

Fragmented Investigations: In the Studio with Sarah Bertrand-Hamel

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- [Posted by Lizz Thabet](#)



Smoothing the leathery skin of her handmade paper, workspace resident **Sarah Bertrand-Hamel** holds her various abaca experiments against a large window. Backlit, the brightly-colored sheets glow with different levels of translucency. She scribbles the results in her notebook.

During her five-week [papermaking residency](#) at WSW, Sarah is experimenting with different fibers to create vibrant, translucent sheets to emulate stained glass. The handmade paper, each sheet unique with its own variation, is the foundation for an upcoming installation at Salle Alfred-Pellan, Maison des Arts de Laval in Montreal this February.

Sarah's work comes together at the intersection of art, science, and craft. Using drawings, watercolors, thread, and handmade paper, she constructs large-scale paper works that have been shifted, fragmented, and reconfigured through geometric patterns. Looking closely at her work, you can see hundreds of intricately-detailed pieces that construct the final image, often held together by criss-crossing layers of delicate stitches and linework. She draws with paper and thread like she does with a pencil.



Her most recent work with handmade paper has evolved from [her drawing and portraiture practice](#). Since an early age, Sarah has been drawing as a way to understand herself and the world around her. Working on an image for months at a time, sometimes even a year, Sarah concentrates on the particular, rather than the whole image. “What I’m interested in when I draw are the details—every single tiny thing. And this is where I really get into the image,” she says.



Sarah’s interests in portraiture and fragmentation led her to research stained glass and the medieval tradition of religious representation. [Medieval Christian icons](#) represent specific people, though their importance lies not in the accuracy of their portrayal, but in their ability to lead viewers on a religious journey. [Islamic mosaics](#) also connect the viewer with the unrepresentable idea of God through the use of complex abstract patterns. Borrowing elements from both traditions, Sarah explores her fascination with the intangible essence of being that’s been the crux of her previous work.

Sarah began experimenting with translucent paper panels in two of her most recent installations, [La disposition des tesselles](#) (2014) and [La fenêtre à carreaux](#) (2014). Their ethereal mosaic patterns are made by varying light and dark sheets of

handmade Japanese paper, light-colored thread, and ridged foldings. Lit from behind by the gallery's natural light, the works glow and begin to evoke the imagery of stained glass, but they lack the vibrancy and figurative imagery that Sarah is drawn to.

Making paper is an important part of Sarah's work, both in process and product. As an experienced papermaker, she responds to the paper's tactility and variation while constructing her larger fragmented works. The scientist in Sarah loves to experiment and be fully immersed in her materials. At WSW, she's working through the whole process of papermaking for the first time, which begins with the preparation of fibers.



Since arriving three weeks ago, Sarah has made sheets from flax, cattail, and abaca fibers, which will allow her to work with a variety of textures and surfaces. Now, she's processing kenaf, which is grown on [WSW's ArtFarm](#). Its bark must be stripped, steamed, and scraped to yield what becomes the paper pulp—each step of processing taking several hours to complete.

By varying times in the beater and using powder pigments, which bind to the plant fibers, Sarah aims for a fiber density that will yield a vibrant, translucent sheet. Making her own pseudo-stained glass installation is pushing her practice in a new direction. For the upcoming installation, Sarah envisions a three-panel altarpiece with a figurative scene lit from behind. The details will develop in the next few months as Sarah continues her experimentation and research.



Driven by an awe of the surrounding world, Sarah's works are detailed investigations into her own identity, and by extension, the nature of being. Through intricate drawings, patternwork, and handmade paper, she reflects and pays homage to the complexity of the universe.

"My work is sometimes a prayer. When I spend this month drawing this one person I love, it's a dedication, a tribute," she says. "This is what drives me to make things, because I'm so fascinated and impressed by everything that is."

Sarah Bertrand-Hamel describes herself as part artist, scientist, gardener, and craft person. She received her MFA from Concordia University in Montreal and has exhibited her intricately-detailed paper works extensively throughout Quebec and internationally. View more of her work at www.sarahbertrandhamel.com, and see more [images of Sarah's residency here](#).

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