, executive director of Dieu Donn . Most of the 61 works in the live auction are 12” by 12” while the 117 silent auction works are smaller, most of them 5” by 7”. The star-studded list of donating artists includes Polly Apfelbaum, Jim Hodges, William Kentridge, and Kiki Smith, all of whom are among the approximately 500 artists that have collaborated with Dieu Donn  over the years.

The new double-height exhibition gallery spanning the 50-foot street-level storefront is only one aspect of Dieu Donn  and one factor behind its recent move from Soho, where the papermill was founded in 1976 by Susan Gosin. The new space also houses a fully-equipped papermaking studio (with a wet paper fabrication studio, drying room, and drying studio), staff offices, and a climate-controlled archive for paper art and historical paper samples.

“The expansion of the facility is a response really to the demand for our services,” says Tara Ruth, deputy director of Dieu Donn . “The move is as much a relocation as it is a galvanization of the services we offer.” The new home was a long time coming. As the former Broome St. location became increasingly cramped, the first priority was more space for the main, wet-floor studio, which is the creative heart of the organization, and the ability to accommodate as many artists as possible. Executive director Warner describes the search for a new space as “an epic six years of fits and starts.”

As the quest for a new location began, it helped to have architect Stephen Yablon on the board of directors. He took a lead role in the search, which was complicated by the unique requirements of Dieu Donn ’s collaborative creative process, paper fabrication sequence, and equipment. “There’s kind of a factory component to what they do, because they manufacture paper and they work with pulp, and there’s a lot of restrictive mechanical, electrical, and plumbing requirements that they need in order to operate,” says Yablon.

The organization ultimately settled on an 1926 steel and masonry building in the Garment District, and after leaving the board, Yablon took on the project professionally, volunteering to donate a large part of his firm’s fee as an in-kind service. His ambitious, meticulous, and, by necessity, economical plan for renovating the industrial storefront loft took into account every aspect of Dieu Donn ’s process, from how the paper is made to the details of drying and archiving works. “The whole papermaking process has a flow to it, so the design is very reflective of that,” he says. “It demands very clean, open spaces where a lot of activity can happen.”

Yablon and his team subdivided the building’s 20-foot loft space and mezzanine into the largest possible areas, principally two soaring spaces behind the storefront gallery that function as the wet studio and the adjacent drying room. A dry studio located upstairs is used for finishing work, curating, and storage. The goal was to make it make an inspiring place, and according to Russo, who moved in with the rest of the Dieu Donn  staff in August, it succeeds. “Everybody has what feels like infinitely more space, and it’s definitely a more peaceful environment to work in,” he says.

Beyond the increased visibility afforded by the storefront gallery, which will exhibit work by resident artists and feature exhibitions related to work produced in the studio, the expansion will allow Dieu Donn  to offer more studio time to artists and to expand its public programs, which include papermaking workshops for children and adults.

“This organization thrives on collaboration, what Lesley Dill has described as a ‘blind date’ between the artist and the master papermaker,” says Ruth. And Dieu Donn  has an outstanding record as matchmaker, having successfully collaborated with such artists as Chuck Close,

Robert Cottingham, and April Gornik. In addition to its Lab Grant residency program for mid-career artists, Dieu Donn  offers a Workspace Program, a year-long residency that encourages New York-based emerging artists to explore the creative possibilities of handmade paper and to develop this art form.

Mixed-media sculptor Jon Kessler, a 2007 Lab Grant recipient, was attracted to Dieu Donn  by the opportunity to work in a new medium. "Over the last several years, I've been trying to be more intuitive in my artmaking process," he explains. "Being a kinetic sculptor, the work is very labor intensive and exacting. So the opportunity to work in an immediate way attracted me."

"Dieu Donn  provides an invaluable resource to artists," echoes The Drawing Center's Lisa Gold, "allowing them to experiment with new methods and media, helping to expand their practice" — like Kessler's own. His first-ever exhibition of drawing-based work, created at Dieu Donn , is now on view at the Drawing Center through October 25.

Up for bid in Dieu Donn 's benefit auction is Kessler's "American Idol Suicide Drama," a collage dominated by a tabloid frontpage that features the title's titillating headline and the pouting visage of Hillary Clinton tweaked with graffiti-style blue scribbles.

Collage has also been the focus of A.J. Bocchino, a 2005 workspace resident. While at Dieu Donn , he created intricately watermarked sheets of pigmented abaca and cotton as the foundation for work based on his earlier piece, "Forbes 2000," a large-scale digital print of corporate logos. "I was able to create a cohesive body of work during the residency," says Bocchino, who has had solo shows at White Columns and Brooklyn's Urban Glass Gallery. The program also enabled him to significantly expand his artistic vocabulary. "Since I primarily use digital printing processes in the creation of my work, using handmade papermaking techniques provided an excellent counterpoint."

Karen Margolis, a 2000 Workspace Program artist, came to Dieu Donn  with an existing love of paper and an eagerness to "get inside of the medium somehow and play with its structure." Her residency allowed her not only to create paper but also to learn every aspect of it and get her hands dirty, literally. "I would mold and manipulate [the wet paper], almost like dough," she says. "I experimented with shaping the paper, wrapping it around painted wire that would color the paper as it dried. I did whatever I could think of." Margolis emerged from the residency a convert and says that most of her work exhibited in galleries and museums is on paper created at Dieu Donn .

For other artists, the residency offered the opportunity to try something totally new. "I went in there thinking I was going to continue making the work for which I had been buying pulp from them," says Rachel Foullon, a 2005 Workspace Program artist. "But after spending time with the staff and the archives, I realized that it would be so much more rewarding to work with them in order to develop new ways of working with the material that we made up as we went along." She was also pleased to be making art that contrasted with her sculptural work in other significant ways. "I enjoyed making works that were more easily distributable — that people could live with, because I can't really say that about a lot of my sculpture."

Next up for Dieu Donn  is the release of new editions by Jim Hodges and Arturo Herrera. Opening in late October is a solo show by Polly Apfelbaum, a 2002 Lab Grant artist who has worked on a number of long-term projects in the Dieu Donn  studio. Among the works exhibited will be "Basic Divisions," a series of vividly colored, psychedelic flags on handmade marbled paper that are based upon the designs of Betsy Ross.

With a new location and room to grow, Dieu Donn  is poised to continue pushing the boundaries of papermaking, artmaking, and how these processes are perceived. A glimpse at the swirling, molecularly precise works of Margolis (hers are the bacterial blotches mentioned above) demonstrates that paper is more than a backdrop for art. "My residency at Dieu Donn  really taught me how to alter my expectations, and I guess my perceptions, of what paper can do, how it is truly a fluid material," she says. "There is almost nothing that cannot be done with paper."