

## **INTERVIEW: CHRIS NATROP**

**By Caryn Coleman**

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**Chris Natrop** is not only one of my favorite artists currently working in Los Angeles but he's also one of the most exciting artist working with paper. I first saw his work at Bank's booth last year in Miami because, you know, one always discovers local talent all the way across the country, and I've been enamored ever since. His hand-cut, no pattern paper pieces and installations are engrossing - it's almost as if the old and the new are combined to make one exciting landscape. Natrop has his first solo exhibition *Into the the Silver See Through* at **Bank** opening this Saturday (November 4 with a reception from 7-9pm) and was kind enough to do an interview with abLA...



**At 30 feet, is this the largest wall-relief and installation you've done?**

Yes, this is my largest project so far. Typically, the scale of my work reflects the size of a specific exhibition site. To me, Bank's new space is very temple-like: super high ceilings, all white with old, classical flourishes poking out in places. The space has a very strong presence when empty. So for my installation I wanted the work to emerge from the space rather than fill it. The main gallery has a 30 foot wall that's bisected by a recessed corinthian column. So I couldn't resist creating a site-specific wall relief that really responded to the character of the gallery. This wall relief leads into the project space where I created a sizable environment of suspended pieces. The whole thing took over 3 months of full-time work to complete.

**I love how your work takes a very flat medium (paper) and makes it a three-dimensional environment and experience. How did you begin experimenting with paper like this?**

In early 2003 I was making large-scale charcoal landscape drawings that depicted organic and synthetic worlds intermixing in various ways. I loved using paper and giant sticks of charcoal, but I wasn't able to achieve the type of hard edge I was driving for. Soon I began trimming away various aspects of the drawing to simply achieve a new level of contrast in the work. Cutting felt very good. I really loved being able to make an absolute mark. I began showing these initial cut pieces suspended from the wall, they began to interrelate as installations rather than individuals. They became 3D environments. Cast shadows

reshaped the surrounding interior architecture. Soon I stopped using charcoal altogether, and just cut directly with a knife. At that point my work and process evolved very quickly. It was like drawing with a knife. I love being able to evoke complete environments with minimal material. The lack of specificity creates infinite interpretations.

**Your work is very fluid and precise and yet you do not use any pre-determined pattern to create your work. Do you have any pre-conceived notion in your mind of what you're going to create or do you rely on the flow to take the piece where it wants to go?**

Fluidity and precision are inherent to the process, but not necessarily to the concept. What I mean is that the work has to embody those particular qualities to actually exist. I could use charcoal to achieve a similar concept, but since my process employs cut paper, its precision and fluidity becomes inherent. Maintaining structural integrity creates overall "fluidity" and the knife will always give way to "precision." Incidentally, if you look closely at the work you will see a lot of energetic rips, tears and over-cuts which is very integral to the process. Over time I have developed a very direct and spontaneous way to make the work. It's actually more like charcoal drawing than traditional paper cutting. I approach each piece with a general strategy, but don't know how the individual cuts will be resolved until after they're made. I respond cut-by-cut, allowing the work to shape itself.



**You say that, "Into the silver see-through" is a broad meditation on the structure of my direct environment within Los Angeles." In what ways does your LA environment (and LA as a whole) influence your work?**

What actually influences my work is my direct surroundings. My work changed a great deal since moving to Los Angeles from San Francisco 1 1/2 years ago. Coming right from a stint at the Headlands Center for the Arts on the coast of Northern California, I found LA to be a bit daunting at first, curiously disparate and seemingly disconnected. I wasn't used to driving everywhere, so I felt kind of disoriented. This overall perception found its way into the work. Different forms and structures began to emerge. I felt like I was finding the hidden essence to LA, a hidden substructure of peculiar relationships. I love how plant-life infiltrates and interacts with the city. How vines crawl up and descend from highways and overpasses. How towering weeds and grasses push themselves from the concrete, overtaking the hardened terrain. How LA's vast highway system pumps vehicles through huge stretches of a broadly anonymous city. Into

the Silver See-Through is a place where the usual environment is stripped away from its substructure, allowing roads, vines, plants, streaking headlights, and glinting chrome to subtly coalesce into its own world.

**Given the influence of LA, how does that parallel with your interest in also creating a fictionalized environment?**

Since my work doesn't reflect the direct or obvious aspects of a specific place, it becomes a new or "fictionalized" counterpart to a particular perception of that place. My work is influenced by fleeting elements that need to be reformed into something new.



**It seems that younger contemporary artists are very much interested in the idea of utopia or, in some cases, the unattainability of utopia. Are you attempting to create or re-create some sense of utopia in your work?**

Yes. In fact I usually say "quasi-utopia" because in the past my worlds were constructed from unattainable or ephemeral elements. (organic structures, energy formations, multiple dimensions, light and shadow, etc) I feel that if you sculpt with these types of things an idealistic realm will emerge that transcends our typical perceptions. I guess this type of utopia is sustainable only in art and our imaginings.

**You mention in your statement how we are all connected through very modern means (like Cable, the internet, etc.). Do you purposefully juxtapose the facts of our current high-tech work with very basic materials (paper)?**

Well I feel we are are completely interconnected through indirect means. I don't think that there is any true emptiness anymore. Our world is completely infiltrated by a sea of frequencies and transmissions. All boundaries are permeated in this way. Also we are all interconnected directly through a grid of electricity, water pipes, cable TV, etc. The nature of cut-paper creates a system of interconnectedness that I feel mirrors these observations. very much like my cut-paper worlds, a city depends on specific ulterior systems to maintain itself.

**Can you tell me a little bit about how you use space and the quality of emptiness in your work?**

I see emptiness as a solid object. I discovered that emptiness is a thing through the actual process of cutting paper. In the beginning, to create a work of cut-paper, I thought what I needed to do is find the positive form within the blank surface of the paper and cut around it. But soon I realized I was actually

discovering the negative space. Negative space soon became more apparent to me than positive space. Every time I cut a chunk out of the paper I was finding the emptiness in between things. That "emptiness" actually accumulated at my feet. It was a physical thing. That realization began to sway my perception to the outside world. The emptiness became a physical object to me. I feel I am able to cut paper without any pre-drawing in part because I recognize this fact. My work is the product of removing emptiness. The other day my friend Miguel Nelson told me of a quote by Carl Andre that I love: "A thing is a whole in the thing it is not."

Top: installation shot at artist's studio for Bank Second from top: site-specific studio installation (2004) @ Headlands Center for the Arts Bottom: *Landscape Blossom Pop*, 2003