

# PAPERWORKS

## RICHARD NEAL

**RICHARD NEAL** is a creative soul whose work blurs the boundaries between painting and sculpture, collage and construction. Ranging from raw, muscular canvases as large as 4' x 6' to exquisite constructions behind glass that measure a mere 6" x 9", his work demonstrates a mastery of each medium he employs. But it is in working with paper that he finds the greatest immediacy and flexibility, ripping and tearing scraps of found and waste paper from his cache to create images that can seem to float in space or represent the full weight of a human being. He describes this process as painting with paper, and it communicates an immediacy and urgency not readily apparent in the painting process.

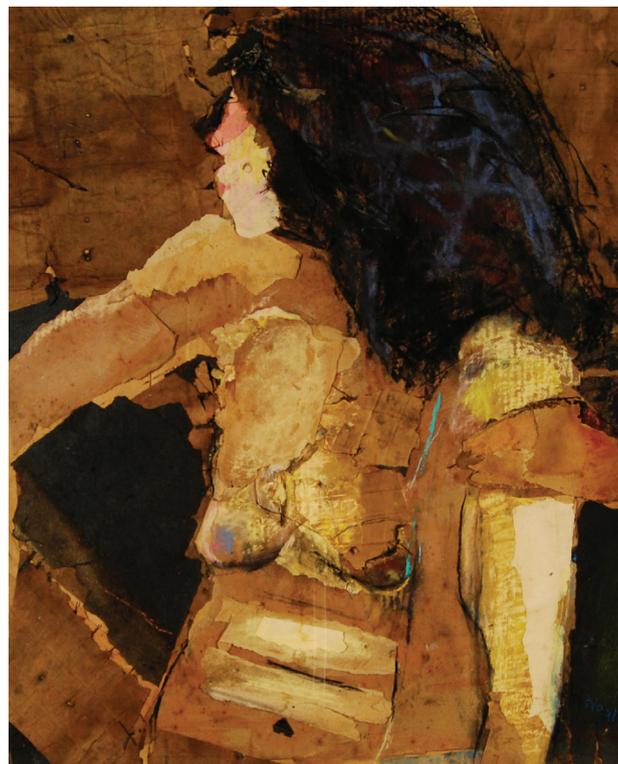
Neal has been using collage and found objects in his work since he left college. "I grew up looking at the work of Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and Tapes, work that was textured, there was a lot to look at on the surface, it wasn't just a pictorial representation," he explains. "I found the work of these artists very liberating, and I was comfortable with the idea that it was okay to make this kind of art."

He studied sculpture at college, earning his MFA degree at Cranbrook Academy of Art, but always had a preference for making "things that can hang on a wall," explaining, "I like the history of painting and all of the issues painters have struggled with over the centuries—the figure, the landscape, scale, perspective, color, value, push-pull, optics, decoration, flatness vs. deep space, illusion, magic—and I also like the immediacy and physicality of sculpture, so I guess I tend to try to have it all."

His work is moody, atmospheric, and often figurative, with themes that seem to repeat themselves as if in a spiraling time-line. "A couple of years



Richard Neal, "Altered States," mixed media



Richard Neal: "Bitches Brew," mixed media

ago my sister sent me some art work I'd made as a kid—you know, you think you've come so far—but when I looked at that early work I realized that I'm still working on the same ideas that I had when I was 6!" he says with a mystified laugh. "I realize that certain themes keep coming up, recurring motifs, or variations of ideas you've always been exploring. I was cutting out shapes and making drawings of figures with colored paper stuck on them like clothing, and I'm still kind of doing that. I really enjoy the idea of working with the figure, I find I respond to the forms in the figure."

He likes to use the stuff of life in his work. "I am interested in piecing together images from the rather mundane materials that whirl around us. People and things are in a never-ending condition of pulling together and breaking apart, and I have tried in my work to reflect some element of that continual state of flux," he explains. "I love paper, I'll rip up paper bags, sand paper, gum wrappers, corrugated cardboard—anything that looks interesting. You could never dream up all the different colors and textures and shapes."

He finds collage a liberating way of working because he can pull things apart, add and subtract, creating depth and texture without too much labor. "It's very malleable, sculptural, and if I don't like it, it's easy to change. I love edges, the ripped edge of paper, how putting one shape on top of another creates shadows, texture and dimension, things you can't do with oil paint. I love creating space between forms, there's a kind of tension where the forms meet. I'm all about forms and the edges of them. Sometimes I'll score the paper so it will rip in the right place, sometimes I'll use old drawings so that the pencil or charcoal shows through, then I'll use paint or pastel on top."

His larger work requires more robust elements—he has been known to incor-



"Shiva (the Destroyer)" mixed media, 80" x 35"

down so it's three-dimensional. Often the rip marks are nice to leave, or I'll cut a contour with a knife. I am also using roofing cement. It's an untraditional material, but I use it in my construction work. I'll trowel it on as if I'm using a palette knife, to get the form, and I'll paint on top of it. But even when I paint, I'm adding paper, so the paper is as important as the paint."

He is most attracted to shapes that resemble the human form, and enjoys the process of working with the figure using paper. The results may seem somewhat disjointed, but anatomical accuracy is beside the point; these are celebrations of a woman's form wrought from shreds and blocks of subtly-hued paper which often seem to have gently floated onto the surface. "With

these figures I'm working on now, I start with a drawing from life. I'm responding to the sensual nature of the figure, but often the figure disappears, then reappears—it comes and goes. The building up comes later, it gives the image volume."

For Neal there are no rules, and no destination in mind; he follows his intuition and imagination on a journey with results that can surprise even himself. He aims to create an illusion, a sense of mystery, "so people can enter another world, a world that takes

porate corrugated cardboard, paint tubes, paint-can lids, even sneakers, in his work—but even in these, underneath the surface that seems to hold the detritus of daily life, are layers of paper building up the image, or creating a textured surface upon which to present the final painting."

He is now working with tar paper, which he tears from old roofs. "Things happen on that roof that age the paper and create amazing textures and colors, it's something you can't buy at A.C. Moore! It's got a history to it, and part of the process is recognizing what's there from that history and being sensitive to it. Sometimes you destroy it in the process, but accidents when they happen are things you want to take advantage of. I paint on the tar paper and build it up by gluing on layers so it becomes sculptural. I rework, tear off, cut back and shave

you places. Maybe the viewer sees something but they are not quite sure what it is, maybe it's a mood, a glimpse, a memory of something unspoken. It's in achieving the hint of an idea, but it's complex, as if I'm triggering a distant memory in the subconscious. It's mystical, other-worldly. The pieces I'm working on now have layers of glass, like veils, it's like looking through to another dimension."

When asked, What do artists want? he replies, "I think what an artist really wants is for people to look at their work, really look at it. I like the idea that you can grab people's minds and take them some place, that you can create a state of wonder or transcendence. Art itself is like a window into another world, a different reality. There is nothing more satisfying than when someone is looking at your work for a long time and you feel you've connected with them. But there's a lot of stuff I haven't figured out yet and that's what keeps me coming back into the studio. If you feel like you've dropped into a formula, then that's a problem."

A gifted artist whose best work is yet ahead of him, Neal has for the past two decades focused much of his energy on raising a family, but recently has been able to turn his full attention to his art work. It will be exciting to watch as he reaches his full potential as an artist. ▲

[www.RichardNeal.net](http://www.RichardNeal.net)

- An exhibition of Neal's work will be on display at the **Studio on Slough Road, Brewster** August 20 – October 10, 2011  
Opening reception Aug. 20, 6–9 pm

- Neal's work can also be seen at Chalk Board Studio, Barnstable

*Gillian Drake is the editor and publisher of this magazine.*



Images from top:  
"Unme," mixed media behind glass, 12" x 9"  
"Perplexion," mixed media and glass, 20" x 10"  
"Incantation," mixed media, 38" x 25"

Photos: Robert Nash

