



A papermaking studio at Dieu Donn 

Courtesy of Dieu Donn 

Following Dieu Donn 's paper trail

By Kaija Helmetag

For two workers in a white-walled room in Manhattan's Garment District on a recent weekday afternoon, paper was more than something to shuffle. Wearing rubber boots and aprons, two women fed pieces of torn paper into a pulverizing machine and watched as it transformed into pulp.

Pulp — mostly made from masticated cotton, linen and abaca, a plant widely cultivated in the Philippines — was the raw material used by the staff and artists who collaborate at Dieu Donn , a studio space and non-profit arts organization with a 30-year history of pushing the boundaries of what it means to create contemporary art using handmade paper techniques.

On Thursday, the organization opened its doors to the public with an exhibition of new works entitled, "Per Square Foot," but will celebrate its grand opening September 25, followed by a live auction event October 18.

Formerly housed in Soho, the new 7,000-square-foot, street-level space on 36th Street was designed by Stephen Yablon Architect PLLC to be a functional workspace for artists. Inside the 1926 steel and masonry building, light pours into a loft-like exhibit space and double-height ceilings form a spacious work studio with huge industrial-looking papermaking machines. Administrative offices, a multi-media archive, and another studio occupy the mezzanine level.

According to Dona Warner, the executive director of the organization, the search for a new space took about six years. “We looked in every possible nook and cranny in Manhattan and in the boroughs,” she said.

The old location had limited studio space and lacked room for growth. Plus, Soho has changed since Dieu Donn  first set up shop there. “Soho has transitioned from an art destination,” Warner said. “We have closer proximity to Chelsea — but it also puts us in a neighborhood of “makers.” And there are a growing number of non-profits in [the Garment District]...They’re all non-profits who are serving artists, helping them by providing opportunities for them to create work.”

Dieu Donn ’s primary mission is to collaborate with artists to innovate. “The idea is that we bring the technical expertise and the artist brings the vision,” program coordinator Peter Russo said. “That’s the way we develop it and that’s the way that we push the medium.”

In addition to collaborating with artists, the organization also works to promote and exhibit contemporary art that utilizes papermaking techniques.

Work produced through Dieu Donn  has been placed at MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the New York Public Library.

Founded by Sue Gosin in 1976, Chuck Close, Louise Bourgeois, Glenn Ligon, and William Kentridge are among the artists who have collaborated with the studio.

“The biggest challenge is always to overcome the idea that it’s craft — the idea that we’re crafty. We don’t think about it like that all. It’s really an artistic medium, first and foremost,” Russo said.

Dieu Donn ’s repertoire is unique. Ordinarily, flat sheets of paper are made when a mold is dipped into a stainless-steel vat filled with wet fibers and pulled out to dry. At Dieu Donn , this technique is frequently adapted. The artistic staff collaborates with artists to form complex sculptural pieces using various casting techniques and materials, for example.

“Because we developed these techniques with artists, in one on one collaboration, we, and maybe more specifically Paul Wong, the artistic director, are the only people in the world who do what we do with this material. There’s no other precedent for it. No one else uses these techniques. They’re all developed in-house.”

The organization also works to preserve the unique history of this type of art. “We’re actually working retroactively now to go back and document everything down to the last drop and technique, so we have that for future generations,” Russo said.

In all, Dieu Donn  serves as an educational center, both for artists and for visitors to its exhibitions. “People look at something first, then look at the wall tag, and then really try to figure out what’s going on,” Russo said. “When they see the medium they feel a real surprise when they find out that something is really just all handmade paper.”

Dieu Donn  offers a three-hour Basic Papermaking class; Wednesday, October 3, 6:30-9:30 p.m.; Wednesday, November 7, 6:30-9:30 p.m.; Wednesday, December 19, 6:30-9:30 p.m. Dieu Donn , 315 West. 36th Street; www.dieudonne.org.