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CONTEMPORARY COLLAGE MAGAZINE

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Below : Redux



# John Whitlock

Brooklyn-based artist, designer and musician, **John Whitlock** has been cultivating his distinct approach to his collage art since 2009. He describes many of his pieces as '*Fragmented Narratives*'. Intrigued, we caught up with John in his studio to dig a bit deeper.



Right : Ballerina

Below : John's studio



**Hi John, have you always been in New York? Were you brought up there?**

I grew up in New York City, in Brooklyn. In fact, I live in the house I grew up in. I have lived in other places, of course. I spent some time in DC, Westchester, New York, but yes, mostly I've been in New York City my whole life. I moved back from DC in 2009, so I've been in Brooklyn, and in my studio space in Gowanus, since then.

**What was your route into art and collage?**

That's a tough one. In New York City in the 80s, art was all around you. As a kid, I probably didn't really think about it so much. I was more interested in graffiti, music and things like that, but it was all around you. I was fortunate to go to pretty good schools in Brooklyn where the arts was a core part of the curriculum, from elementary school up. I always had really good art teachers. Then, in New York City, a lot of my friends' parents were artists from the Abstract Expressionist era, the New York School and stuff, so it was just always around me.

I can remember making collages my whole life, too. I think I was more interested in drawing when I was a kid, and I still am equally interested in drawing and painting, but collage, I don't know why it clicked. When I first got back to New York in 2009 and had a smaller studio space, and collage was just a fast and efficient way to exercise a point of view.

I'm a collector, and my father is a paper/ephemera collector. That fed into it, of course. I inherited a lot of old, out of print magazines and paper ephemera when he closed his store front. Around the time I got back to New York, I knew I wanted to take art more seriously, and collage was the fastest way to explore my vocabulary. It still is. I've moved onto larger, cut canvas paintings which are very much like collages on canvas, but collage is still the source of all that. I start with small collages - I use those as studies or exercises or sometimes I use those as the material that I'm going to reproduce with paint and charcoal, only larger.



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**On your website you describe a lot of your work as ‘Fragmented Narratives,’ and I’m wondering if you can expand on that a little bit?**

It’s a hard one to talk about. I think it’s about the way we treat memories in our minds. Maybe you’ve seen a face ten years ago, and you see it again and you don’t know where it’s from. The mind can play all kinds of tricks and distort your memory. I feel like, with collage, photographic material and the kaleidoscopic nature of the aesthetics that I work with, I like to try and evoke some familiarity.

I like to try and play with the idea of memory, of transformation, the idea of images being re-contextualised and changed. Maybe not on purpose, maybe you look at this image and you think you see something that I didn’t even intend for you to see. I try to evoke that response in people. Maybe it seems like there is some implied narrative, even if there’s not. So that’s what I mean by fragmented narratives.

Just the way you can take an image that has a really clear meaning or story and you can fragment it, remove pieces of it and change the story completely. You can take an image of the most benign or comical everyday context and if you cut or abstract it a certain way, it becomes this provocative or disturbing thing just by finding the right fragment of the image.

That’s something I really like about collage and certainly moving into paintings and larger works, collage is always going to be part of the process. I think of them almost exactly the same although obviously working with paper is a lot faster.



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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

# Untitled (6)

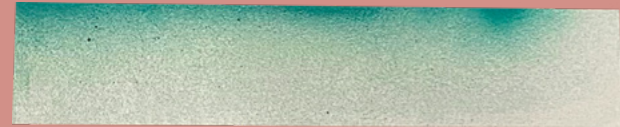
This was from a large series of collages commissioned by The New Collection and Atelier Pardon. The works were created as a fund-raiser for the Coalition For The Homeless. It was during the height of Covid and the economic effects that the pandemic would wreak on the poor were in sharp focus. Making art felt pointless. I decided to use a stack of old 1950s Hollywood portraits that Michael Desutter had left in my studio to run a collage fund-raiser. The newspaper snippets were from a stack of post Civil War publications that I had been holding onto for a while. The series as a whole is a play on the foundations of modern inequality as a result of both periods: the failed promises of redistribution after the American Civil War, and the myth of the American dream during the golden age of capitalism. In the end we raised a few thousand dollars for the cause. A drop of water in an ever-expanding ocean.





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I feel confident that this will be the thing I do until they bury me...



**Are you a full-time artist now or is there a day job as it were?**

I'm a full-time artist in the sense that I'm in my studio full-time every day. I also do commercial work out of my studio - creative direction and a lot of commissions via my art practice for various publications: *Pro-Publica*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times* and many smaller magazines. I also do some commercial stuff that isn't necessarily related to the art practice, but I do it all out of my studio. I feel full-time but in New York City you have to have a few different things going on, you know?

**Which came first? Was the commercial work/design your route in or were you discovered by the editorial magazines on the basis of your art?**

I try to keep the commercial work very separate. I don't like to put that stuff forward too much. I think I got into commercial work because I was interested in art and I needed to find a way to make money, not the other way around. All of the editorial work that comes to me, comes to me via my fine art. Nobody's ever asked me to do an illustration that's

outside of my style and that's important to me. I just wouldn't be interested in doing that.

It's more that I got into commercial/creative direction because I needed a hustle. It's hard to make a living just selling your art, especially if you want to live in a big city, but I'm trying to figure that out. The good thing about visual art over any other creative practice is that it's something I can do for the rest of my life. I feel confident that this will be the thing I do until they bury me so I can figure out ways to make it more and more full-time, and structure my life in such a way that allows for that.

**You seem to stay very true to your style when you're doing that commercial work. It makes you one of the lucky few who are able to work commercially without any major compromise at all.**

I wouldn't be doing commissions if they weren't part of the art practice. Editorial work doesn't pay tremendously. It's not the greatest income, so what would be the point, I guess? That's the way I approach it anyway.



Clockwise from top left : Accident At The Factory : Hooded Warbler : A Drop in the Bucket : Snaggletooth Head Wrap





Left: Untilted 5

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Your style is very distinctive but also very consistent. It flexes left or right or up or down a little bit but there’s a spine that goes through. How quickly did that emerge when you were doing collage?  
Really quickly. I’ve been thinking about that a little bit, because that question comes up a lot. When I first started with the current practice around 2009, I probably landed on some version of what you’re seeing now, very quickly. I don’t know if it was intentional or if I was drawn to a certain style and I could point out historical references, I’m sure you could too, but I’m not sure how much of that is seeping in. I got to a form that I liked and felt I could explore within.

It happened pretty quickly and it’s definitely evolving. It’s interesting with larger paintings. When you work on small paper collage, or digital collage for editorial, it’s very different than working on a larger, five foot canvas - the density of imagery, the density of texture is different, the scale of the fragments are different and the way you experience it is different. So, the works on canvas are necessarily getting busier and busier. I think that’s where I’m at right now, because it feels different in person when you look at it.

When I first started doing canvases I was approaching it more minimally and carefully, and I don’t think it had the right impact in person. So yes, it will be rooted in the exact same vocabulary and I think that’s true of the editorial work, too. With editorial work, there’s a lot of feedback, revisions, photo editors and stuff like that, so I can’t be as loose as I can be on paper. I can try and make it feel loose or the process feel loose but somebody is going to come in and tell me to swap images at a certain point. I think there’s a common thread through all my work, like you said, it shifts left, right, up and down based on the medium and the application.



# Diamond Cutter



This piece was part of a series for a works on paper show at a gallery in Brooklyn called Court Tree Collective. The black and white photo sections were snippets cut from a series of large charcoal drawings that I had completed about a year earlier. At the time, I had just started experimenting with doing these large scale, charcoal reproductions of small collages. Ultimately I was unhappy with the flatness of the final drawings; with collage there is layering and depth built right into the work, and the charcoal reproductions stripped all of that out. So, for this series, I used those drawings as source material to create new, cut works on paper that brought back the natural layering process that I love about collage. Transformation is an important part of my work, both conceptually, and also in terms of the process.





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It's both satisfying and intimidating when you finish a large realist charcoal piece and say, "OK, now it's time to cut it up!"



**I was interested in developing that conversation in terms of the relationship between the collage and the canvas work. We interviewed Cecil Touchon...**

Oh I've been in shows with Cecil! I love his work.

**He has an interesting relationship between his two sets of work. He does his collage relatively small - on paper or on board - but then he'll take his original collage almost as a sketch or preparatory work and he'll recreate it on canvas without using any collage materials, just paint. As far as I can see, your work seems to still be a mixed media thing. Still using elements of collage within your work.**

I've experimented with what you're talking about. What I'm doing now, the final piece that's on canvas should be its own improvised expression. It might take me a long time to finish it because I'm figuring it out as I go along versus if I was reproducing it from a small collage. I've tried that to mixed results. For me, the struggle is when I make paper collages I like to see the overlap, I like to see the shadows from the overlap and I like to see the layers. The times I've tried to straight up

reproduce that onto canvas, it felt flat. It just eliminated all of that built-in tactile nature. I mean, paint obviously has texture and a tactile quality but the joining of imagery was flat so that's why I got away from that really quickly.

My sister is doing paintings similar to how you described Cecil's process. I like it in other people's work but for me it just wasn't the same as combining things right into the composition on the fly. One thing I do that is the most time consuming part of the process, and I might move away from this at some point, but, I'll make small black and white collages as quick ideas. Then I'll reproduce those flat, in charcoal and really large on canvas. Then I take that drawing on canvas and cut it up as source material for the final painting. So, in a sense, that step of the process is like what you said about Cecil Touchon - reproducing, at large, but for me it's just to get to the source material that goes into the final improvised piece. It's a bit cumbersome, but I like drawing and I do like the process of reproducing photography with charcoal. It's both satisfying and intimidating when you finish a large realist charcoal piece and say, "OK, now it's time to cut it up!"

Untitled 2







**You alluded to the fact that I might see some influences in your work - and I do - but I'm interested in your perspective. Where do you think the influences are coming from?**

I'll just speak about it broadly because if you're asking me, you might get a loaded answer. Everybody thinks that their work looks like their favourite thing, and then other people don't. I hear from people a lot, and I fully understand it, I get the Cubism thing a lot, the Constructivism thing, which I think a lot of collage artists get. I would say I'm more influenced by painters like *David Salle*, people who work with fragmented, layered compositions and a juxtaposition of influences in their work. Or people that push aesthetics into challenging territories.

The Cubism thing? The Dada thing? I get that and I definitely grew up on that. I'm probably more influenced by that than I'd like to let on, but it's not something I think about when I work. I mean, I like Kurt Schwitters and I have tons of books about that stuff, but it's not something I'm thinking about when I'm making work. When I'm making work I'm looking at contemporary painters probably more than anything else.

**Does your process have any element of planning within it?**

No, I don't plan at all, it's completely improvised. I should plan a little more with the large paintings, because I could save a lot of time. I mean, I have a process, but the final compositions are fully improvised and I like it that way because it's like exercising. It feels like I'm working out. When you're reproducing, like the collage to charcoal step, or like what you described in Cecil's work, for me there's less of a struggle with the final piece. That part can be cathartic and meditative, but I like the final piece to be a bit of a fight. I feel like that's when you really discover things about yourself.

**Yes, I suppose, to use a cooking analogy, you've created your own ingredients and then you're going to cook with them.**

Yes, exactly. You'll see common shapes, that's just the way my hand goes, that's the way I see things. I collage with scissors, I don't use an Exacto knife, so I think I'm somewhat limited to more simple, geometric shapes. I'm sure some of that seeped in from Dada or Cubist sensibilities, but that's just where I've landed.

**On a broader note, John, what's your sense of where collage is at the moment, as a medium? Do you feel that its star is rising in some way?**

I've felt that many times over the last ten years, so I don't have a strong feeling of where it's going. I felt like it was at critical mass about five years ago, so who knows.

I've been a part of various incarnations of the international collage community over the years and the interesting thing to me is that there's this emphasis on the medium as the unifying thing. I have never fully related to that. It's strange to me, I think about collage not in terms of aesthetics or ideas that I relate to, but how something is made.

In terms of where I see collage, it amazes me that it's gotten more and more popular. I think there were times when I was probably overwhelmed by that because it's like, 'wow, everybody's making collages', and it's not a particularly hard thing to approach. Ultimately though, it is hard to get to a place where you have found your own voice. I think there have definitely been times where I felt it was over-saturated. The internet and social media adds to that feeling, but ultimately I think it's a good thing. If more people are making art and abstraction gets more and more normalised, I think that's a good thing for the world and society.

Like anything, if you get into dollhouse furniture making and miniatures, you're going to find a saturated world out there. I try and remember that. Yes, there are a lot of collage people in my feed, but there's a reason for that. That's the algorithm.

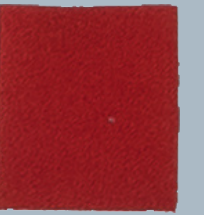




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**Music is a tougher grind, which is funny to me because I guess when I was a kid I would have thought the opposite, that if you're an artist, you're going to be struggling.**

Left : Flowers from the West



**How much are you tied into the New York collage community or even the Brooklyn Collage Collective? That seems to be quite a thriving area.**

Yes, I know many of those guys.

Allan Bealy is in Brooklyn, isn't he? I think he might live near me? I used to help Andrea Burgay publish her *Cut Me Up* magazine. We're friends, and I first came across Allan through that. I think he was in an early issue and had one of my favourite pieces. I've known many of the Brooklyn Collage Collective people over the past decade. I'm not super involved with them, I'm not part of the collective, but I'm friends with people who have been. I'm really good friends with James Gallagher. He's been around for a long time. He curated that first collage book with Gestalten, "Cutting Edges". There's a big community here for sure.

**Can we touch on the music? I'm wondering if you ever put music to your work or if your approach to collage is similar to your approach to music.**

I play in a band called 'Half Human', and that's the most different thing because it's a rock-based band, like a post-punk thing. We do incorporate sound collage into it so it does play a factor there. But for my own personal experiments as 'Multiform Palace', it's essentially sound collage. It's rhythmic, beat-oriented sound collage and sampling and I think it's very related to the visual work. I also do collage based album art for a record label. We tried to develop a distinct palette that's maybe a little different at first glance than my larger work but it's still very connected and still very me. That's the closest it comes to synaesthesia, where you see music as pictures

or taste words. With my own music though, yes I think of it as satisfying the same urge, just in a different way.

**Is music involved while you're collaging?**

Oh yes. I listen to music constantly. I don't know which came first for me, music or visual art. It's probably equal. Music is a tougher grind, which is funny to me because I guess when I was a kid I would have thought the opposite, that if you're an artist, you're going to be struggling. I think the world is less kind to musicians than artists if you can believe it. It's something that's a big part of me and I'll continue to do that as well, in some capacity, forever. I think the visual arts practice is my main domain, though.

**So what's coming over the horizon? Do you have plans for the next year?**

I'm in a group show curated by Maximo Tuja and D. Dominick Lombardi that opens in Cortland, New York in early November. I have a few pieces in that. And then another show with Max in Spain on the early side of next year. I also have open studios coming up in this neighbourhood, Gowanus. I just shipped out a lot of work for the Cortland show and now this side of the studio is a bit empty, so I have to try and get ready for the open studios which is a fun thing. I like to be in my studio anyway and I just keep the door open. Lots of people come through and it's always a unique experience.

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You can see more of John's work on his website: [johnwhitlock.tv](http://johnwhitlock.tv) and on his Instagram page: [@johndwhitlock](https://www.instagram.com/johndwhitlock)