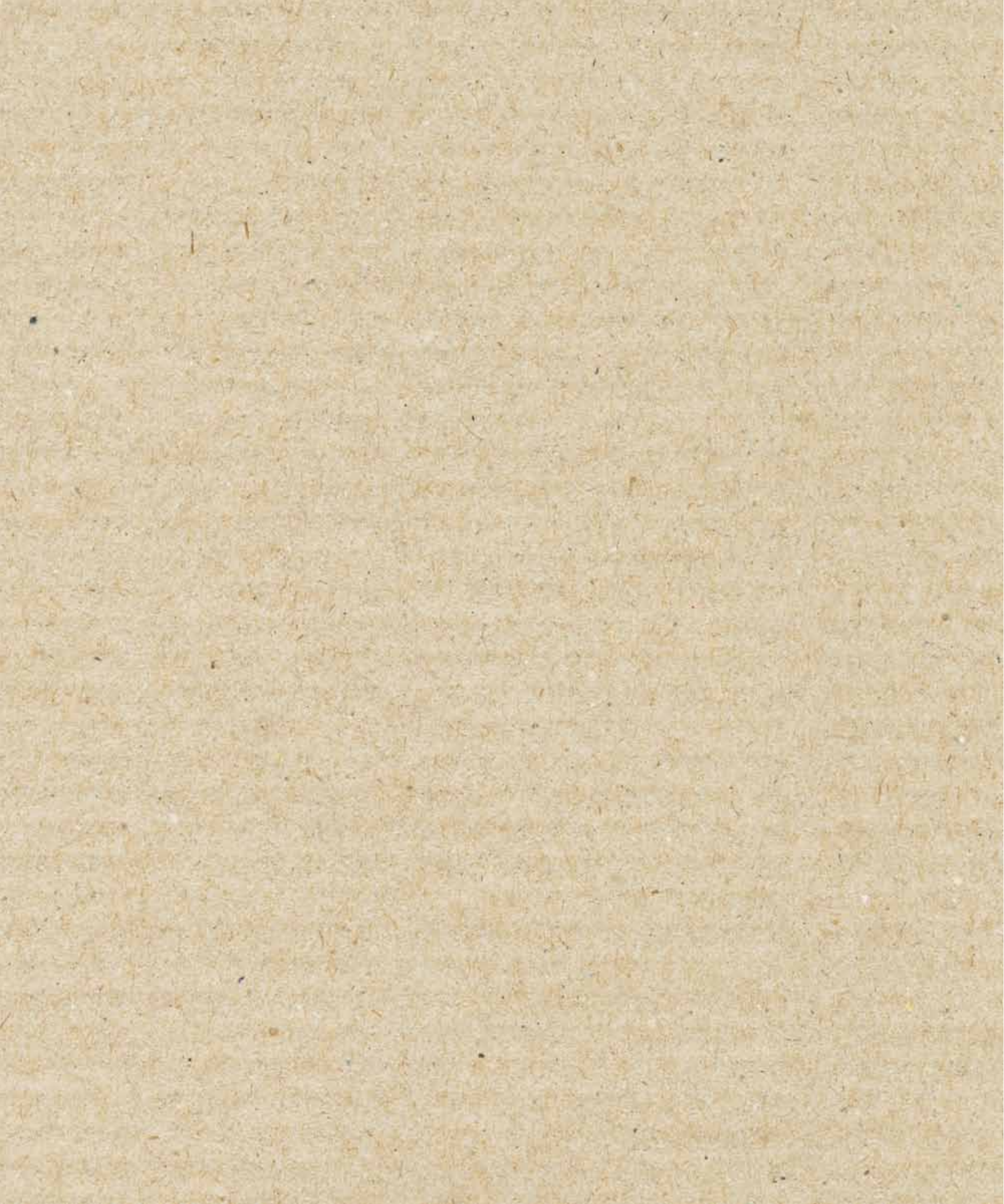




BORDERS AND FRONTIERS:

COLLAGE AND APPROPRIATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY IMAGE



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Jonathan Allen

Michael Anderson

Matthew Cusick

Chambliss Giobbi

David LaChapelle

George Rahme

Holli Schorno

Maritta Tapanainen

Mark Wagner

Curated by **Dick Goody**

Oakland University Art Gallery



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The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash. A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture ... (1980)

— Sherrie Levine (“Five Comments,” 1980-85; appropriated from phrases found in Roland Barthes’ *Death of the Author*).

It is paradoxical in the context of the lushness of this exhibition that the above statement, thirty years on, might appear celebratory rather than pejorative. Artists appropriate materials of their time and place, and rapidly the destiny of these “tissues of quotations” becomes the reflective and reflexive visual record of their given epoch. *Borders and Frontiers* presents a collection of artists that demonstrates both a specialized appetite for the digital and contemporary, yet, at the same time, a blend of quotations from an image bank of the past, and in doing so they build a bridge between historicism, the contextual present, and a conjectural tomorrow.

Using the notion of “borders and frontiers” as a metaphor for the democratization of imagery and the cutting-and-pasting of reconfigured pictorial forms, this exhibition explores the cultural significance of the mass-produced and the repurposed image. Contemporary artists have a seemingly infinite library of sources and stylizations to select from, appropriate and pastiche in their work. These rich sources of abundant

mass-printed forms, embedded with all their convoluted visual traces, constitute the watermarks, logos and loaded signifiers of the contemporary age. This is the raw material from which these artists convey the density and variety of global visual culture. Selection, archive, conceptualization and pictorialization are the overarching systems by which they reconstitute visual fragments into whole objects, creating newly aligned and delineated compositions. Confronting the agglutination of media, both culturally (from the global image bank or from their own photographs) and temporally (from historical image sources), these artists create new visual platforms as layered and sophisticated as in any traditional two-dimensional practice.

Collage — cutting and pasting, an art paradigm not truly established until the beginning of the twentieth century — whether used in painting, photography or sculpture, has been re-energized and re-invented with the coming-of-age of digital technologies. Just as painting could never be the

same after the invention of photography (another innovative paradigm of the modern age), all art forms have adapted to the digitalization of culture. Speaking of collage in this

There is also an aspect of using both representation and abstraction at the same time in different compositions. Some compositions are more completely abstract, using such a level of non-linear narrative in the construction of the collage that the images themselves lead to no direct story, although the images are symbols themselves. And because of their advertistic [sic] qualities, the public recognizes them as something specific, but they've never seen these pieces put together in this particular manner previously. This makes a kind of third wave abstraction that I think is very obvious in our society today, one where the remote control of the television never leaves the hand of the watcher and never remains on a single channel for more than a few minutes, or where an Internet search of a few key words leads us to hundreds of possible links that make the user trend toward many ideas not originally imagined. The sheer number of advertisements that we are beset by in public makes sure that we never really ponder any single advert in its entirety; we only see small sections of everything, and this is what creates the third type of abstraction in the modern human condition.

— Michael Anderson (February 1, 2011)

This exhibition explores digital appropriation as a new paradigm that transforms the means of art production. That said, the materials that these artists use is both digital and analogue; hence, extraction and reconstruction of digital images is presented and explored in the context of art that uses both old and new technologies.

The artists in *Borders and Frontiers: Collage and Appropriation in the Contemporary Image* expand the practices of painting, photography and print media (and collage) into new hybridized forms which challenge their conventional archetypes. The connectedness of global culture, with all its permeable boundaries and interfaces, is the literal and metaphorical plane upon which they build their micro-macro worlds, each expressing in various codes the multiplicity and frontiers of existence.

Expansive rather than reductive, contemporary collage emerges at a time when everything and anything seems possible, where there are no longer standardized rules, no

context, one of the artists in the exhibition, Michael Anderson, alluded recently to this condition as “third wave abstraction:”

avant-garde, and no master narratives. These artists (re) construct images from the vestiges of appropriation, for as we have come to realize, appropriation, which has been a colonial practice for generations, saw its postmodern pinnacle (after Andy Warhol's extensive requisition of photography in all its mutated forms) in the 80s. Appropriation is a universal practice. Some artists acquire their impulsive ideas internally from their “authentic” identity rather than from assimilation. However, today this Baudelairean interpretation of “artistic inspiration” is all but an anachronism. With the digitalization of technology and the instant availability of visual material artists cannot help but be interactive with visual culture. Indeed, now, it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of art production outside the context of appropriation. The flat screen represents one kind of appropriation (albeit virtual), which is universal, instant and transitional. Collage, on the other hand, entails a more active kind of engagement involving the physical act of selecting (or rescuing) the extant and repurposing it into a permanent concrete commodity.

Printed matter is the chief form and substance of collage. The process (selection and placement) is analogical, reflexive and rhetorical. Simultaneously, and paradoxically, it is both iconoclastic and constructive. The result, pictorialization, is acutely of its time, even more so because it is less dependent on the pedagogy and history of traditional hierarchic disciplines. Moreover, it echoes the multi-various, hyperactive and over-stimulated glare of visual culture — that is to say, formalistically and conceptually, every collaged fragment releases a cascade of juxtapositions.

Historically, collage has always been tied to modernism. Initially, collage, or *papier collé* as it was in 1911, was something glued to a canvas. It was intrinsically subversive, and while sampling and appropriation are no longer particularly subversive, its defiant bent and lineage to formalistic modernist concerns still persists. In the introduction to his book *The Frame in the Mirror*, Thomas Brockelman quickly establishes why collage is an extraordinarily direct process and perhaps begins to allude to its (ultimate) divorce from painting:

Depending upon viewpoint, modernist artists and critics have interpreted this reality [the reality of collage as formalistic rather than pictorial intervention] either as a “materiality” of the canvas and objects placed upon it or as an abstract “flatness” of the painterly plane, but in either case the point is that collage attempts to embody a kind of immediate presence beyond the necessity of representation. For the modernist, collage amounts to a kind of short circuit of the *distance* always implied by signification, indication ... representation.

In this exhibition, however, the artists, a hundred years on, want to achieve the opposite effect. They are not concerned with the materiality of something stuck onto a painted canvas, but, in fact, are very connected to the representational significance of their extracted pictorial fragments. They are more interested in an instant connection with a combination of the

representational and concrete than with the formalistic materiality of stuck-on signification.

The art of assemblage, whether it be cut-and-pasted or object-based, is at the forefront of recent developments in contemporary art. In 2007, for example, *Unmonumental*, a groundbreaking exhibition organized by the New Museum for its inaugural opening in the Bowery in New York City, introduced audiences to sculpture that bypassed traditional fabrication techniques in favor of temporary-looking juxtapositions derived from economical found materials. Comparing the sculpture in *Unmonumental* to the collage process of the artists in *Borders and Frontiers* is illuminating. Indeed, Laura Hoptman, one of the curators, referenced collage several times in her catalogue essay:

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, an era of customization in which selection from an almost infinite array of choices are collaged together to create personal soundtracks, social groups, menus, histories and canons, the most interesting artists are the mixers, mashers and sewers-together, the cobblers of irreproducible one-offs.

Of course, this was chiefly an exhibition of “sculpture,” but the parallel idea of riffing liberally from an array of 2D visual sources is the same as composing art from what is freely available rather than purchasing traditional art supplies. If rejection of convention is an intrinsic part of the ideology of contemporary artists, turning one's back on traditional disciplines, materials and techniques is also a *de rigueur* contemporary practice.

In a manner of speaking, the unconventional sculptures in *Unmonumental* possessed a pictorial dimension in that their sources — furniture, clothes, architectural oddments and so on — were not disguised; they existed openly in a pictorial sense as the objects that they had once been, and still, in a sense, continued to be. Hoptman also stated that, “In a world of make-your-own-teleology, style is just another collage element, joining appropriated motifs, personal



Michael Anderson, *Lady Gaga's Looking Glass*, 2010, street poster collage, 44 x 56 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and Claire Oliver Gallery, New York

fetishes and objects, found and made.” Similarly, the artists in *Borders and Frontiers* similarly blend their “found” images into newly “made” configurations.

Assemblage is the act of reconfiguring extant material. Rigged-up and mish-mashed juxtapositions of images and objects are one of the elemental trajectories of contemporary art in the second decade of the 21st century. It is clear now why it was no coincidence that collage and sculpture would be more reactive to the bursting economic bubble that catastrophically began pruning back fine art commerce in 2007 — that is to say that collage is potentially the most reactive of practices. Being more reflexive than reflective, the artists in this exhibition are implicitly *of* their culture — the ubiquitous global culture of universal images that are part of the everyday life of any contemporary city. Their collages are not stand-ins for something else, but are a manifestation of the very things that they are made from and as such are metonymic indexes of contemporary culture.

Hijacking the semiotics of images — photographs, engravings, manuals, maps, et al — is fundamental to the process of collage. The semiotic grammar of photography in all its forms (artefact, index, illustration, heirloom) is of particular significance to most of the protagonists in this exhibition. The photograph in this context is for consumption, both in terms of matériel and subject matter.

In framing and examining contemporary collage in 2011, what we see is a diverse array of practices. David LaChapelle, the defining American portrait and tableau photographer of his generation, creates an immediate and palpable shortcut to his photographs in his new collages, which he alters and reassembles on cardboard. Photographs tend to be multiples, but a photograph pasted into a collage is a unique object, linking it directly to the artist’s touch. Chambliss Giobbi similarly collages his photographs — the ones he takes of his sitters specifically to be torn and reassembled in his unique multiple viewpoint portraits.

Michael Anderson composes his work from street posters. The June 11, 2009, *Rolling Stone* cover unveiled Lady Gaga in a bubble costume; David LaChapelle’s iconic pink-infused

portrait of her appears hijacked (via street poster) in Michael Anderson’s *Lady Gaga’s Looking Glass*, 2010, collage. Anderson and LaChapelle know one another. The Gaga collage, while not a collaboration, certainly operates in the spirit of one, if not that of an homage. Like Anderson, George Rahme and Jonathan Allen riff a variety of lens-based images, but their sources are diverse: posters, reproductions, magazines and more.

Holli Schorno and Maritta Tapanainen assemble intricate collages from technical illustrations. These (often lens based) images are delicately extracted and repurposed into compulsively transformed biomorphic and architectural arrangements which contemporize their (historical) archived sources.

Matthew Cusick — and Holli Schorno — deconstruct maps and book pages in their work. Anderson and Rahme, like Tapanainen, Schorno and Cusick, are connoisseurs, each amassing their idiosyncratic archives.

Jonathan Allen’s approach to images is much more temporally sensitive, yet he still depends to a degree on historical sources. Another connoisseur is Mark Wagner, who dissects, deconstructs and composes his collages from dollar bills.

All the artists in this exhibition have discrete interests and substantial archives, making their work unique to them. Some share common goals, some are divergent, but all work to advance a means of expression that emancipates a direct approach to composing the pictorial via the repurposing of the extant. Their work is all-encompassing, culturally rich and challenges assumptions about the present, the popular, and the future of pictorial art. Absorbed by the interlocking assimilation of media and ideas, they are pluralistic visionaries and visual collaborators.

Dick Goody
 Curator
 February 2011

Chambliss Giobbi

(American), b. 1963, Mt. Kisco, New York

Chambliss Giobbi lives and works in Manhattan. He makes multiple photographs of his subjects and then tears their digital paper prints into fragments, which he then reconfigures into a portrait.

My studio is a disaster area where, surprisingly, I enter a meditative state. All day I wade through thousands of photographic fragments. It's as if the floor and tables are littered with suggestions for a destroyed psychological identity that waits for reconstitution. As I glue the pieces on the panel, I rediscover who this person really is to me: a heightened and refreshed intimacy that emerges from chaos.

— Chambliss Giobbi (January 25, 2011)

The distinctiveness of Giobbi work is embodied in the multiplicity of viewpoints exchanged within each of his portraits. *Portrait of Alice O'Malley 1*, 2010, for example, is a series of sequences of the figure in space. Each pasted fragment is an index of intimacy between the portraitist and sitter, and, to a great extent, even when surrounded by intense gloss darkness, they are a compelling memoir of the day the subject was shot.

Giobbi's monumental works are as much concerned with temporality as they are with biography. A myriad of photographs in his hands has the revealing temporal dimension of a succession of encounters. He simultaneously slows down and speeds up dynamic sequences of the figure in space. The area around the figure, with its layer of dense black coated with beeswax, creates a powerful emblematic effect.

He insists that he has to know his subjects for some time (months, years) before he can think about photographing them. When the long process is complete — apprehension, capture, extraction — the revealed persona, seen from all sides, has a unique familiarity. Nevertheless, the static image creates a fracture, a distance between the observer and the portrait, which is something not unlike the memory of watching a figure on a blacked-out stage, caught in a spotlight, captured on film.

I think that by using photographs as documents of something that really happened, I am capturing time; but by reconfiguring them in a manifold way, I am capturing the changing emotions and catharses that we use to measure time, like a diary.

— Chambliss Giobbi, (September, 2010)



Portrait of Alice O'Malley 1, 2010
collage and bees wax
on Tycore
56 x 92 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and The Butcher's
Daughter Contemporary
Art, Ferndale, MI



Tanz Fur Mich Salome
(Dance For Me Salome:
Self-Portrait), 2009
collage and bees wax
on aluminum panel
68 x 92 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and The Butcher's
Daughter Contemporary
Art, Ferndale, MI



**Portrait of Alice
O'Malley 2**, 2010
collage and bees wax
on Tycore
56 x 92 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and The Butcher's
Daughter Contemporary
Art, Ferndale, MI