

Handmade Paper Imposters

SINCE 2003 I have been creating functional handmade reproductions of ordinary domestic objects in a variety of materials and techniques. In 2008–2009, I was awarded a Workspace Program residency for emerging artists from the Dieu Donne Papermill in New York City, a nonprofit artist workspace dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art in the hand-papermaking process. The residency allowed me to collaborate with Steve Orlando, creative projects director, to create new work in handmade paper. We worked together for seven days over a year's time. Four of those days were spent developing and ultimately producing an edition of 130 handmade functional paper towels.

December 9, 2008. We tried to make paper towels. We used cotton pulp and formed thin sheets. Cotton made a nice paper, but not such a good paper towel; the finished sheets were not absorbent. Time to research.

January 13, 2009. Second attempt. We used a sulphite wood pulp. We beat the fiber and formed a lot of sheets. The final product was absorbent, but not soft. Time for more research.

February 2, 2009. Third try. We got serious. We tried two different sulphite wood pulps, which we beat for various durations. We made sheets of assorted thicknesses. We kept track of everything and made lots of notes. When the paper dried, I embossed it using a polymer plate on a letterpress. One sheet was close enough to make me hopeful.

April 8, 2009. Fourth paper towel attempt. We had our recipe and got to work. We made about 200 sheets. After the sheets dried I embossed them on a printing press and then trimmed and folded them to size. A few sheets were too thick and others were too thin; in the end, 130 paper towels passed muster. Done. Next! 



ABOVE: Paper Towels, 2009; handmade paper, embossed, folded; each 9" x 9¾" flat; 9" x 3¼" folded; edition of 130. Created in collaboration with Steve Orlando at Dieu Donne Papermill, New York. Wood pulp donated by the Weyerhaeuser Corporation; Sheehan bought the metal dispenser online. Images courtesy of Dieu Donne Papermill, New York. Photos by the artist.

The artist's website is www.zoesheehan.com. To learn more about Dieu Donne Papermill, New York, visit www.dieudonne.org. To read more about Sheehan's work, turn to the Profile article on page 34.



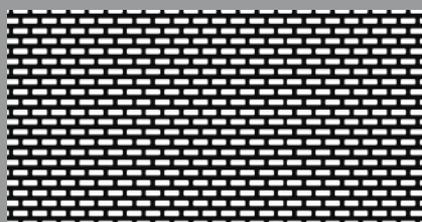
Steve Orlando and Sheehan working together in the papermaking studio.



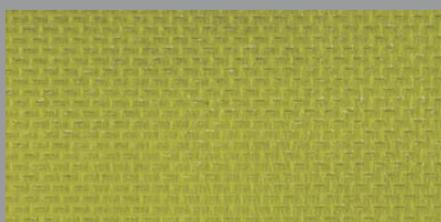
A formed paper towel sheet draining on the mold.



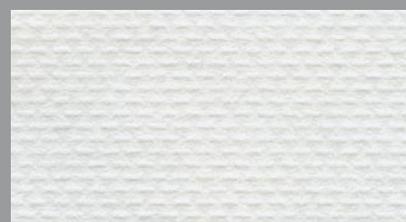
Wet sheets of paper separated before pressing the surface pattern design.



Detail of the digital design Sheehan created to make the embossing plate.



Detail of the embossing plate used to press the texture of the paper towels.



Detail of finished paper towel surface.