



Painting in Space

JIM GAYLORD TAKES THE BRUSHSTROKE INTO THE THIRD DIMENSION IN HIS UNIQUE COLLAGE-BASED ART.

BY JOHN DORFMAN

WHEN YOU HEAR “works on paper,” you think of something flat—a drawing, a print, a watercolor. Artist Jim Gaylord, however, envisions something much thicker, more solid, almost sculptural. He takes watercolor paper and instead of painting or drawing on it, he cuts, folds and presses it into shapes that are mounted within a frame. He uses an X-acto knife not only to cut out the shapes but also to incise patterns of fine lines into the paper elements of his compositions (he also uses a bookbinding tool called a bonefolder). The overall effect of these works is like a low-relief shadow-box hung on the wall, or a vertical diorama. Largely or totally monochrome, often white-on-white, these works of Gaylord’s have a compellingly timeless quality, evoking Constructivism and other versions of geometric abstraction from the 1920s and ’30s.

Other works by the artist, though, are riotously colorful as well as having a more contemporary sensibility. He makes these by collaging a large number of paper strips, each shaped differently and painted with gouache, to produce an eye-dazzling, kaleidoscopic effect in which spa-

Jim Gaylord, Victory Lap, 2012, gouache and soot on cutout watercolor paper, 26 x 36 in.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DEANNA EVANS PROJECTS; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ELIZABETH CLEMENT FINE ART



Clockwise from top left: *Ad Hoc Chakra*, 2021, cutout and abraded 300 lb. watercolor paper, 31 x 23 1/4 in.; *Heals Itself*, 2013, gouache on cutout 300 lb. watercolor paper, 33 1/4 x 25 in.; *Am I Legend?*, 2009, oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in.





Clockwise from top left: *Chimney Chirp Secret*, 2016, gouache on cutout 300 lb. watercolor paper, 46 ½ x 40 in.; *Catch As Catch Can*, 2016, gouache and spray paint on cutout 300 lb. watercolor paper, 40 ¼ x 34 ¼ in.; *Musical Spine*, 2019, cutout and abraded 300 lb. watercolor paper, gouache, 48 x 38 in.

tial depth is unsettlingly ambiguous. For some of his pieces, Gaylord has used Photoshop as a preparatory process, taking paintings he did some time ago and manipulating them with blending tools and color reversal, “to create effects that were not intuitive.” He then takes these digital products and uses them as a guide in making gouache-on-paper collages (the computer doesn’t actually create the final product; it just helps Gaylord with his visual thinking).

Despite all these innovative techniques, Gaylord thinks of himself as essentially a painter. “My striated sinewy shapes were based on brushstrokes,” he explains. “That was inspiration for creating other multidimensional shapes within picture plane.” He’s gone through quite a few metamorphoses and unforeseen transitions in his career, but painting has always been his true calling. When he was growing up in

small-town North Carolina, he watched his mother make ceramics and with her encouragement decided he could make things, too, which he did using easily available materials like felt and magic markers. Soon he was teaching himself to paint, and in high school, he painted scenery for the local university theater. When he went to college at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro, he took a bit of a left turn by deciding to major in film production, on the grounds that it would eventually provide a more secure living than painting. His plan was to become a specialist in stop-motion animation, and in fact he did get a job in that field after graduation, at a studio in San Francisco. His “first love,” painting, still beckoned, though, so Gaylord ended up quitting the film business and enrolling in the MFA program at Berkeley. After that he moved back east, to New York, and now lives and works in Brooklyn.

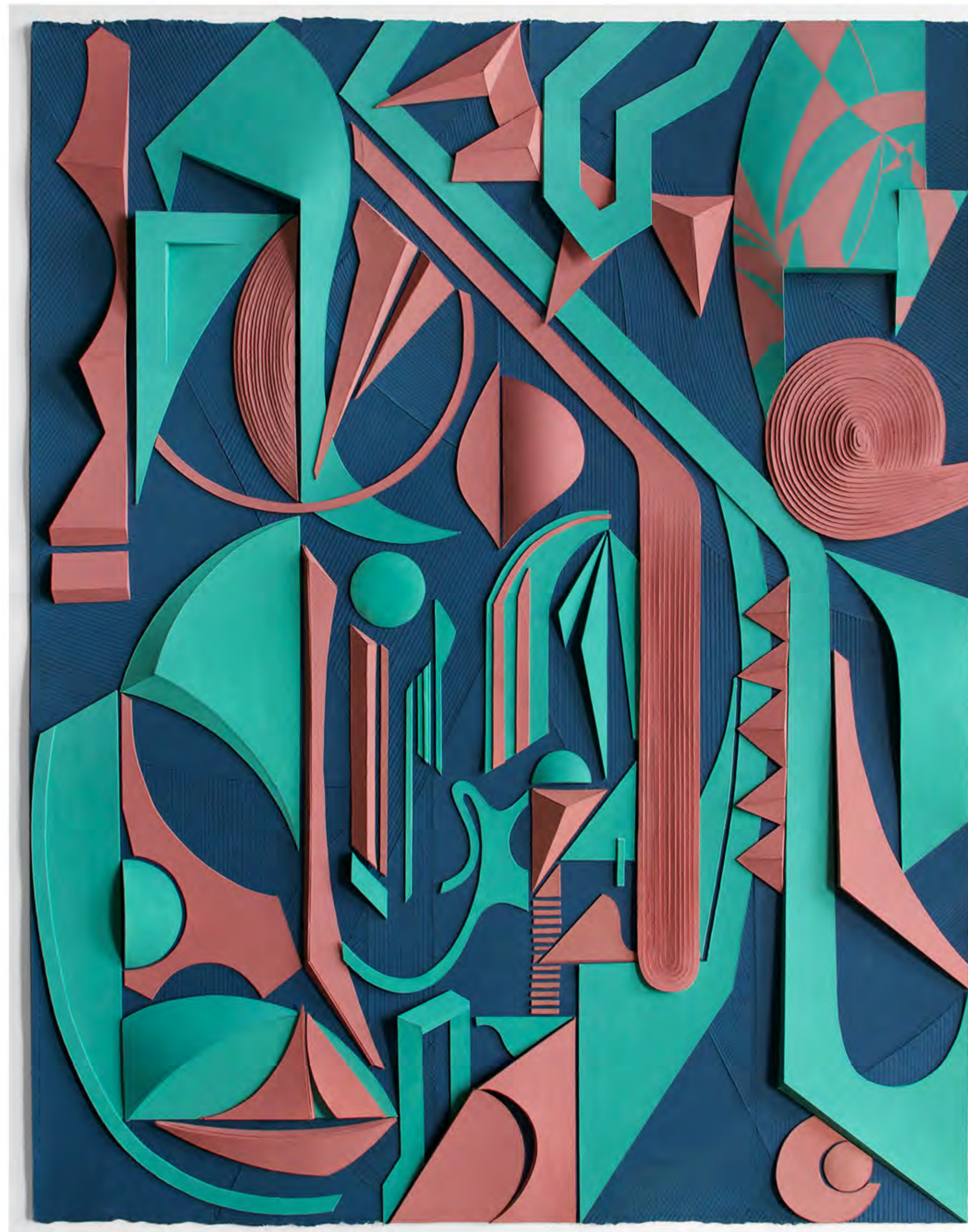
The interest in film, like all of Gaylord’s many interests, finds its way into his painting. About 10 years ago, he made a series based on stills from action mov-





COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DEANNA EVANS PROJECTS

Stanza, 2021, cutout 300 lb. watercolor paper, 13 x 12 1/2 in.



Clockwise from top left: *Meme*, 2018, gouache on cut-out and scored 300 lb. watercolor paper, 30 x 23 ½ in.; *New Age Mousetrap*, 2019, gouache on cutout and scored 300 lb. watercolor paper, 30 ½ x 23 ½ in.; *Quarter Study No. 9*, 2015, gouache on cutout 300 lb. watercolor paper, 16 x 12 in.



ies, completely severed from their original context—what he calls “abstract moments within the action films.” He had always been attracted to collage, dating back to childhood days when he clipped fragments out of magazines. That had led him to Dadaist collage artists like John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, and Kurt Schwitters, who appropriated mass-media imagery as a means of subverting it. Gaylord conceived of his action-movie-inspired works as being in this Dadaist lineage. “I think of these American action films as a sort of propaganda,” he says. “There’s a machismo in movies like *Cliffhanger*, so I wanted to take something out of them that is completely removed from that context, to create a painting out of it, and make it unrecognizable.”

Like Schwitters, whose “Merzbau” style led him away from Dada satire and into formalist abstraction, Gaylord has found his calling as an abstract artist. While that may cut against the grain in today’s art world, he has no regrets. “Currents change, and you’re never going to be able to predict what will be in favor,” he says. “Artists have to

be focused on what their interests are. I’m just looking for something that preserves a sense of mystery. There is a narrative in what I’m doing, but its multiple narrative roads, not one. It holds my interest more when I’m not able to figure out the narrative so quickly, which allows my mind to travel in ways where there isn’t ever an end.”

There’s a tension in Gaylord’s career between chaos and order. For example, while his paintings were straining to become sculpture, or even architecture, he always wanted to stick with the rectangular format and place his works within a frame. “You have to set parameters as an artist,” he says. “You have to set limits, or else you could just do anything.” The film-still series “began to feel too chaotic,” and after that he went through a kind of crisis. “In creating those works,” he recalls, “I had a pile of scrap paper left over from making cutouts, and I decided I wanted to leave source material behind and find out what the language I was speaking was. So I started doing impromptu studies—I’d pick out a scrap that was interesting, it would



From top: *Coat of Arms*, 2012, gouache on cutout paper, 26 x 40 in.; *We Move Through Weather*, 2019, cutout and abraded 300 lb. watercolor paper, 48 x 38 in.

lead me down a path, and then I'd create more shapes." He also temporarily purged color from his practice, which led to the monochromes. And the monochromes, in turn, were "a springboard for new work in color. The purpose of white on white for me was to take a step back and think about composition and the foundations of the work."

Gaylord's formalism has been leading him in some interesting directions lately. In some of his recent works, he combines color with the scored-paper construction technique in a way that very much suggests the forms of nature, even of bodies. In a way, it's a return to origins. When he was a child, he immersed himself in anatomy books and built intricate plastic models of the human body, from hobby-shop kits. These models, like one of the eye that he recalls particularly vividly, had various transparent surfaces so that the various layers of skin,

muscles, nerves, etc. could be seen. He also avidly studied the transparent overlays in the *World Book Encyclopedia's* anatomical sections, which he credits with inspiring his interest in visual layering.

"One of the main ideas I'm thinking about with my current work," he says, "is the exploration of order and logic within forms that appear otherwise idiosyncratic or strange. This connects to my early interests in anatomy, and the natural world in general, where physiological structures and organisms might seem odd on an individual level but serve an important function in the greater scheme of things." Gaylord says he's working on some things that he hasn't shown anyone yet and doesn't want to disclose details of. Whatever it ends up being, one can be sure that it will be both formally elegant and full of mystery. 