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# COLLECTION IS COHESION

Uncollage, a New Word for a Particular Set of Collage-Based Operations

By Todd Bartel

*Editor's note: This is the fourth installment in Bartel's four-part series exploring the notion of Uncollage.*

Joseph unifies his painted and drawn layers by archeological abrasion, and the result is often smoothed to a single surface....When his stencils become unserviceable, Joseph creates collages with these lushly painted tool-objects.

In the spring of 1999, I visited Bo Joseph's Brooklyn studio for the first time. Before that visit, I believed the overlapping and tangential silhouettes within his work were created by free-hand drawing. While they are occasionally drawn freehand, I learned that he generally produces his paintings by placing and layering stencils to form his composite imagery, and that he has been using many of the same stencils since the early 1990s. It was during this visit that I uttered the word "uncollage" for the first time. This fourth article in the series on uncollage takes a look at Joseph's work and why it inspired the coining of this new collage term.

Joseph collects books, photographs, and catalogs about cultural objects. He cuts along the silhouettes of printed images to form positive and negative cutout shapes that he then uses as stencils, with which he constructs networks of co-opted images in his drawings and paintings. The clippings he began collecting in the early 1990s have become a resource of thousands of cutouts. Joseph builds up the surfaces of his work by placing scattered shapes of referential objects, so they touch side to side or are otherwise superimposed. As he forms networks of interconnected shapes, he sometimes leaves the silhouettes unaltered, and at other times combines several profiles to establish hybrid configurations that confuse the original identities of the forms he transcribes. By stenciling his objects, the resultant outlines become abstracted, distant, and elemental referents. Joseph's abecedarian networks sometimes remain evocative of their original forms, but they can also suggest alternate readings. Abstractions of this sort invite free association—not unlike the age-old game of naming clouds.

Describing his approach, Joseph says, "I draw things from one context and insert them into another, or I take things from several contexts and place them into a unified context." Joseph layers paint to form colour strata under his object deposits. Joseph has a 6-foot by 5-foot sink in his studio, and he uses such chancy techniques to charge his imagery with senses of both loss and discovery. He often employs reductive processes when he works, and he sands or washes his surfaces to reveal and excavate im-

Images by Bo Joseph

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*The Meat Thief*  
19.75"x15.75"; ink, acrylic, tempera, gesso and cloth on panel; 2009  
Photo by Robert Puglisi

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Bo Joseph's studio showing stencils and works in progress, Brooklyn, New York, 2019  
Photo by Todd Bartel

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*Virtual Artifacts: Eclecticism*  
10.625"x14.75"; ink, acrylic, tempera, gesso and collage on offset printed catalog pages, mounted on board; 2015  
Photo by Kevin Noble

Page 23  
*Terra Australis*  
9.875"x13.875"; gesso and colored pencil on paper; 2012  
Photo by Kevin Noble





agery, to invite anomalies outside his control. "I'm trying to open levels of consciousness—levels of awareness—by embracing ever more complex systems of interdependence." Joseph unifies his painted and drawn layers by archeological abrasion, and the result is often smoothed to a single surface. After Joseph finishes with his stencil stage, and the stencils have dried, he stores them to be used again and again—until they break or their profile shape loses clarity. When his stencils become unserviceable, Joseph creates collages with these lushly painted tool-objects.

At the time of that first visit in 1999, I had already been busy in my thoughts for several years, having seen the art of Mark Tansy on numerous occasions at Curt Marcus Gallery in New York during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Tansy's work in particular—but also the silkscreen paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, and the paintings of James Rosenquist, David Salle, and Julie Heffernan, among so many others—presented me with a linguistic concern. Up until that visit at Joseph's studio, I had not realized I had been working on the problem of single-surface paintings not being credited as collages, and the lack of a proper term to describe such work vexed me.

When Joseph showed me the drawers filled with his accumulations of used stencils, I said, "You make these drawings

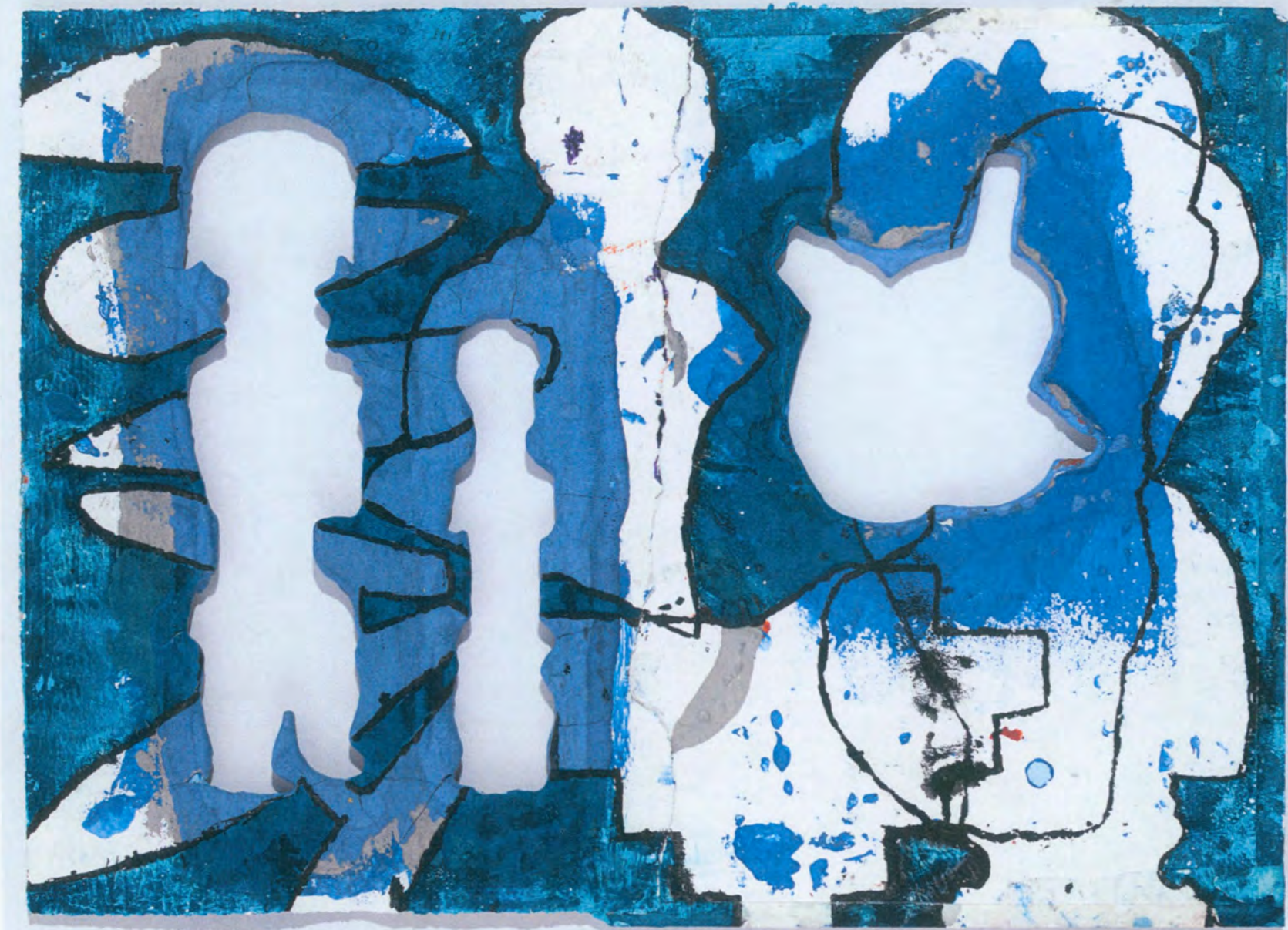


and paintings using stencils? I thought you just drew your imagery free-hand. So, really, your work is collage-based." He agreed, and I asked, "There really isn't a collage word to describe what you do, is there?" I pointed out how what he was doing was an "inversed" collage operation.

Collage usually ends up with visible layers of paper glued to a surface, and typically Joseph's works undergo a period when paper is placed onto the surfaces but he doesn't glue them down. Joseph's papers are placed temporarily, armatures that are ultimately removed after use; this is one sense of inversion in Joseph's work. Another inversion concerns Joseph's proclivity toward negative forms, forms that signal loss. When you cut out a shape, you yield a positive, but Joseph prefers the absences also yielded "because they are voids"—yet another kind of inversion. Joseph undoes the residue of his collage's papyry origins but keeps the painted records of their placements: paper ghosts, built up

and abraded pentimenti. Joseph's order of operations favors the undoing of the paper record, which still constitutes a collage-based operation.

In our conversation, I pointed out that "there is already a term to describe the undoing of collage surfaces in the physical sense—*décollage*." "But *décollage*," we discussed, "always has noticeable paper layers, and the removal pro-



cess is about leaving paper with visible tearing." We acknowledged the "paper removal" in Joseph's practice, and how "it's absent in the final state of the work." Joseph doesn't want the paper; he wants the drawn and painted elemental imagery of a single-surface network of things.

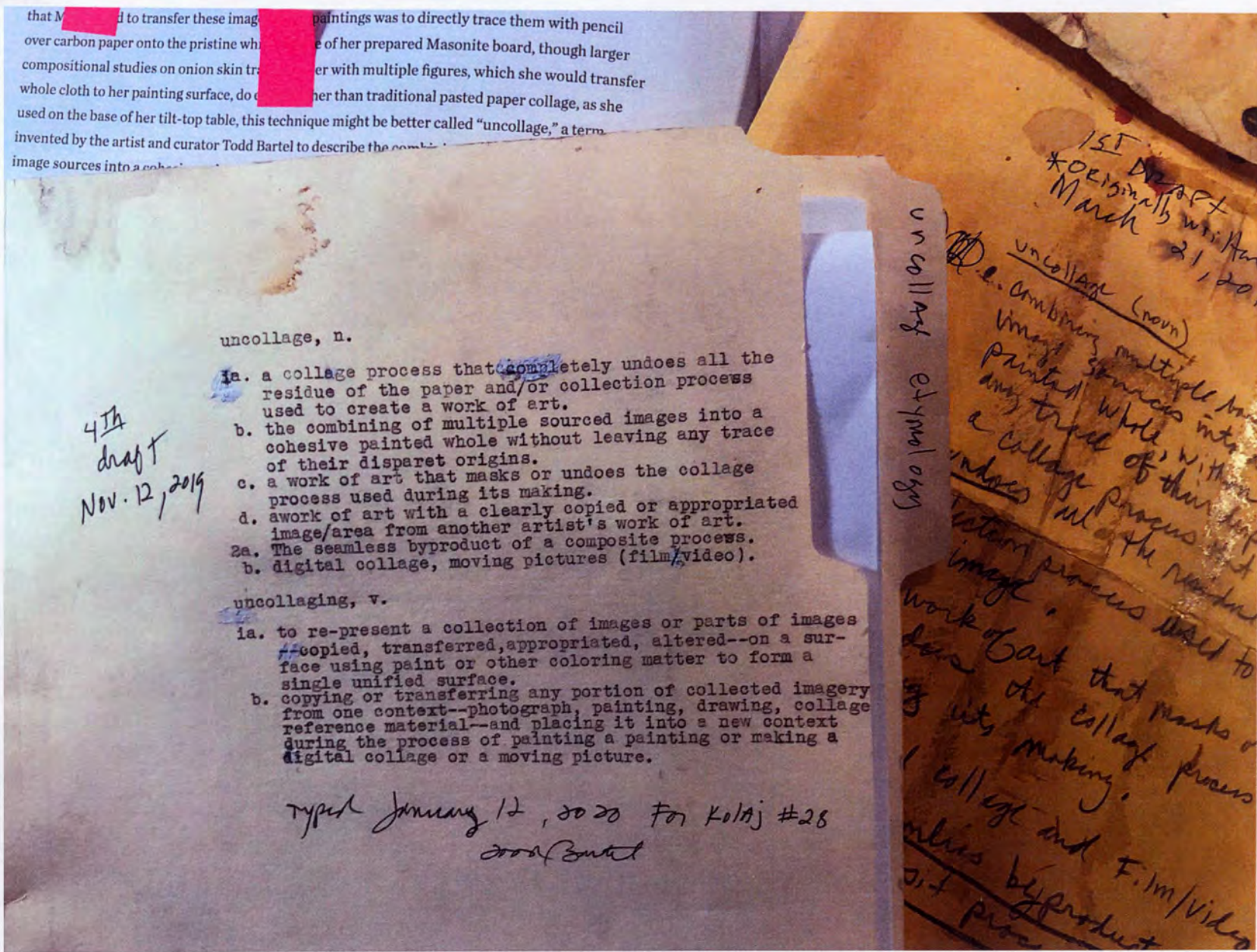
"What you are making are 'uncollages,'" I blurted out. We both laughed out loud, in agreement with the neologism. With that realization, I noted, "Your process undoes any residue of what is basically a collage practice!" That is how the word first came into being: out of a need to credit something that would otherwise be lost on any would-be viewer, a desire to credit collage in all its manifestations. Uncollage, then, means de-papered collage.

The word "collage" comes from the French verb "coller" and literally means "pasting, sticking, or gluing." As Francis A. Frascina pointed out in "Collage: Conceptual and Historical

Overview" (*Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014), in French, "collage is also idiomatic for an 'illicit' sexual union, two unrelated 'items' being pasted or stuck together. This undertone of illicitness is actually germane to the meaning of the word, for collage does not just apply to any paste-up." Joseph's illicit unions are visually glued by the paint that holds together the memory of absent paper and the memory of the cultural objects he juxtaposes.

Collage as an attitude has existed ever since humans began binding stones to sticks. Coupling the unexpected is as universal as the mind that generates dream imagery. In this sense, collage has been with us at least as long as humans have been sentient. Therefore, it is inaccurate to say that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque "invented" collage. No one individual invented collage. Picasso and Braque broke the European tropes of illusory depiction with their incor-





poration of worldly goods and mechanically-made materials into the repertoire of the painter's palette. That gesture spurred an already galloping modernism into a frenzy of new art practices. The reimagining of pictorial space with cutting and pasting allowed for the readymade to enter into the process of making a painting—the revolution of papier collé—and we are still reeling from that Modernist advent. But today, physical glue and paper are no longer prerequisites for a collage to be a collage—paper is optional, and glue can be virtual.

Collection is cohesion.

All uncollages are collages, but not all collages are uncollages. It seems simple enough to say, and a bit obvious, but such acknowledgments help to establish paintings as uncollages. More to the point, under the right circumstances, uncollage paintings can synonymously be called collages.

**uncollage, n.**

- 1
  - a: a collage process that completely undoes all residue of the paper and/or collection process used to create a work of art.
  - b: the combining of multiple sourced images into a cohesive painted whole without leaving any trace of their disparate origins.
  - c: a work of art that masks or undoes the collage process used during its making.
  - d: a work of art with a clearly copied or appropriated image/area from another artist's work of art.
- 2
  - a: the seamless byproduct of a composite process.
  - b: digital collage, moving picture (film/video).



**uncollaging, v.**

also uncollaged

- 1
  - a: to re-present a collection of images or parts of images—copied, transferred, appropriated, altered—on a surface using paint or other coloring matter to form a single unified surface.
  - b: copying or transferring any portion of collected imagery from one context—photograph, painting, drawing, collage, reference material—and placing it into a new context during the process of painting a painting or making a digital collage or a moving picture.

Why the need for the new word? If we begin a dialogue about the context of what an artist uses to make a composite image, then we engage in the broader ramifications of collage, which is always about connectivity.

Todd Bartel is a collage-based artist. His work assumes assembled forms of painting, drawing and sculpture that examine the roles of landscape and nature in contemporary culture. Since 2002, Bartel has taught drawing, painting, sculpture, installation art and conceptual art at the Cambridge School of Weston, Weston, Massachusetts. He is the founder and the Director of the Cambridge School's Thompson Gallery, a teaching gallery dedicated thematic inquiry, and "IS" (Installation Space), a proposal-based installation gallery. Bartel holds a BFA in painting from Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA in painting from Carnegie Mellon University. The Kolaj Magazine Artist Directory page has more information, as well as [www.toddbartel.com](http://www.toddbartel.com).