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Alan Shields
Headline Bus Driver
2000
watercolor on cotton pulp-dipped galvanized steel armature
Dieu Donn 



Alan Shields
Headline Bus Driver (detail)
2000
watercolor on cotton pulp-dipped galvanized steel armature
Dieu Donn 



GARDEN OF LIFE by Julia Morton

"Alan Shields," Jan. 11-Feb. 9, 2008, at Dieu Donn , 315 West 36th Street, New York, N.Y. 10018

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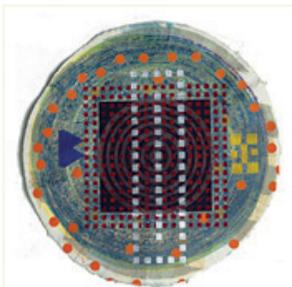
In the downtown New York art scene of the late 1960s and 1970s, Alan Shields (1944-2005) was a Merry Prankster of color and form, an artist who broke barriers with his innovative spirit, collaborative generosity and hand-made approach to art and life. He was a harlequin, a jester, a magician and a shaman whose art spread like flowers in a garden of life. Whether confounding the rules of formalist painting with his draped and decorated canvases or painting fingernails at gallery openings, Shields brought a tie-dyed exuberance to an art world then consumed by its own sense of decorum.

Dieu Donn , the celebrated hand-made paper lab that works with all the top contemporary artists, recently moved from its longtime home in SoHo to a new 7,000-square-foot space in Chelsea. And now, Susan Gosin, Dieu Donn 's founder and a close friend of Shields, has organized a small but revealing show to highlight the artist's varied output. The exhibition presents 22 tabletop sculptures and wall pieces, many made at Dieu Donn  and others coming from the artist's estate, which is co-managed by his daughter, Victoria Shields



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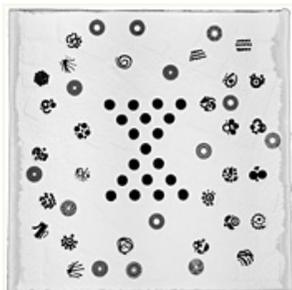
"Alan Shields" at Dieu Donn 's
West 36th Street gallery space



Alan Shields
Alan Shields' Shield
1974
relief, embossing, screenprint,
die-cutting, stitching on
handmade paper and emery
paper
Dieu Donn '



Alan Shields
Eagle
2001
watercolor on cotton pulp-
dipped galvanized steel
armature
Dieu Donn '



Alan Shields
Serious Repercussions
1994
relief on handmade paper
Dieu Donn '

Weslek, and his son, Jason Shields. Not all of the works are for sale; a few smaller pulp-dipped cages and several limited edition prints are offered for collectors.

Shields came to New York in the 1960s and quickly embraced the spirit of the day. He worked across all mediums, with a primary focus on challenging the status quo. He turned macho Minimalism and formalist theory into a play of jewel-like hues and exquisite detail. In his hands, the reductive grid became a variegated cage of color. He snipped and shaped chicken-wire armatures to have an architecture of their own, and dipped them into paper pulp to create a thin skin onto which he drew, painted or built. Other grids were left as hollowed-out boxes with colorful clumps of pulp clinging to the spindly structures.

Set at the entrance to the narrow glass-walled gallery, *Step well* (2000) is an upside-down paper-and-wire-grid pyramid mounted on top of a mirrored box. You look down into the glass to see up into the inverted labyrinth of cubes and cut pathways. Shields staged his dimensional and abstract pattern plays in works like *Big Cube* (n.d.), which featured a hallowed box of brightly stained pulp-cover grids and beaded wire springs that connect the interior spaces.

Printing, however, was Shields' life-long quest, and his many collaborations read like a "who's who" guide to fine-art printers and papermakers. He worked with many important presses in the U.S., including Pace Editions, Tandem Press and Tyler Graphics. In the actual work, Shields was committed to breaking boundaries. His prints don't appear to be prints. Rather, each is so unique that they seem instead to be one-of-a-kind collages, relief sculptures or even torn quilts.

Rickey (1978), for example, combines relief, printing, sewing and handmade paper in a composition that features colorful circles of various sizes, bound and floating in the center of a lacy web square. *Shields Shield* (1974) is a round disk made of embossed handmade paper covered with suggestive geometric marks. *Two for Too* (1978), a work of motley printed fabric, has been mounted between two sheets of glass so that both sides of the work are revealed. Because Shields so often used every side, many of his works are shown in this manner.

In addition to these smaller pieces, Shields, who lived on Shelter Island and, it's said, grew or caught what he ate, also created works on a monumental scale, though none of those are on display. He exhibited for many years with Paula Cooper Gallery and his work continues to be included in museum surveys. In recent years, the paper arts have had a resurgence and this exhibition allows us to see that Shields'



Alan Shields in the Broome Street studio of Dieu Donn , December 2000
Photo by Bill Mine

breakthroughs have had a wide-ranging influence.

More importantly, perhaps, this unassuming show reminds us that art is more than a history of ideas. In the hands of an artist like Shields, art can also be pure joy.

JULIA MORTON is a New York-based curator and writer on the visual arts. She is author of *Amalgam: Kent Williams*, (2006).

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