

# In the Studio with Artist *Zea Morvitz*



A dialogue with Amena Hajjar

**Amena:** Deeply rooted in wonder, Zea Morvitz's artwork captivates. Meticulous studies of objects, collaged and organized in a grid on Washi paper, hang on her 40+ year studio walls. Large, intricate drawings and collage/paintings on fiberglass are everywhere. Her handcrafted notebooks reside behind the glass

cabinets, and a wall of shallow shelves showcase her altered books, intentionally torn, roughed up, painted over, and pasted onto, drawing one into her imagination. Morvitz points to them:

**Zea:** These are 'altered books.' They are commercially printed books that I have worked on— painted over. Don't worry, none of these books were precious. They were best sellers -- mass-produced like any commodity, and when the excitement was over, libraries that had bought multiple copies were sending them to the dump. Tim Graveson, my husband (who is also an artist) and I rescued shopping bags full of books to use in our various art projects."

**How did books come to be part of your artwork?** I grew up in a house full of books and art (mostly reproductions). I was given books illustrated by wonderful artists: "Alice in Wonderland," illustrated by Tenniel, and "The Wind in the Willows," illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Also, I studied the comic strips in the daily newspaper closely. Even as a kid, I loved intricate line drawings and the magical or nonsensical realms they illustrated. So for me, the drawings and the books themselves became doorways to other worlds. That's something I'm always trying to get at: glimpses into a mysterious other place. Actually, that's how I experience the world, half everyday reality and half mythological.

**So you became a book artist?** I am a mixed-media artist, but books show up in my work a lot, and I do make artist books, including altered books. But when I was coming up on the East Coast, painting was THE art practice. I studied painting, and for years I would call myself a painter instead of saying "I'm an artist ..."



**Did you study art in college?** I majored in Philosophy, but I had a job in the library oiling antique leather book bindings. There was an old Washington Press in the library, and I took a class in hand typesetting and printing on it. After that, I was hooked on the physical aspects of books: the type, paper, and printing methods, which was my introduction to bookmaking, printing, and binding.

After college, I lived in New York for five years. I took painting at the Art Students League, and figure drawing at the New School, and other places, and worked in the book production department of Simon and Schuster. At this time, I read John Cage's books and became interested in chance, in not foreseeing or controlling every brush stroke or line -- inviting accidents into my work. This remains integral to my process. While I'm working on it, I really don't want to foresee what the final piece is going to look like. I want to be surprised.

**And when you moved West ...?** My roommate and I drove to San Francisco in the late 60s. Everything was happening there! I walked all over the city on foot. One day, I found a little shop selling crudely made but totally hip artist books. That was a revelation: they were personal, political, mysterious; I wanted more of that.



So many different kinds of art were being made, thanks to Warhol, Rauschenberg, and artists experimenting with very different media, with plastics, industrial materials. It was so exciting to see all this. I was enrolled at UC Berkeley for a Master's in Painting. In one painting class, the instructor suggested I take the canvas off the stretcher, lay it on the floor, and paint on it that way. This permanently changed my relationship with painting and artmaking in general. I discovered that my materials - the paint, the canvas - have interesting physical properties worth exploring: how paint stains fabric or tints paper; how paper crumples and tears

For me, now materials are never simply supports for an image: I engage with the physical properties of each piece I'm working on, and this often dictates the final image.

After I graduated from UC, I began painting and collaging on fiberglass. Also, I investigated ways to make and bind artist books. I took some classes at the San Francisco Center for the Book, a great place, still going strong. I started hand-binding little notebooks for myself. I don't know how many I have now ... Drawing in notebooks is now part of my art practice.

**Did you focus more on books or on painting once you'd moved to Inverness?** When I moved to Inverness, I was stain painting and collaging onto fiberglass. Many of these paintings took the form of book pages: I wrote or stenciled words and added images ... like that piece (points) [maybe introduce an image here]. Gradually, the paintings became more and more like giant book pages. Eventually, I gave up using fiberglass -- it's nasty on your skin, you get cuts, and art dealers didn't want to touch it. I began working on large sheets of paper, drawing in graphite or ink, painting less, and using watercolor more than acrylic. Instead of staining, I use frottage to inject accidents into my work. This has become part of my practice when working on large sheets of paper.

**You mentioned frottage - what is that?** It's a rubbing technique developed by surrealists in Paris before the war. It's a way they incorporated accident and chance into their artwork. I do the same. My specific technique is to lay a sheet of paper over a rock, then take a piece of graphite and rub across the paper, picking up the rock texture. This creates a field of accidental marks all over the paper. My task then is to take a pen and draw, teasing an image out of that field of random marks. Recently, I've been working on collages of images I've digitized from my notebooks, drawings from many notebooks that have been hidden away for years, bringing them out into the light. Arranging them into grids, like some kind of textbook diagram ... like the alphabet of a lost language.



**What is your connection to Gallery Route One?** Tim and I were among the original 25 GRO artists. The leaders of the group were Ted Odza, Mary Mountcastle Eubank, and Toni Littlejohn. Mary, Toni, Tim, and I are the only original GRO artists now living in West Marin. I am still a GRO artist, exhibiting at GRO, and I also currently co-direct the Visiting Artist Program, which presents exhibitions by artists unaffiliated with GRO in the gallery approximately five times a year. Mary Eubank began this program, and now Jenny-Lynn Hall and I administer it. I enjoy working with other artists, whether they are experienced or just starting; I know it has helped my own artistic journey to continue to be among other artists.



Zea's website: [www.zeamorvitz.com](http://www.zeamorvitz.com)

