

# **ART WITHIN:**

## **The Excavated Books of David P. Gieske**

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts  
of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

by

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the journey I have taken to achieve my thesis exhibition. After the completion of my BFA degree in 2007 with a focus in both sculpture and painting, I continued to pursue my passion for creating art. However, I was thrown into a world void of artistic surroundings and daily interactions. I had to adapt to my new, smaller environment with a lack of equipment and tools that were available during my undergraduate experience. I occupied a small studio that forced me to focus on smaller paintings and jewelry designs. Unable to pick up where I left off, I went on a search for new materials and subject matter that would accommodate my new art. It was this dramatic change that would bring me to where I am today as an artist.

## Work

I did not know it at the time, but my passion for using books in my art all started a few years before I finished my BFA. I would spend numerous hours each week at garage sales, thrift stores, and used bookstores. This experience allowed me a glimpse into the lives of other people. What was it that led me to this point? It was a box of comic books, mainly from the mid 1990s, that I found at a garage sale. I have always been drawn toward the visual style and vivid colors of comic books so I knew I had to purchase them and at some point would use them in my work. The stories these comics contained were of no importance to me, just the imagery. It was not until after I graduated with my BFA that I would use these books as a source for my art. The comics were a means to search and create compositions that I could translate to canvas. Thinking about the interactions I had with other people's lives, I would cut small sections, the same ratio as my canvas, into the cover of the book then cut around imagery I wanted to paint and remove the rest. I did this page by page until I reached a desired composition that revealed a glimpse of the image content. I would then translate what I created through that discovery with oils on canvas. I worked on a series of these paintings for the next three years, until I felt a need to expand my resources.

Books play a vital role in recording events, storing knowledge, or for entertaining. They are also a symbol of intellect and status. For example, lawyers are often photographed in offices containing bookshelves filled with books. The books reinforce a belief that the lawyer is well educated and capable. A book is a vessel used to house information that can be retrieved by cracking the cover, but also holds an experience not written within. For as long as I can remember, I have always been attracted to books for their tactile qualities. The familiarity of these tangible objects awakens memories and emotions that I have developed and subconsciously stored throughout my life. The feel and smell of a book triggers memories that transport me to a different time and place. This becomes the



unwritten story of the book. This experience can enhance the content of the book by setting moods or states of mind that intrigue the reader. The digital age is vastly expanding and changing how we interact with the content of a book. As technology advances, it renders the previous version obsolete. Once obsolete, the technology loses its demand, it is no longer useful. For example, today's generations, for the most part, have never used typewriters or rotary phones. Computers and cellular phones have replaced them. Eventually, these too will become a part of the past and forgotten by the masses. The digital world is slowly replacing tangible books. More books are being produced digitally than ever before and bookstores are closing. They are being replaced with lightweight libraries accessible at one's fingertip. The tactile characteristics and emotional connections offered by tangible books are being replaced with a universal feel and smell of plastics, glass, and other materials used in the manufacturing of digital technology. I do not think books will be entirely replaced digitally. After all, digital files can be lost over time due to software corruption, wear and tear, and submission to technological advances. Tangible books have survived the test of time; their contained information is accessible by anybody who can open a book. No upgrade required!

A book is made through a process where the materials matter. Choosing the materials appropriate for a particular book is similar to how artists choose the medium that reinforces their artwork. Books made using high quality papers, gold edges, and leather bindings have a feeling of great importance and preciousness; whereas a magazine or newspaper unconsciously tells the reader that it is disposable and does not matter if it gets destroyed once read. Digital technology substitutes these characteristics with a universal characteristic. Books of great importance as well as articles published digitally will produce a similar physical experience and interaction. For me, the tangible traits of a book are very important to my interaction and experience both in my reading and my work.

The start of my MFA degree was a continuation of cutting into used books, magazines, comics, and other sources to find compelling compositions to translate into paintings. However, early on it became evident that my process was as important as my paintings. It was then that a real change in my art occurred. I began excavating bound pages of visual information to reveal more content of each book or magazine I completed. I eliminated my step of translation in oils on canvas. My excavation and the book itself became my art. Any single bound source held potential as long as the source contained a collection of colorful images. A quick flip through the bound material allowed me enough information to decide if it held the possibility to achieve my goal. Once I started cutting into a book, I had no idea what or where images would appear. As I experimented with various books, magazines, and atlases, I developed a feel for the material. I came to an understanding of the capabilities of each source as I worked, pushing some to the point of destruction and failure as an art object. The pieces were still successful because they allowed me the freedom to make mistakes, learn from them, and apply my gained knowledge to future work. The goal was to save any images that I found interesting or would yield a compelling composition in my finished piece. My interest is purely in the imagery and how to use it. My best pieces are created from understanding my mistakes.

I search for the alternative, unwritten visual language books contain. Only through my process can I reveal this new language. It becomes my history, my language, and my interpretation of the book. My process has become an addiction, a thrill of what I will discover next as I cut deeper into a book. The adventure of discovering the unknown fuels this addiction. My process is reductive. Nothing is added, rearranged, or changed. I only remove unwanted, undesirable sections from each page of the book I feel will not work in my overall composition. My technique involves elements of chance and my reactions to revealed imagery. For each selected segment I consider placement, color, and content. The saved section must connect to an edge of the cut frame which is connected to the books binding since I do not seal my books shut. Often, this opportunity does not present with the first image encountered

so I must remove the entire image moving deeper into the book until a suitable image emerges. I do not seal my books because it is important to me to preserve the original function and structure of the book. Once a book is sealed it can no longer be opened and paged through. Sealing the book changes it into a solid object or material much like a block of marble used in sculpture, therefore the book loses its identity. My transformation adds new life to the object, but at the root of each work a book still exists. Although not encouraged, it can still be opened and paged through. I emphasize what it contains. The revealed sections of my finished pieces are a glimpse or synopsis of imagery the source contains. I have a basic composition in mind at the beginning of each book, but also need to be flexible and adapt according to the content uncovered within the book. Each saved section affects the next image revealed, therefore every cut and decision is based on the previously saved content.

A book possesses a multitude of avenues my journey may take. The finished excavated piece becomes a log of my journey recorded by the exposed visual imagery and the thousands of cuts made to get there. My artistic touch is displayed through decisions, light, shadow, color, and texture. My process is recorded by the slight variations of each cut. A few pages of cuts may not be very obvious, but once a book is completed and each cut throughout the book is combined, the history of my process and journey is revealed. By excavating these used books I reveal an alternate visual language. I show that a book is more than a container that houses written and visual information. The book itself holds a value of time indicated by characteristics popular at the time it was published. The color, subject, condition, and style date books. A book from the 1950s appears completely different than a book from the 1990s. The glimpse of the content I uncover in my finished pieces creates a sense of time. This occurs in a variety of ways. The books I chose for my thesis body of work showcase works by artists in chronological order, starting with their earliest work. Therefore, their earlier works appear in the foreground of my work. The selections saved from the artist's early work are also the earliest stages of my piece. Saving larger segments of an image at the start of the book and smaller sections as I excavate

deeper into the book not only produces a sense of space but also suggests the process of time. Time becomes visible through each cut of each section. The viewer gets a sense of the commitment and time spent to excavate the book. I treat each chapter of the book archeologically, in an attempt to uncover the buried visual information buried within the book. Each chapter contains a period of time of the artist just like each strata of the earth contains a period of history. I am excavating through the pages, or strata, searching for fragments and relics that when combined create my finished piece. The finished work becomes a compression of time.

The repetitive action of cutting and removing sections of each page is a therapeutic and meditative exercise for me. While working on a book I enter a state of peace, in which the outside world disappears, and I develop a close connection to the book I am excavating. The book becomes an extension of my mind. This experience consists of periods of time that clear my mind along with moments of thought and reaction. These calm moments occur when I am removing the same sections of each page until I uncover the next image in the book. Once I reach the next image my cleared mind has to respond. These moments of peace or meditation enable me to be more focused on the next image. I study the next image and look for suitable portions that work with the previously saved sections. As I excavate I react to what the book tells me through its imagery. I get a sense of what the book has to offer. I trust both the book and myself to make decisions, as some are forced upon me by the book. The determination to remove a compelling section of an uncovered image puts my trust in the book that it will reveal another, better option further within. I am limited by imagery placement, the number of images, and the thickness of the book. I rely on the knowledge and intuition I have gained from past excavations. Only near completion do I get a sense if the book will work as an art object. My finished pieces are a manifestation of chance, reactions, and decisions that result in a structural abstraction of the visual content provided by the bound source.

My thesis body of work consists of a series of books written about masters of fine art, featuring artists such as: Rubens, Manet, Van Gogh, and Picasso. One reason I chose this series is that it was a set of books produced by Time-Life in the 1960s focused on the average household and available only through subscription. It required a commitment. I, too, have a commitment to show the potential of these books. The series of books I selected for my thesis show are also uniform in format, design, and color scheme. The consistency throughout the set enables me to create a unified series of art that is connected not only through my process, but also through the characteristics of the objects. After I excavated several of these books, I noticed a pattern of design and layout of the content. Similarly, my work contains patterns evident in the process. By cutting and removing the same sections of multiple pages, before uncovering the next image, I create a pattern. This pattern may not be clearly noticeable to viewers, but it exists. The pattern remains until I reveal and save a portion of the next useable image, thus, creating a new pattern. The majority of artists in this set of books are known to the general public. I used these artists because of their fame to show that new art can be created using reproductions of their works. I also used portions of their paintings in my work that most people may not even know exist. For example, excavating the book *Matisse Excavated* (Figure 17) gives a view throughout his career with his early academic style in the foreground and glimpses of his more modern work peeking through the background. Most people may not be familiar with Henri Matisse's early works focused on traditional genre subjects. He is generally known for his modern paintings from the early 1900s such as his 1909 painting *The Dance*.

As an artist I have an appreciation of the journey each artist takes through his or her career. Every piece I have finished influences my future work. A masterpiece is not created overnight. Using reproductions opens a variety of imagery containing simulated textures, colors, renderings, techniques, and implied space that I can use to my advantage. I am able to build a language between the photographed qualities and the physical qualities that my process creates. Each cut edge of the pages

creates a physical three-dimensional texture versus the flat two-dimension that is depicted in the printed image. Saving sections of a reproduction of an original painting that render depth and space in a two-dimensional image adds a conversation with the result of the physical depth that my cuts produce. Another aspect of depth is created the deeper I cut into a book, usually, a smaller saved segment. This adds a sense of space within my piece.

This set of books also offered multiple full-page color reproductions of master paintings. These large colorful images offered a variety of options to complete my composition by using numerous fragments of images throughout the book. In some of these books I included portions of renditions of drapery or architecture by the original artist, creating spots of recognizable imagery. When a portion of a well rendered object is saved and combined with a flat surface or color, it becomes a point of interest and can even function as a focal point within my piece. For example, *Turner Excavated* (Figure 11) was greatly influenced by a need to change my approach and focus. After excavating several books using more organic and surreal shapes, I found myself falling into a routine. To avoid this I set a rule for this book. I only allowed myself to use rigid straight lines when cutting. In doing so, I had to accept what was revealed even if the saved segments of the images included multiple aspects or objects. Within my selected sections were segments of scenes of Turner's paintings, creating points of interest or even micro paintings within my piece.

My influences are not direct, but subconscious. However, I am aware of the characteristics and influences of art styles, works, and certain artists have on my work. My interest is in line, simplicity, and sleek shapes. A piece that has had a lasting impact on me is *Bird in Flight*, 1919 by Constantin Brancusi. The slim elegant lines that make the piece spark imagination and suggest motion. Brancusi gives the viewer just enough information to draw a conclusion. Another artist that I feel a connection with is Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. He is able to create compelling imagery using nondescript shapes, simple

lines, and flat bodies of color. Also, the paintings of J. M. W. Turner evokes emotions and a sense of being within the work. His simple color schemes and vast areas of color along with minimal detail hold my gaze and spark my imagination longer. Imagination takes control and I become part of the scene.

I have also been influenced by art in comic books, especially the simple flat planes of vibrant color and use of line. The works of Roy Lichtenstein, especially his brush stroke paintings, are of interest to me as well. These works are a simple, bold breakdown of marks made by paint brushes.

Lichtenstein's use of bold color enhances the excitement of the stroke. Surrealism in general has always caught my attention; artists such as: Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, and Max Ernst spark my imagination and hold my interest. I have a passion for the organic shapes, sense of movement and the use of color found in surreal works. While I was working on the book *Winslow Homer Excavated* (Figure 16), I quickly recognized the potential for a surreal landscape to emerge. The further I progressed the clearer the landscape became. My finished piece contains a foreground, middle ground, and background. Organic shapes and the use of multiple sections to form the land and sky create a dream-like scene. The lower third section contains a portion of sky that is overlapped by rock formations shooting upward in the foreground and blocks mountain-like forms in the background. It exists within the landscape connected to both the sky and the ground yet feels as if it is a portal to another land. I created layers of land through the book to invoke a sense of space and distance. The fragmented sky acts as both a single sky and as individual entities. Large bolder-like forms float along the border. Not only do these masses enhance the surreal feeling, they also suggest that the landscape extends beyond what is shown within the frame.

Currently there are several artists using books in their art. Artists such as: Brian Dettmer, Guy Laramée, Mike Stilkey, Noriko Ambe, and Susan Porteous all use books as a medium. One artist I relate to is Brian Dettmer. Dettmer's process is very similar to my own. We both work in a reductive way. Like

me, he relies on what the book offers and where images appear. His work has been referred to as dissections. As he dissects books, he usually saves entire images and the final works are comprised of multiple images stacked and contained within the object. For example, his work titled: *Saturation Will Result*, 2012 is a collection of images he discovered while dissecting the books used. However, our work differs in a couple of ways. While Dettmer is collecting whole images, I use only fragments of images to make an overall two-dimensional composition. Additionally, I do not seal my books. His works still resemble a book, but become solid objects that contain a collection of images. My process sustains the book's original identity and functions, but manifests into a work of art. Guy Laramée physically carves into a single book or a block of multiple books to create his work. He uses power and hand tools to remove material to create beautiful landscapes then paints the landscape accordingly. *El amor por las Montana nos cura*, 2012 is a great example. His work will often include structures or buildings within the landscapes such as his piece *Longmen*, 2010. Mike Stilkey stacks books in a unique arrangement, then paints a scene on the bindings. His work, *The Piano Has Been Drinking*, 2010 features a figure playing the piano painted on a mass collection of used books. The bindings of the books that have not been painted function as a colorful blur of a background. It is a two-dimensional image painted on a three-dimensional canvas that engages the viewers' space. Noriko Ambe creates unique designs and depths in a similar process to myself. However, Ambe's work is primarily made of stacks of, unbound, white paper. Susan Porteous uses books in her art, but in a more sculptural and manipulated manner. Unlike the artists I have researched and mentioned above, I sculpt paintings using the visual content given to me in books.

Starting with a box of comic books, developing my process and expanding my selection of sources enabled me to compile a large, unified body of work for my thesis exhibition. My passion for using books in addition to discovering and revealing the next excavated piece reinforced my commitment and practice. Gained knowledge, one book at a time, and learning from mistakes



enhanced the outcome of each excavated book that followed. I have acquired an understanding of materials and processes that I now use with each future work. Every excavation yielded an experience and journey unique to the book, similar to each new book read. Reading a book for a second time I am told the same story and have similar experiences as the first time. Like reading a book for a second time I plan to excavate the same series of books I used for my thesis show in the near future. However, unlike reading a book for a second time, the experience and end result will differ from my first excavation of each book, creating a new untold story not previously revealed.



Figure 1  
Giotto Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 1a  
Giotto Excavated, detail

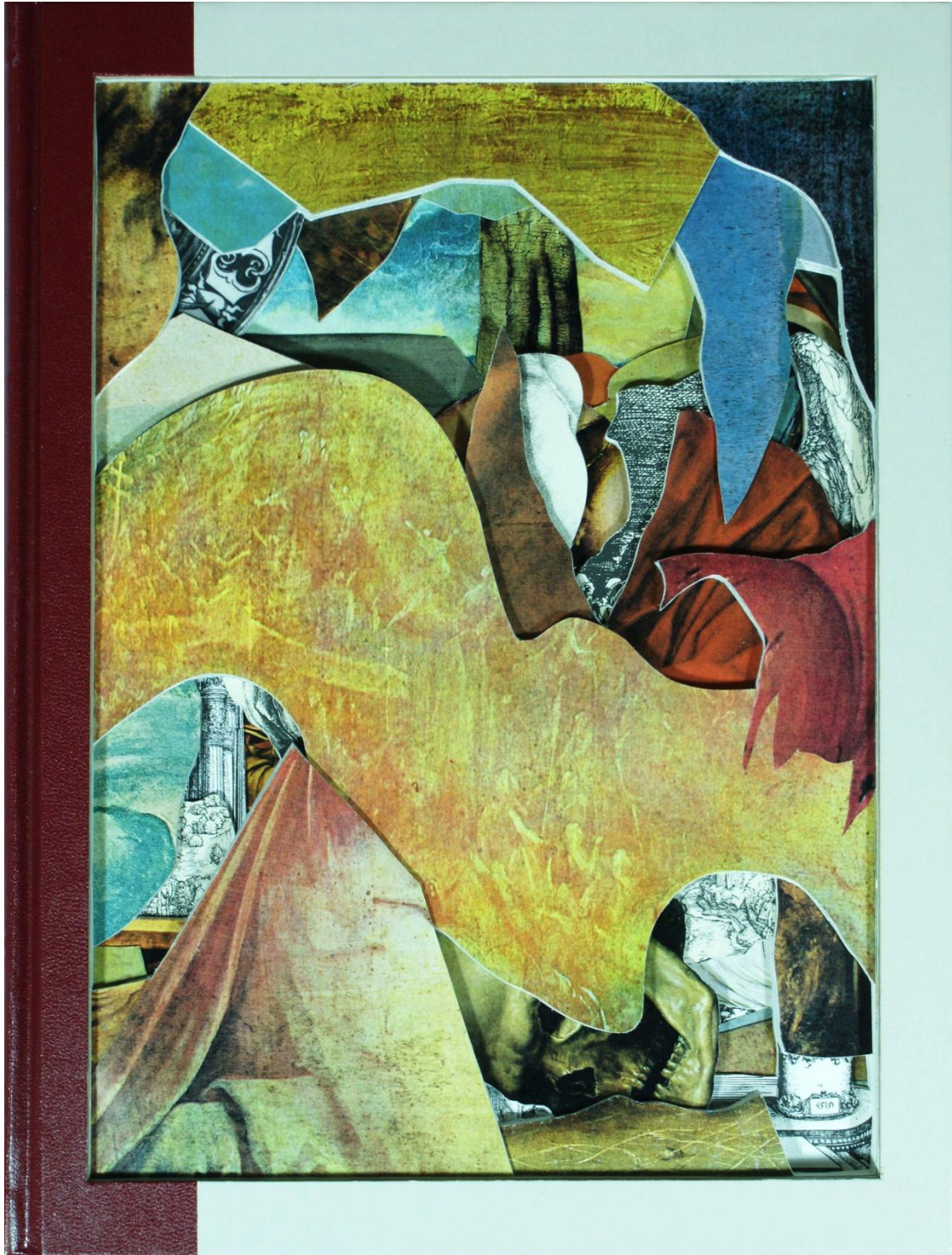


Figure 2  
Dürer Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

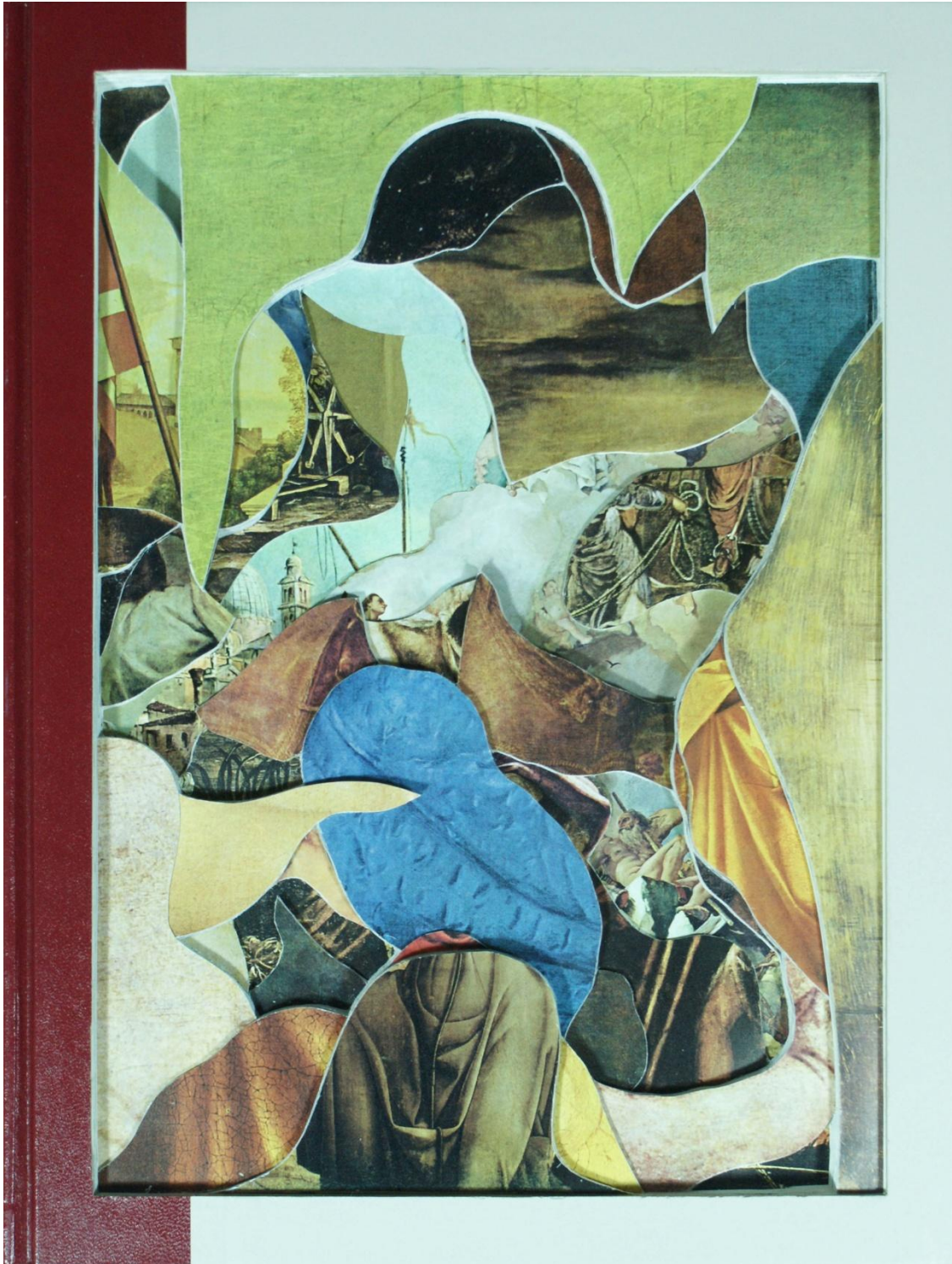


Figure 3  
Titian Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

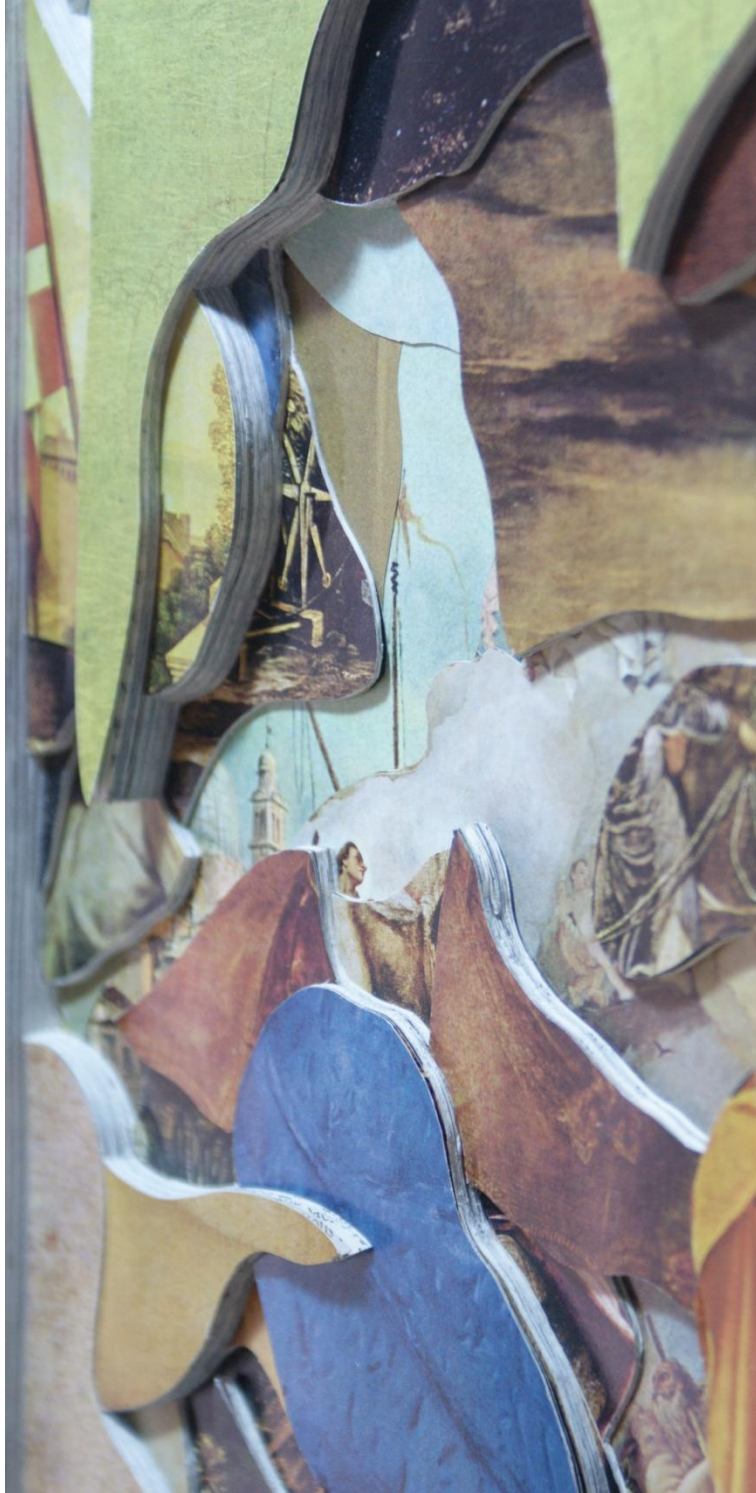


Figure 3a  
Titian Excavated, detail

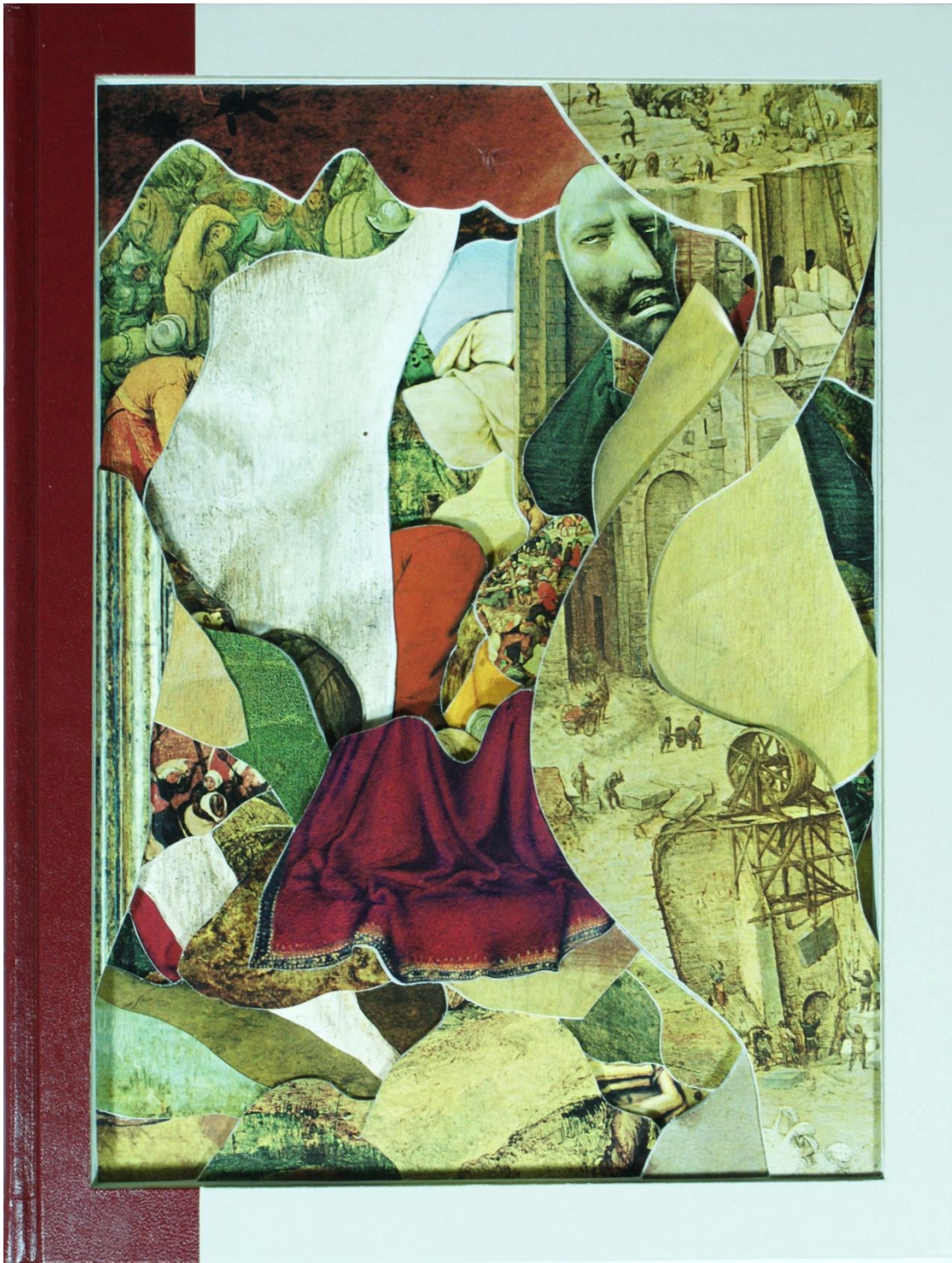


Figure 4  
Bruegel Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

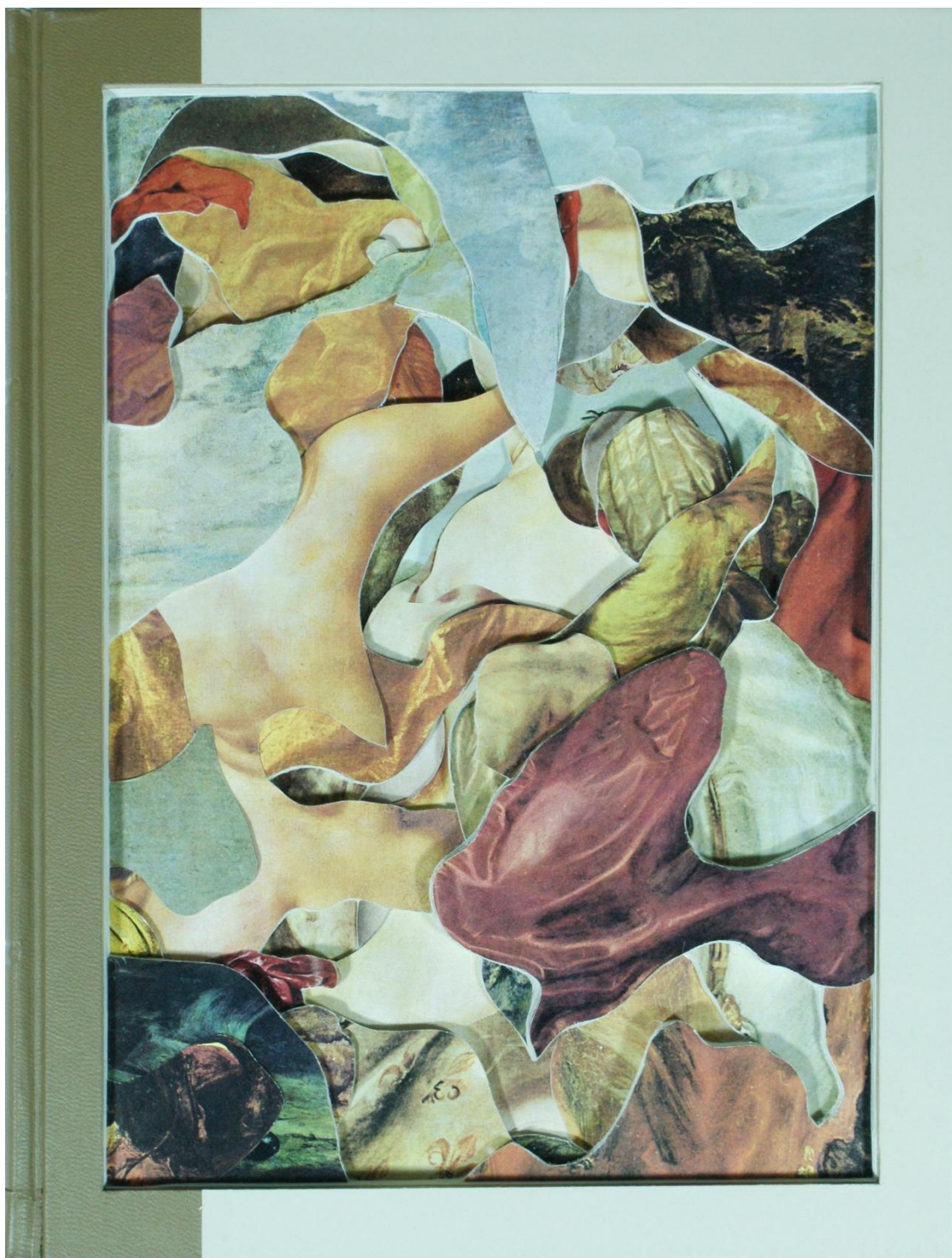


Figure 5  
Rubens Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches





Figure 6  
Velázquez Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 7  
Watteau Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

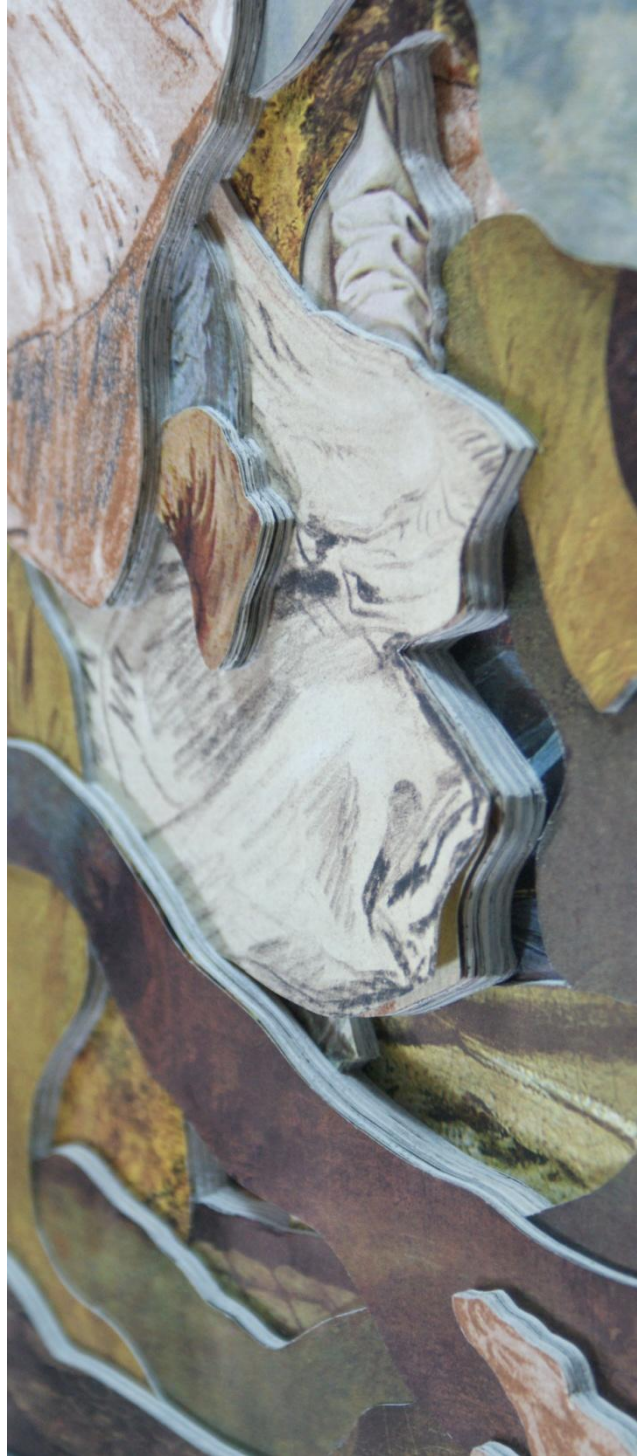


Figure 7a  
Watteau Excavated, detail



Figure 8  
Gainsborough Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 9  
Copley Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 10  
Goya Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 11  
Turner Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 12  
Manet Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



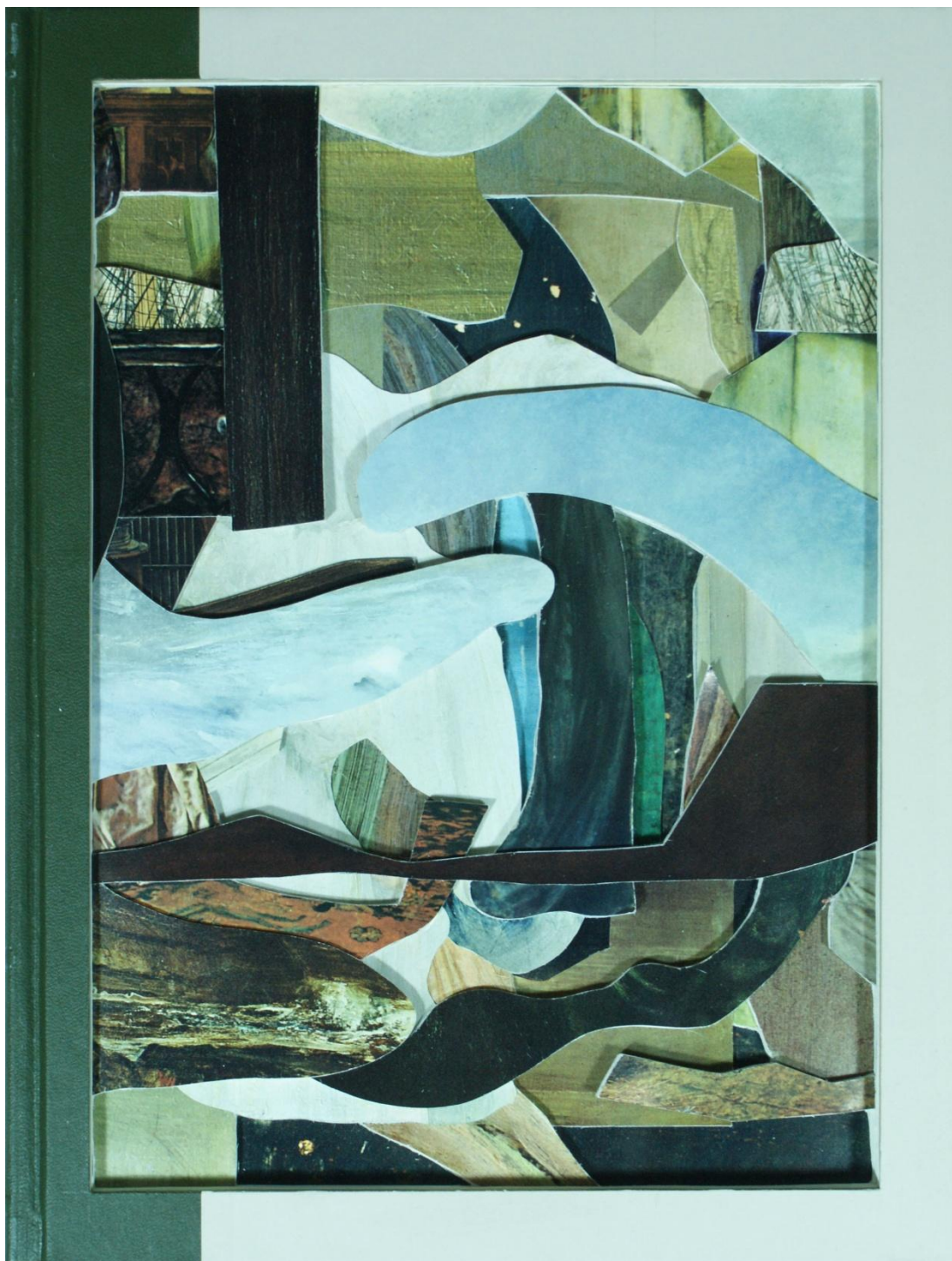


Figure 13  
Whistler Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

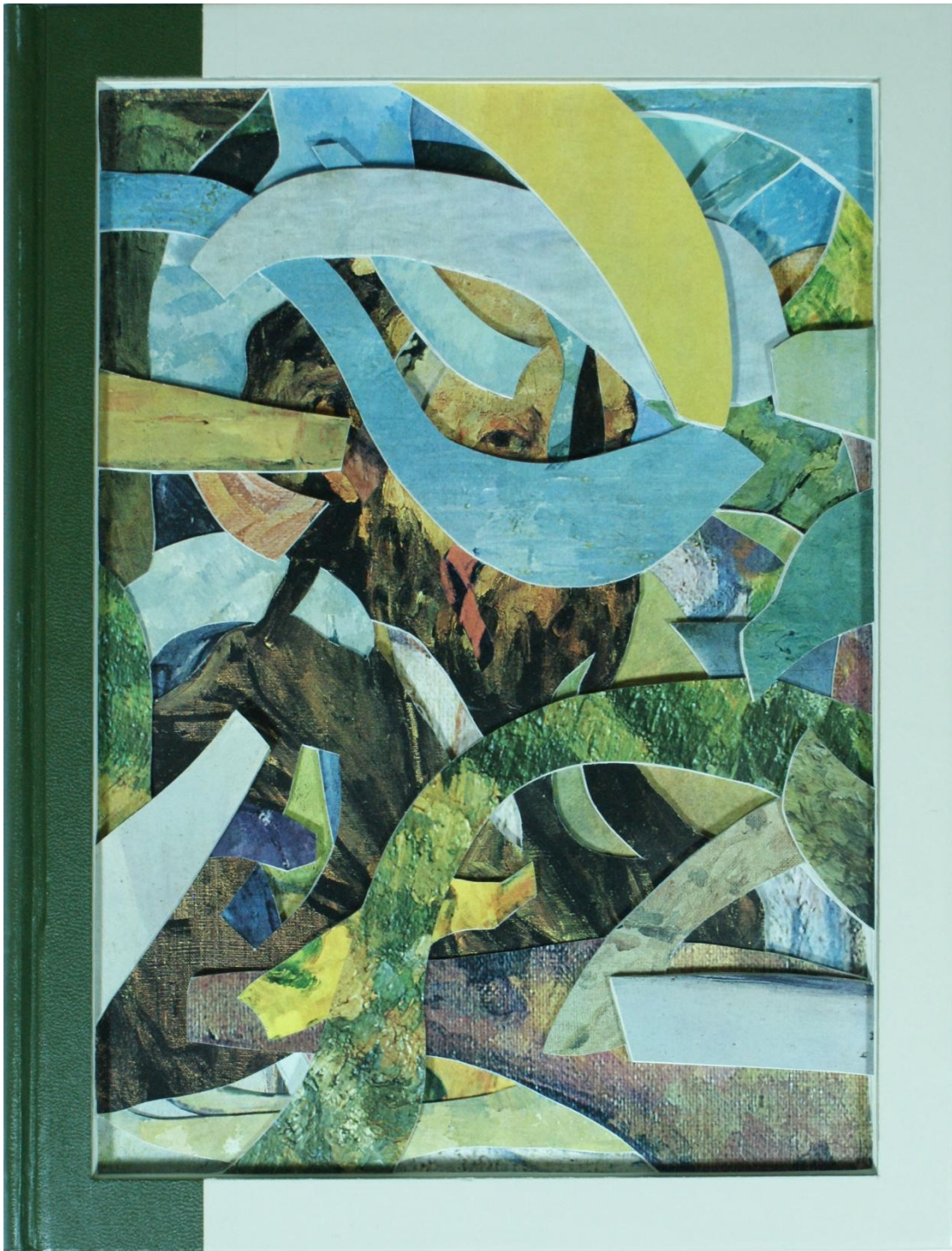


Figure 14  
Cézanne Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

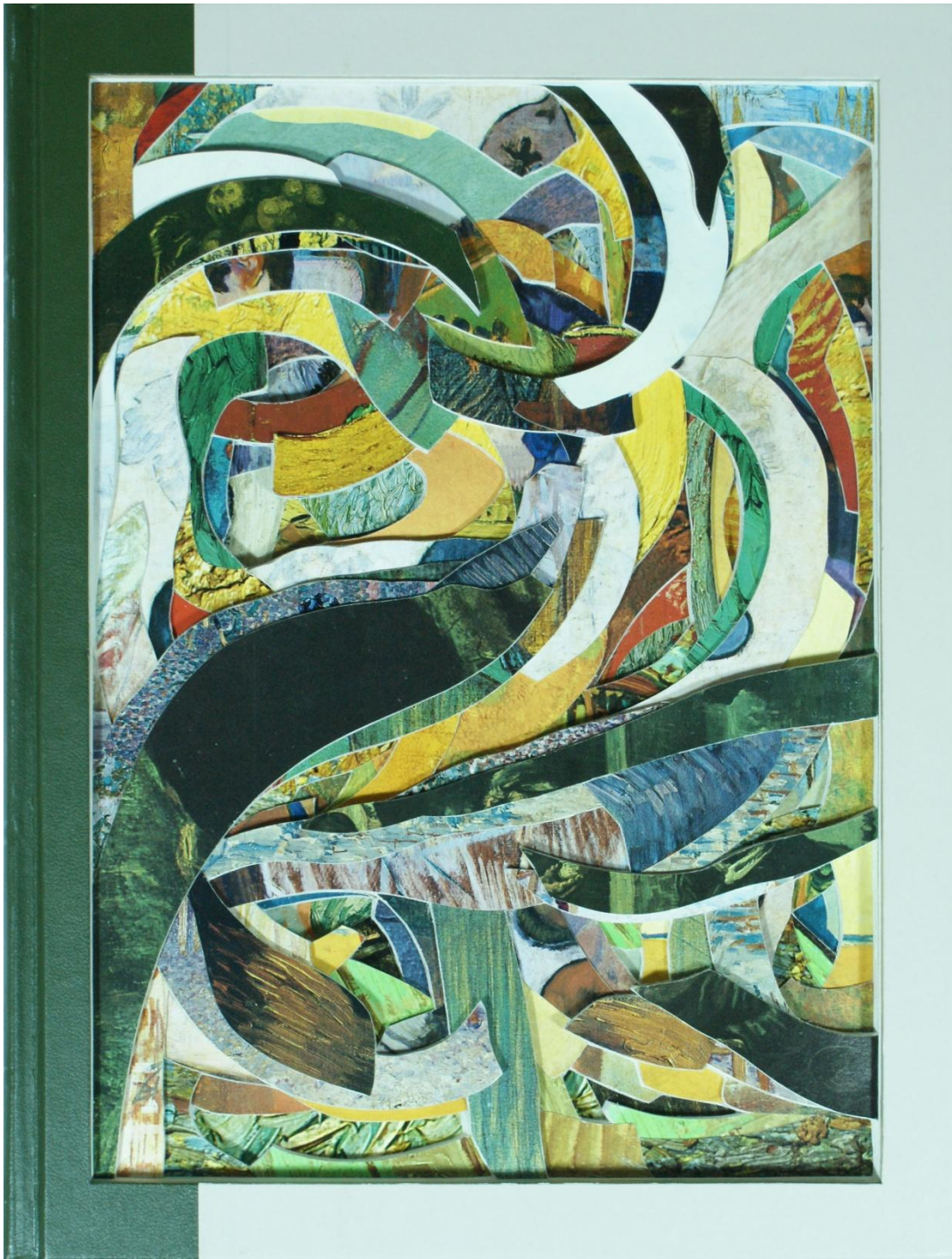


Figure 15  
Van Gogh Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

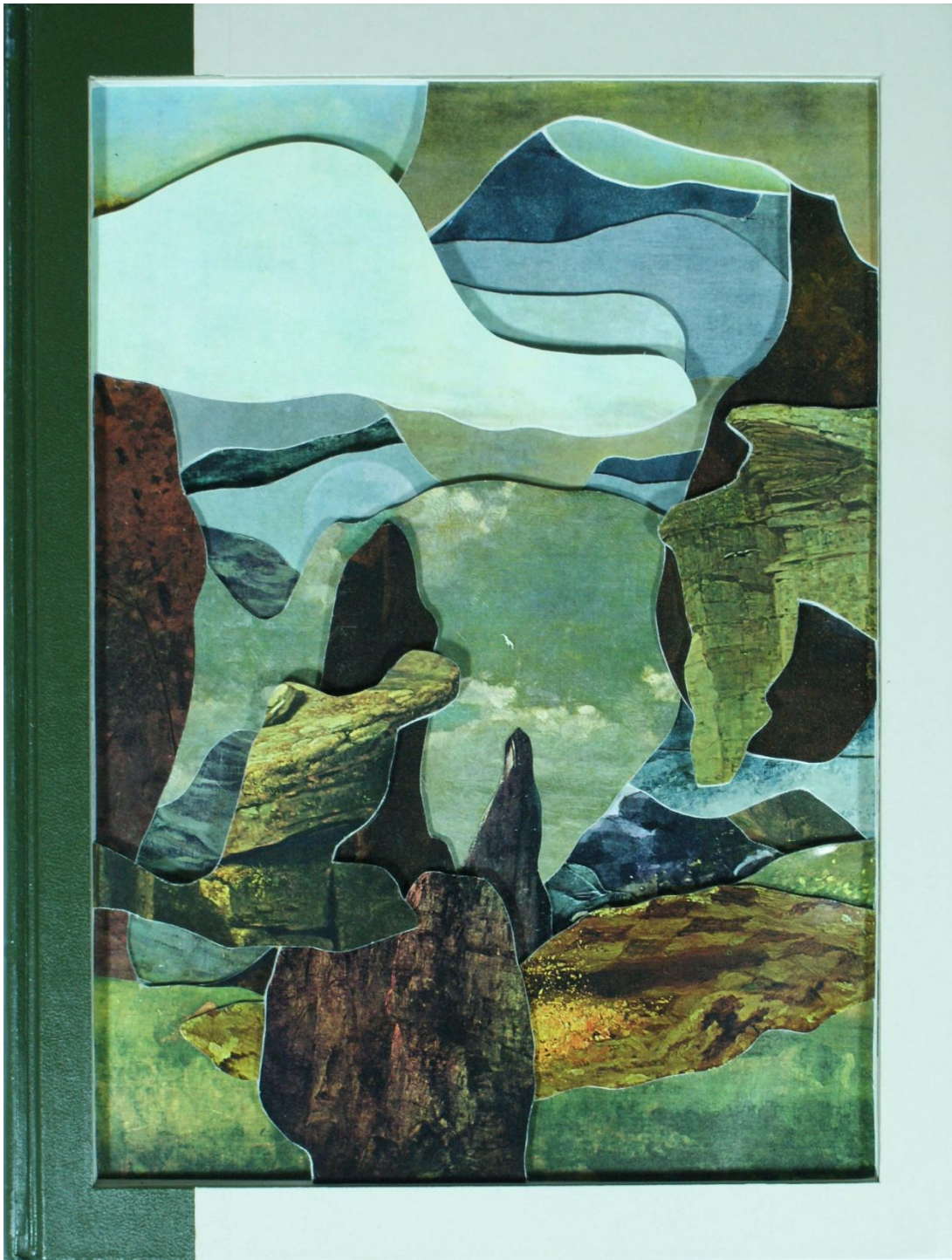


Figure 16  
Winslow Homer Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 16a  
Winslow Homer Excavated, detail



Figure 17  
Matisse Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches



Figure 18  
Picasso Excavated  
Excavated Book  
12 x 9 x 5/8 inches

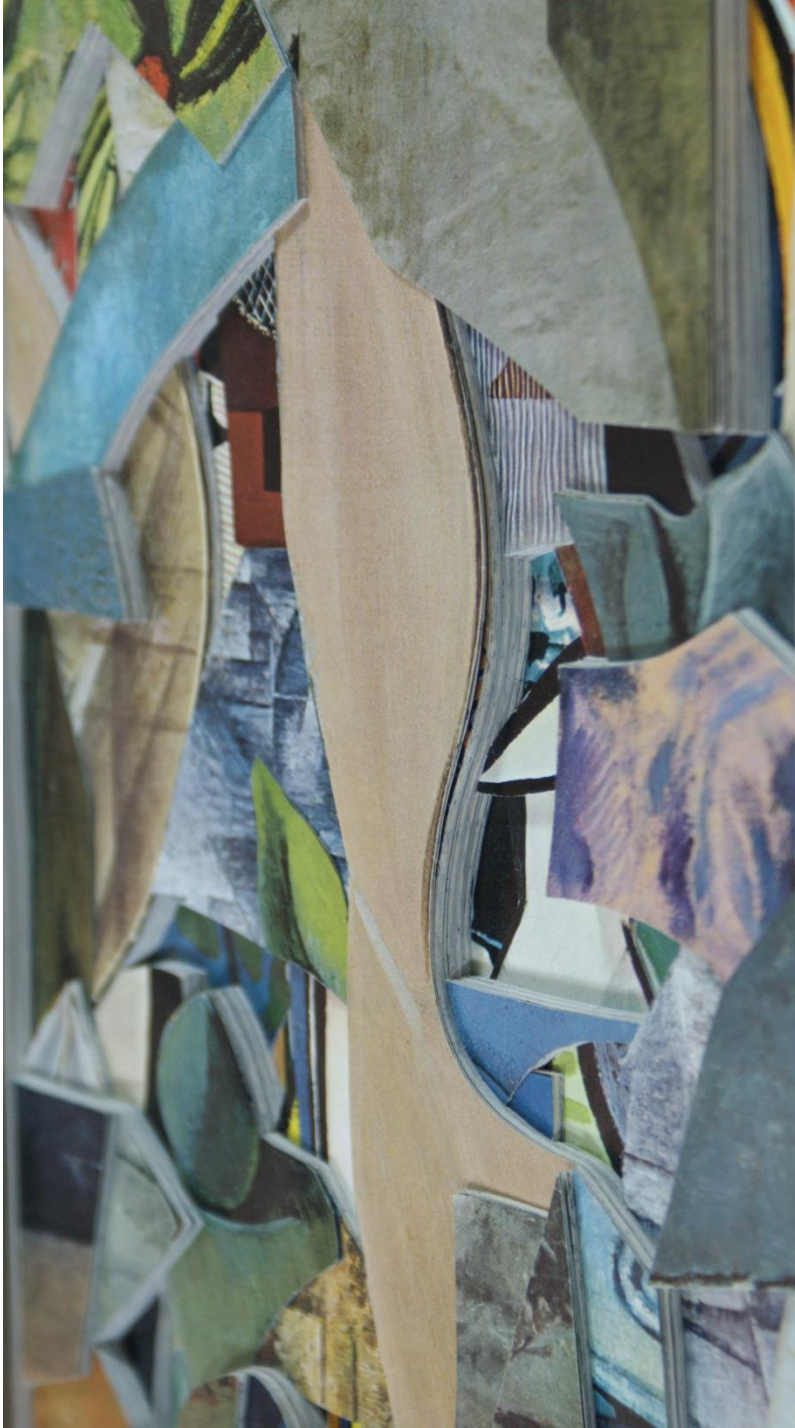


Figure 18a  
Picasso Excavated, detail



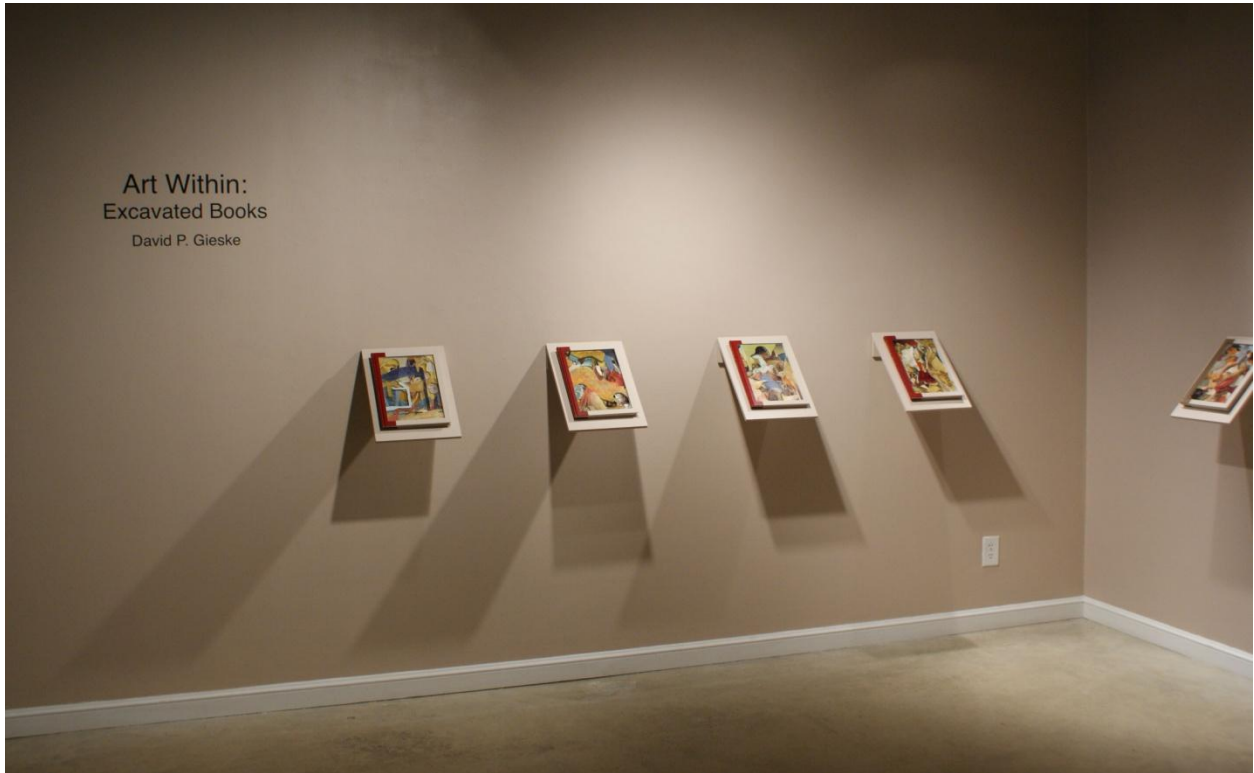


Figure 19  
Installation Shot 1  
Art Within:  
Excavated Books  
October 30 - November 7, 2014  
Painting Gallery  
Kent State University



Figure 20  
Installation Shot 2  
Art Within:  
Excavated Books  
October 30 - November 7, 2014  
Painting Gallery  
Kent State University



Figure 21  
Installation Shot 3  
Art Within:  
Excavated Books  
October 30 - November 7, 2014  
Painting Gallery  
Kent State University



Figure 22  
Installation Shot 4  
Art Within:  
Excavated Books  
October 30 - November 7, 2014  
Painting Gallery  
Kent State University



Figure 23  
Installation Shot 5  
Art Within:  
Excavated Books  
October 30 - November 7, 2014  
Painting Gallery  
Kent State University