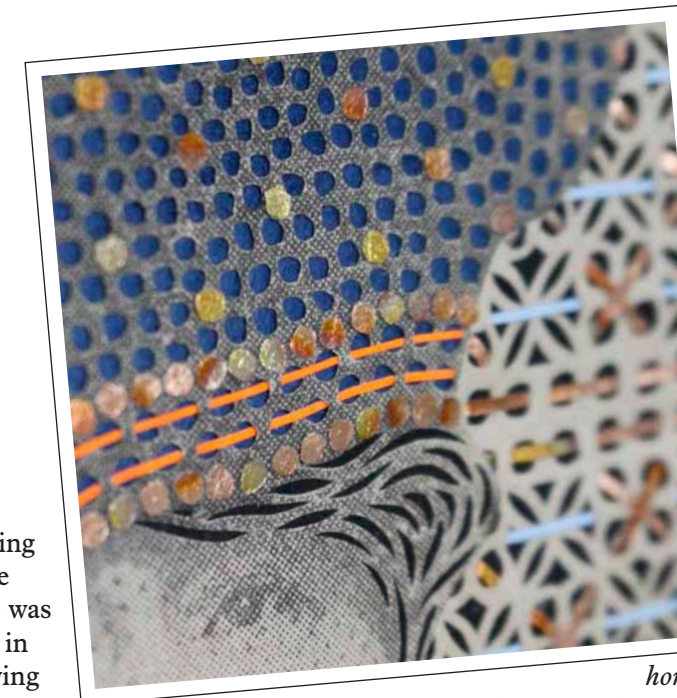




The Perfect Cut: Talking with Myriam Dion

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In collaboration with their co-organizers of the Paperology Reading
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*Mrs. Isabella Goodwin, The First Woman
To Be Appointed To New York Detective
Force, Wednesday August 23, 1911,
(detail), newspaper, Japanese paper,
gold leaf, 84 x 86 cm, 2021*

We interviewed contemporary paper-cutting artist Myriam Dion in the spring of 2021, while she was quarantined at her home in Montreal, Canada, following an international artist residency at NARS in Brooklyn. Dion is an artist who is especially difficult to classify as she reimagines a traditional craft through her manipulation of scale, a love of excess, an inventive intermingling of various materials and techniques, and an eye for accidents and happenstance. Her work is about the interplays of text and image as much as it is about pushing paper to its limits, as close to textile as her precise hands will allow it. Dion started paper-cutting while doing her MFA at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), which she completed in 2014. She had her first solo show at Galerie Blouin-Division the same year, which has represented her ever since. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions, from shows based on paper works such as the *Papier* series in Montreal, to more expansive events, including at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec and Arprim in Montreal; the *Art Toronto* fair; the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies; the Sharjah Art Museum in the United Arab Emirates; and the Rijswijk Museum in the Netherlands. Her works are part of several public collections including the MNBAQ, MACM, Loto-Québec, TD Bank, Scotia Bank, private collections in Canada and in the United States, and have been reviewed in publications that include *Kolaj*, *Spirale*, *Circuit*, *Hyperallergic*, *Canadian Art*, *The Guardian*, *Le Devoir*, and *Uppercase*. Most

recently, in 2021, her work was exhibited at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in *Des*

horizons d'attente, an exhibition of recently acquired works.

Paper-cutter, Pattern Maker

Dion's material is the newspaper, which she proceeds to destruct with utmost care. Her geometric cuts fill the page, leaving barely a space unconsidered, untouched. With the assistance of her trusty X-Acto knife, she creates patterns made up of small holes, transforming ordinary newspaper pages into intricate lacework. She draws the viewer in up close to inspect the machine-like precision of her hand and the scale of her enterprise: the fine and repetitive quality of her work is a spectacular commitment to order and structure. But what does it mean to 'fill' a page when the result is a sheet riddled with holes, absences, and missing information? For Dion, her perforated sheets are above all studies of pattern and ornamental traditions. Indeed, perhaps even more than the art of paper cutting, pattern and motif are at the heart of her work, and she is continuously studying these by

looking at pattern books, rugs, and tapestries. During our conversation, she shares an anecdote about a recent residency in New York, when she would stand in front of the window of a rug shop while the owner kindly turned over the rugs for her to contemplate and study. This everyday devotion to committing patterns to memory has been in the making from a young age.

I lived in a house where there were many rugs, a lot of artworks, tapestries. My parents were very sensitive [to that], they travelled a lot. There were a lot of patterns in the house and I think that's something that stimulated me from a young age. My mom was a kindergarten teacher, and she created a really stimulating environment. When I went to show my mom a drawing, she would say, 'You can still add things, you still have room.' I was always filling in my drawings and then I got a taste for it. I still have very precise memories of my childhood, of the rug in the living room. When we played on it, its patterns were part of the universe we created, part of the game. So patterns have been with me since childhood. As far as thinking about patterns in the arts generally, I like to think of the pattern as a channel, because all cultures have patterns. Patterns are mixed together and hybridized, you can tell which pattern belongs roughly to which culture. There are so many mixtures of patterns in all cultures that it really opens up a whole set of questions that allow us to learn about the world in general; I find it endless, and so rich. The research is never-ending, and I find this appealing.

Dion eschews today's minimalist aesthetic, hers rather a throwback to



excess, detail, and complexity.

Despite the time-consuming nature of her process, she often works at a large scale, including the production of installations. These big projects are balanced by smaller works meant for framing. In all, her slow working method means she produces no more than eight pieces a year, a rare example today of William Morris' nineteenth-century plea to not let productivity replace the quality of handmade skill and labour. Her approach to work, as well as the works themselves, are contemporary echoes of the values and aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts movement, which Dion cites as a major influence.

This juxtaposition between minimalism and ornamentation is interesting because I like both. In my house, for instance, there are walls with nothing and there are really intense areas with rugs, full of books, full of detail. My work is ornamental, but I like super minimalist things too. In objects, I really have an attraction for what is handmade, for craftsmanship, traditions. Often these are objects that are well made, but this doesn't mean they are necessarily ornamental.

This ornamental quality to Dion's work is present regardless of whether she is working from a news story that is uplifting or more sober. She has transformed California wildfires into a bloom of flowers (*Cortège floristique – California Blazes*, 2020), the fire of Notre-Dame Cathedral (*Notre-Dame en Feu*, 2020 and *Notre Dame Cathedral*, 2019) into hypnotic stained-glass patterns, while a *New York Times* picture of a shantytown in Manila became the centrepiece of a 216 × 162.5 cm homage to Millefleurs tapestry (*A Moment of Beauty in a Land of Misery*, 2019).

When I started working with newspapers, I told myself that I really had to transform them, to magnify them, to create something intense, like a precious object, a jewel. In order for it to be a work of art, I'd have to decorate it as much as possible, to make it as delicate or precious as possible. That's when the idea came to me to work with a lot of detail and make things very ornamental. But I could do minimalist works as well. I could take a newspaper and just decide to do some weaving in it, with very light colours. It could be tone on tone, white, gray. It could be very intense too but super soft, super minimalist. Maybe my practice will turn to that someday, but right now I'm into decorative Arts and Crafts, into William Morris' floral style.



Recto, Verso

To make these detailed works, Dion makes a staggering number of cuts, each its own moment of removal. She takes away content and substrate together, leaving in their stead small but exact holes. Her mark is not that of inscription or the trace, but of the cut, which allows Dion to play with the physical limitations of paper.

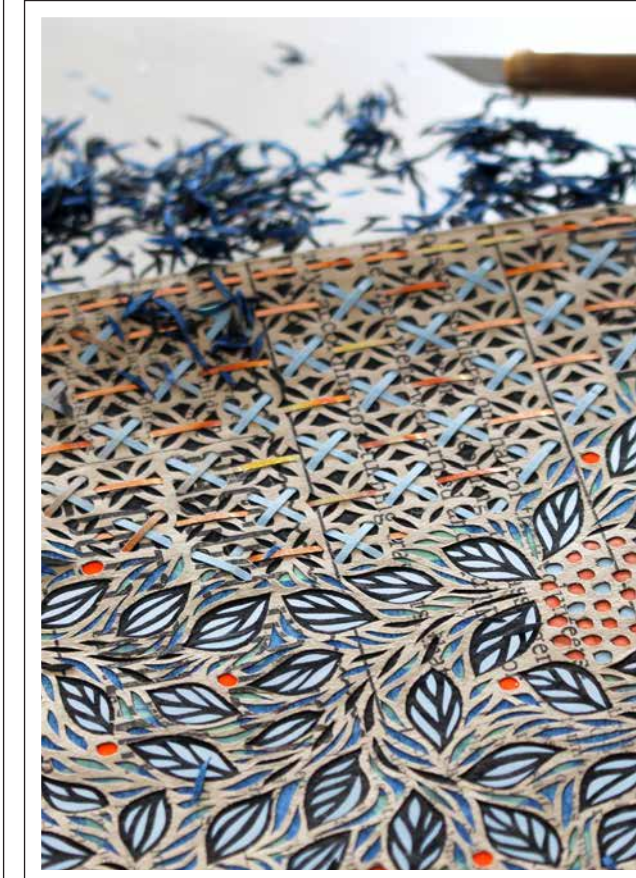
There are fragilities which are created. I make openings and I come to weaken the paper with all these holes. But that's what transforms it. It becomes like lace. You can see that something is happening; you lose the formal referent of the newspaper. I weaken it, but at the same time I transform it. This tension is important, but I would say that it is more in relation to the limits of paper. There comes a point where I can't do anymore, but I'm still trying to add to it, for example wanting to weave gold leaf into the layers of cut paper.

Despite the density of her compositions, her perforations can be seen as openings, as a decluttering and unburdening of the paper's content, as airy portals or spaces of possibility. When describing what she does to paper, Dion prefers the French verb 'ajourer' rather than the more common 'couper' (to cut). The literal meaning of 'ajourer' is 'to let the day shine through,' and refers to the craft of openwork. As she considers the shape of any given intervention, she is able to comment and dialogue with the news stories, or, in her installation work, use her cuts as filters that literally let the light in or through.

Even if the gesture is a little destructive, even if I come to weaken, to cut the newspaper, there is something luminous which occurs. There are openings that are created. They are holes, but they are openings too. There is something beautiful in this gesture. It's tender. Even if it's something I undo, I try to take care of the paper. There's something in the meticulousness and the delicacy of the subject. I give love in this work, I give [each work] a full month of my life.

The cut is the most important part of her repertoire of tricks. Indeed, to create such dramatic displays, she must rely on some deception. Unlike works that are on a surface, her working of and through the surface means that front and back are each other's makers. The surface is refined and neat ('lissé'); orderly and restrained; fine and delicate. But turn over any of her pieces and the messy scaffolding of her assemblage is revealed, producing something that looks very much like collage. While she cuts she also pastes, artificially moving around headlines and the information from the mast page; layering pages; placing side by side many copies of the same paper; folding; and so on. Unlike other forms of collage that overtly divulge their cut-and-paste technique, Dion's collages are for the most part dissimulated. What on the 'recto' looks like a simple intervention into a page is exposed in the back as a carefully constructed scenario.

By accumulating the same images, three or four times in the same piece, I develop a strategy to complicate the repetitive character already present in my work, in addition



to underlining the serial nature of the newspaper. The object has a familiar character through its banal, mass-produced material, but it becomes foreign through the ornate treatment and appearance that I give it. This strategy of juxtaposing copies implies a second process, collage, which plays an essential role in the making of the pieces, particularly in the production of large formats.

If I refer to the history of 20th century art, collage is part of a dynamic movement that evolved on the side of the random, the unfinished, the eclectic, and happenstance. My work reverses these usual connotations of collage because of their 'finished' and applied quality, which is the result of a rigorously calculated and structured composition: there is little room for accident or chance. I think it's worth emphasizing that I fine-tune the collages with extreme precision; I conceal the joints by covering them with cut-out patterns so that the work becomes one coherent surface. Despite my efforts to hide the junctions, collage has become a very important element. I think that ultimately it contributes to a slow reading of the pieces, encouraging the viewer to look carefully in order to grasp the steps involved in its making. So while I do reverse some formal aspects of the history of collage, I also recognize myself in some of its history, especially in the work of deconstruction and construction of the artists of the Dada movement, such as Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch, and Max Ernst. Their process of research, exploration, and selection of images from the heart of everyday life is similar to my day-to-day collection of newspapers, which provide me with fragmentary snippets of the everyday. Collage gives me the impression that I'm part of a tradition of 'bricolage' – something I associate with an economy of means and with working with one's hands, and which is in keeping with my working material and my desire to revalue manual skills.

Planned Compositions

There is much about Dion's work that happens in the moments of planning. Her process requires the forethought and precision of the architect's drawings, as well as the fine gestures and movements of the surgeon's hands. Just as the architect inscribes and creates by leaving his mark, and just as the surgeon who can repair or transform through addition or removal, the paper cutter is at once building and eliminating, making and undoing as they fill up pages with empty space. While the overall shapes Dion designs are ornate reminders of Baroque or

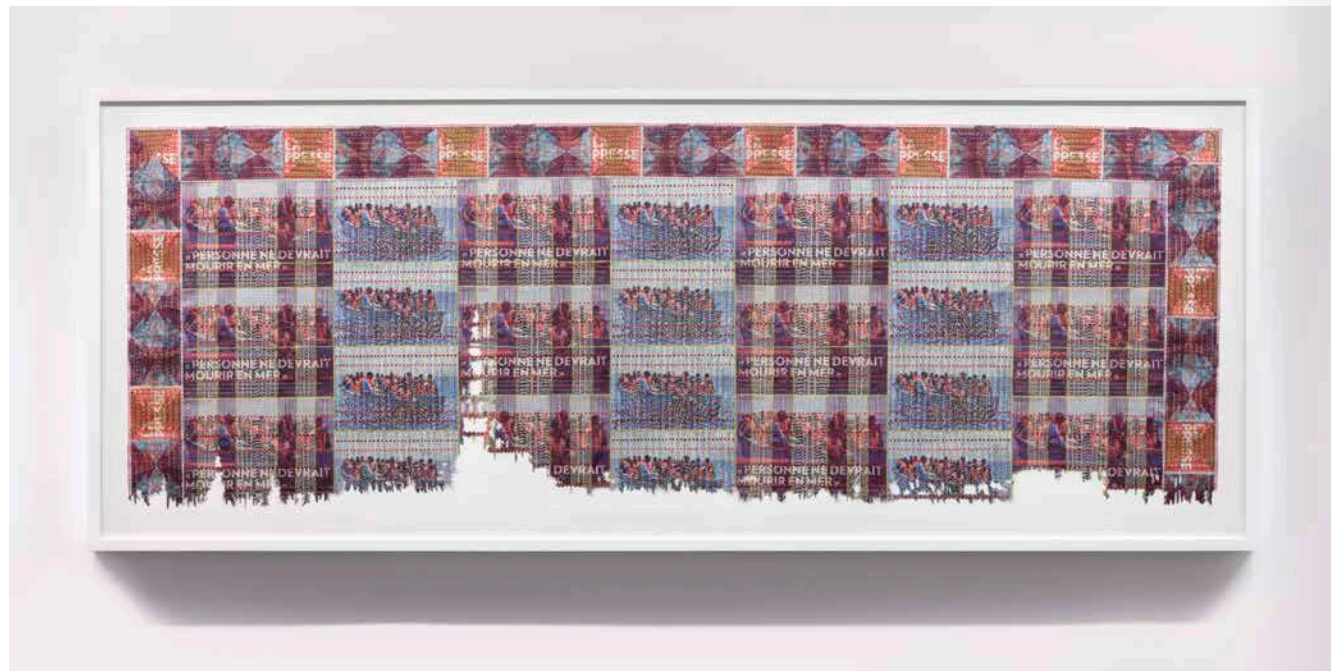
Victorian orderly flourish, the detail she uses to create the patterns of her micro-cuts are rule-driven and structured.

It's true that my work is super controlled. It says something about me, for sure, it is me who makes the works. I think it's a way to reassure myself. Because it is a precarious job to be an artist. So works that are in my control [...] it's a way to say and accomplish exactly what I want, as something precise for me, sure, finished.

In addition to paper cuts, other elements like collaging, paper folds, weaving, drawing, the integration of various materials such as gold leaf, or even repurposing the small confetti-like cut-outs she makes, add ever-more complexity and detail to her works, and all the more things to plan and compose in advance.



Half-moon Streamers, Sharjah Art Museum, U.A.E. December 2019 – January 2020. Photograph by Myriam Dion

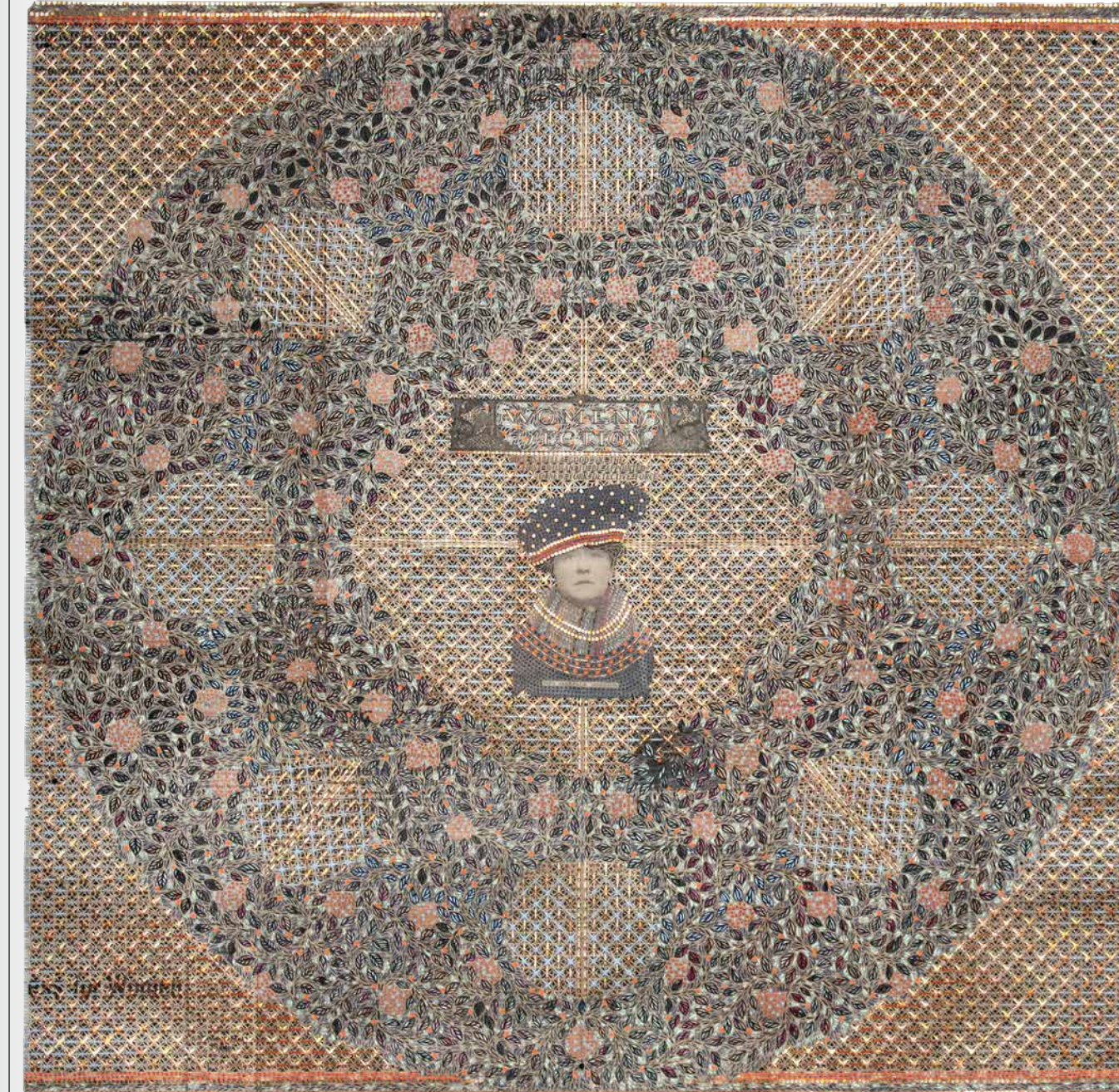


Personne ne devrait mourir en mer, La Presse, Samedi 8 juillete, newspaper and Japanese paper cut with X-Acto knife, 61 × 178 cm, 2017

From the beginning, I know if it will be a small work or a large one. I know what dimension the work is going to have approximately because it depends a lot on the image in the paper. If I have several images, I can really make a collage that transforms the work. It also depends on the context, if it's for a particular exhibition. Often, they ask for specific dimensions, which means that I'm constrained in the dimensions that I make. And if there is folding in my work, I also know it from the start, because it requires a lot of planning: what sections I'm going to fold, what is on the

Anything that is more likely to catch the eye or put a focus on where I'm going to put the gold leaf [must be pretty clear from the onset]. I use that often in borders, or around the person for the central subject. Then at the end I add small punctuations so that it is as harmonious as possible. I have to plan ahead so that it doesn't look overwhelmed with incomprehensible stuff.

Once the big picture sculptural plan of her work is laid out, the detail of her patterns and other smaller decisions can happen along the way.



Mrs. Isabella Goodwin, The First Woman To Be Appointed To New York Detective Force, Wednesday August 23, 1911, newspaper, Japanese paper, gold leaf, 84 × 86 cm, 2021

back of the section that I'm folding, I have to know right away when there's folding, because it's more complicated for me in terms of choices. It's more challenging, which I like. So as soon as there is folding, it puts the focus on a particular area and then I really have to think about it beforehand – it's not a decision I'll make after I've done half the work.

This kind of careful planning goes into her use of materials that tend to catch the eye, such as gold leaf or colourful Japanese paper.

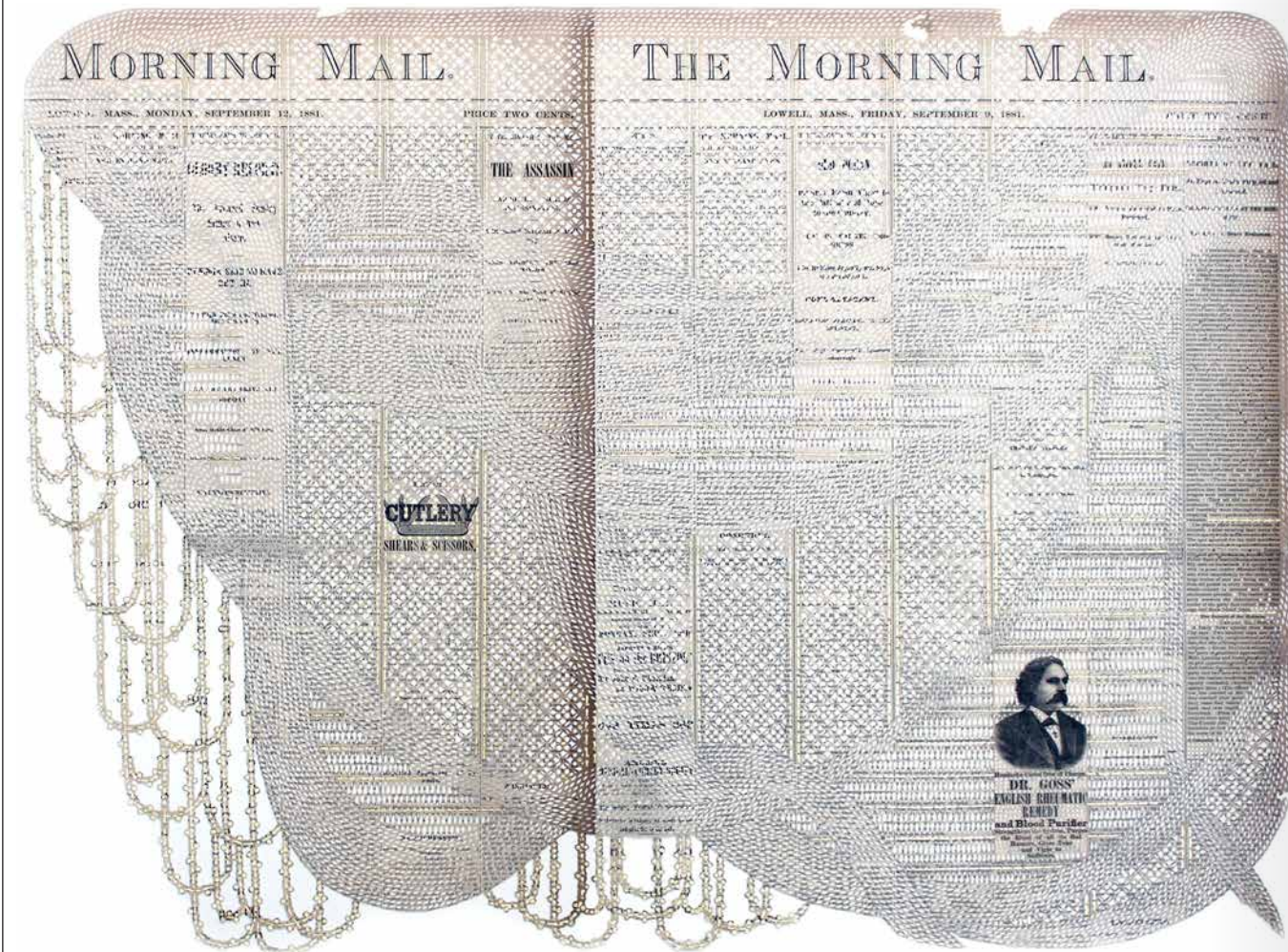
It takes so long to make a work that I do change my mind, that's the fun of it too [...] It takes a long time, but it means I have the latitude to make some of my decisions while I'm making the work. After that there's all the colour work too, that's the part that's the hardest for me. It's what I find the most difficult [...] I would never be able to be a painter! Then, from the moment I choose the colours and start collaging, it's hard to go back [...] Once it's glued, it's over! If something goes wrong during this step, I have to start all over again with the cut-outs, so this is the most technical part, and the most stressful for me. So I would say that my work is divided between formal decision making – like the overall shape, what pattern I'm going to use – and

then long stretches of work, repetitive work. I make a decision and then I have a week of repetitive work. After that, I have to make another decision about what colours I'm going to use or what other pattern I'm going to do or what other transformation, then another week of repetitive work.

This repetitiveness is at the heart of Dion's everyday work, a creative process she sums up pragmatically as 'sitting and working.' She sits at her home desk with a box of handmade paper stencils for the patterns she often repeats, and must remind herself to take breaks

someone to program something that would mimic me. Maybe such an automated process would help me with one layer. But then again, when people see my work, what they appreciate is that it's handmade. That's what's impressive and that's important to me. It's the labour, the workload, it's the time. It is a gift of time, by the work of my hand. If there was a machine, the work would lose its interest. Anyone can also cut by hand, but no one takes the time to do it.

While her working time is characterized by structured cuts, when she 'lets go,' during her



Train Robbery, Jesse James, September 12, 1881, newspaper and gold leaf cut with X-Acto knife, 52.5 × 68.5 cm

to spare her hands and wrists from tendinitis. Those long, solitary nights spent cutting a piece, or 'opening it up,' are punctuated by her rhythmic breath: 'When I cut, I blow to move my scraps out of the way, there is a kind of rhythm: cut, blow, cut, blow [...]' It would take too long if I swept all the time with my hand. So people can hear me working from the room next door.'

The restraint with which she describes her process ('sitting and working') and the simplicity of her tools ('to work, I need a table, my stencils, and a lamp') are a reminder of the value of simple gestures and a certain nostalgia. In a world of laser cutters and 3D printers, Dion remains committed to her handiwork.

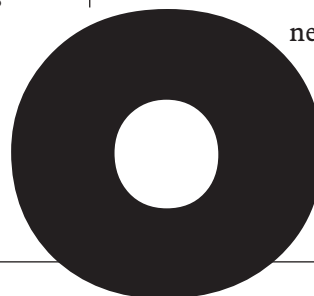
There is something I like about this economy of means. I have thought about programming a machine for particular sections. But I would have to plan all the steps ahead of time and give up changing my mind along the way. I would also have to hire

'unproductive' time – on vacation, with her personal projects – she does not reach for her X-Acto and she does not opt for gestures of removal. Instead, she draws, makes ceramics, inscribes, improvises.

Then there is also what I do for myself like drawings that are not for the gallery. I wish I could do only work, but it also takes ways to relax! When I go on vacation, I'll bring pencils and paper and I'll draw whatever I want, it'll be more free. I have to be able to do that, because otherwise my practice is way too intense.

'I don't decide what's in the news'

ne of the aspects of Dion's work that is left to happenstance is what news stories she will end up working with: 'I would say that what triggers the work most often is really the subject of the newspaper, the photographic or political



qualities that are in the image.' To feed her inspiration, Dion patiently picks newspapers by visiting the rare newsstands that remain in Montreal, where she lives. Her favourites are those where she can find the international press:

The New York Times, the Financial Times, the Paris newspapers. So I can compare the news, see what's on the front page, regardless of where you are in the world. And often the papers from somewhere else are late, so there's a kind of fun game in that. I'll decide afterwards how to dress ('habiller') the article. [...] Other times people will bring me old newspapers, sometimes they are like treasures – the first time we walked on the moon, or invaluable for some personal reason – but are just gathering dust in the attic. [...] Someone came to do a studio visit recently and when she saw that I was working with historical newspapers she was outraged. She said, 'Oh my God, you're destroying an archive!' But in terms of leaving a mark or a trace, even while cutting things out, you are also creating a new archive; by intervening on a historical newspaper, you are speaking about your time. They are your choices, your subjectivity that you come to inscribe in these objects that you transform, that you decide to keep such or such object, to put the focus on this newspaper in particular. It is a new trace, a new archive, even if you are 'destroying' it.

She also scours eBay for old newspapers and, like a dedicated collector, piles up more issues than she can use in her apartment. It is hard to explain what exactly draws Dion to a particular news story: a combination of the aesthetics of the page (nice images, striking headline) and a personal interest in the topic.

Sometimes, the newspaper page itself becomes alive in unexpected ways. In a piece about the tsunami in Japan a few years ago, Dion was surprised by a spectral apparition from the other side of the page.

It was a [picture of a] woman putting flowers on the ground, there was snow. The image is very beautiful. I bought twenty issues [of the newspaper] and made a long piece in the shape of a wave. I hadn't noticed this right away, but on the back of the image I was using, there was an image of a face. When you noticed it, it really looked like a ghost! A face repeated twenty times in the work.

It was one of the first works that I did for my MFA thesis exhibition. I kept it for at least six months at home and we just saw the face when it was framed, because it was facing the light. It was really disturbing because this was a work about the tsunami and its many deaths. If I had been searching for this effect, I wouldn't have been able to produce it. Sometimes there are things like that that reveal themselves, ghosts, and that's interesting. I wonder sometimes how my work will change over time. The paper will become thinner, it will turn yellow, maybe things will appear. I would like that.

I've tried working with other kinds of paper before. Just white paper, for example, or photos I took myself or books. But I like working with newspapers precisely because I don't have control over the news. Yes, I choose the article, but I'm not the one who decides on the news. There is an element of the unknown in this that transforms my practice, and it also leads me to work with other kinds of motifs, subjects, and documents. I have to do research on new things and there is a kind of transformation in the repetition that makes it not boring for me. I would stop otherwise, because it wouldn't



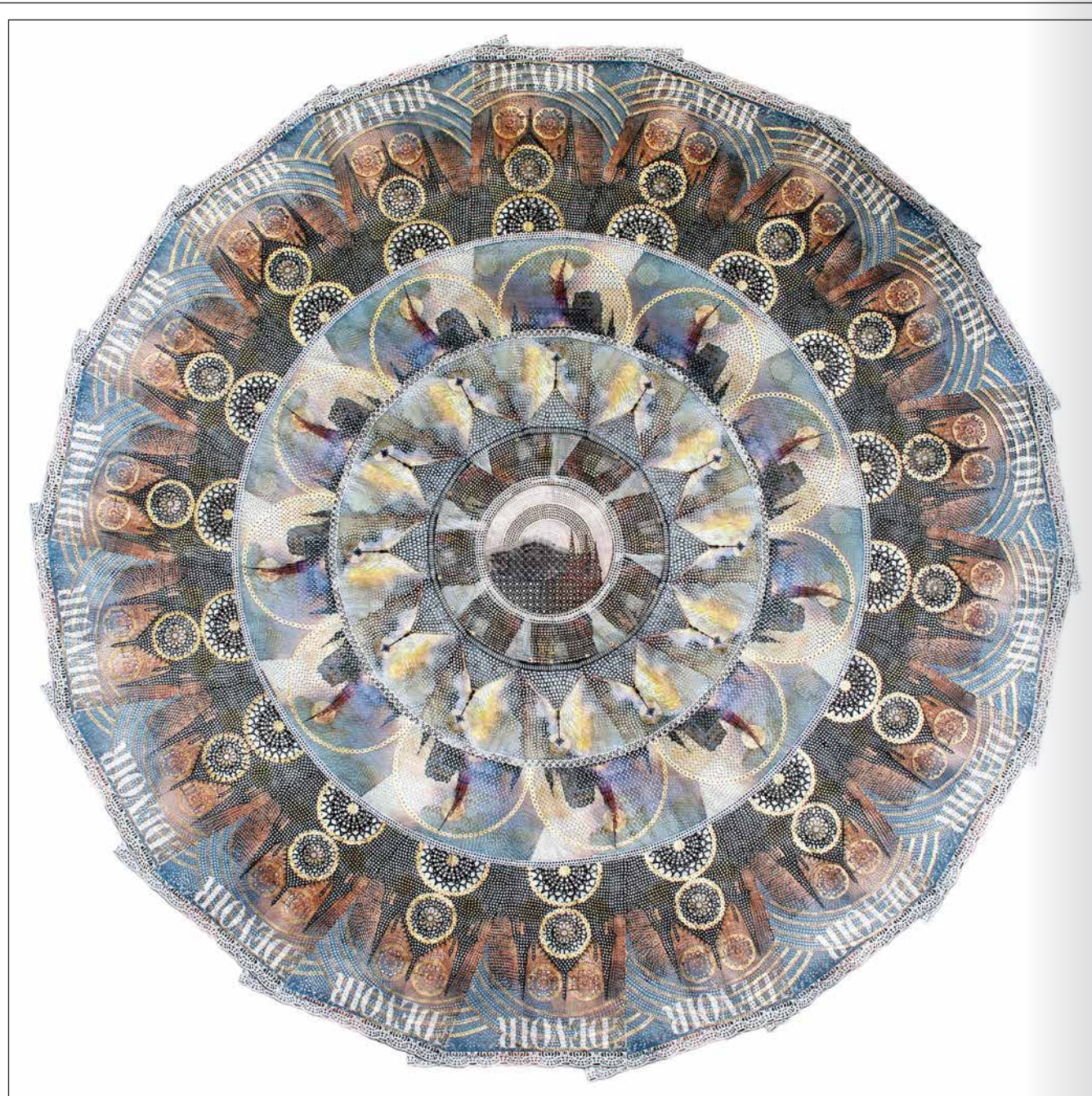
Opework Flag, dyed Japanese paper cut with X-Acto knife, 101.5 × 178 cm, 2021

be fertile. So the newspaper is a solution to that. When I worked with the photos I took, I chose everything, it's super controlled and it's as if there were no surprises anywhere.

Once she has decided on the newspaper page or story that will serve as the anchor of the piece, Dion begins associating it with patterns and motifs. 'What happens when I have the newspaper in front of me is that there will naturally be visual or formal associations that I make with other subjects that I like and that I appreciate.' She describes the 'assortment of topics' that is always in the back of her head: 'rugs, tapestry [...]' There is a family of subjects that I love and that I studied a lot during my master's degree, especially everything that concerns craft, feminist art, weaving, for example the works of Anni Albers.'

Associations between news stories and patterns emerge 'naturally' for Dion. For example, in her 2021 piece Mrs. Isabella Goodwin, The First Woman to be Appointed to New York Detective Force, Dion wanted to change the condescending text from 1911 that was meant to celebrate the new detective ('but don't worry,

HOLES



Notre Dame Cathedral Tuesday April 16 2019, newspaper, Japanese paper, gold leaf, cut with X-Acto knife, 132 cm diameter, 2019

there are four men supervising her work'). The result is a dazzling intricacy of gold leaf, minuscule holes, and subtly weaved Japanese paper. 'I wanted to highlight the woman. I put a necklace around her, I really transformed her and her visibility with all the ornaments I added.'

It is not the only surprise hidden in the other side of the work that shaped Dion's trajectory. An accident brought her to working with newspapers in the first place. When she was an undergraduate at the UQAM, Dion was inspired by the work of Canadian artist Ed Pien and took up cutting a white piece of high-quality paper on piles of newspapers in order to not scratch her work table. 'Then, when I removed the white paper, I noticed that the newspaper was much more interesting, more beautiful in what it does, there are colours [...]. There's more going on than with a blank sheet.'

This interview was conducted in French and translated by the authors.

