THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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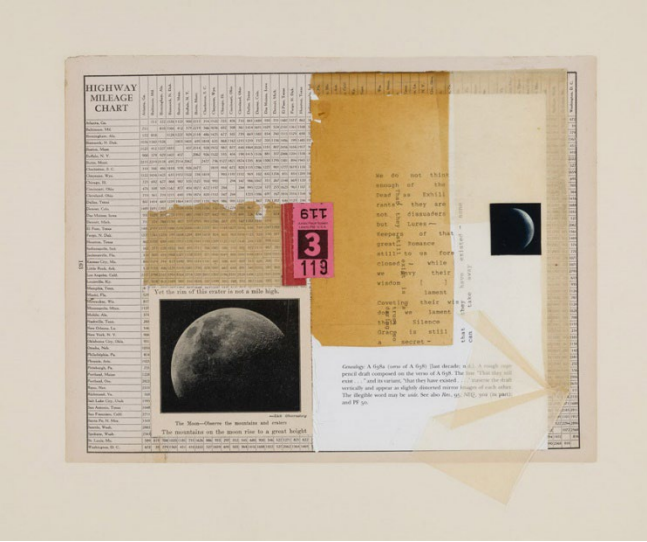
Janet Malcolm: *Collages*

By Rebecca Allan



Janet Malcolm, *Crater* (from The Emily Dickinson Series), 2013. Collage on paper, 10 1/4 x 13 1/2 inches. Courtesy Bookstein Projects.

Relegated to a musty corner in the architectural salvage shop, vintage card catalogs await selection by an interior designer who considers one for her client's home office. Repurposed as stylish storage for undergarments or spices, these chests originally housed index cards that guided readers to the knowledge encased in library books. Before they were collected, trimmed, and composed within the collages of Janet Malcolm (1934–2021), the fragile notecards, charts, and case studies must have been similarly consulted and mindfully filed away by bygone astronomers, psychiatrists, or poets.

The first exhibition of Malcolm's collages since her passing is a fascinating presentation within a chapel-like room—a private chamber for thinking. In one corner at Bookstein Projects, stacked upon the artist's drop-leaf Pembroke table, a collection of her own books (she wrote fourteen, along with her prodigious body of article-length nonfiction) invites delving. Selected from three distinct collections—the "Emily Dickinson Series," "Free Associations," and the "Jesus Collages"—the artworks unveil a branch of Malcolm's oeuvre that constitutes a generative, though relatively private, decades-long practice with this medium.

As early as the late 1960s, according to gallerist Lori Bookstein, Janet Malcolm started playing with collage by collecting "little funny things" (her daughter's words) and pasting them down, filling the picture plane in a composite-like way. "I recall Janet telling me that this was a way to preserve things—family letters, ephemera."

The ephemera she deployed, in cryptic juxtapositions, nonetheless signals her lifelong engagement with photography, psychoanalysis, art, and literature. The "Free Associations" series, for example, evolved after Malcolm received the papers of an "émigré psychiatrist" (her father?), who practiced in New York in the 1940s and 1950s.

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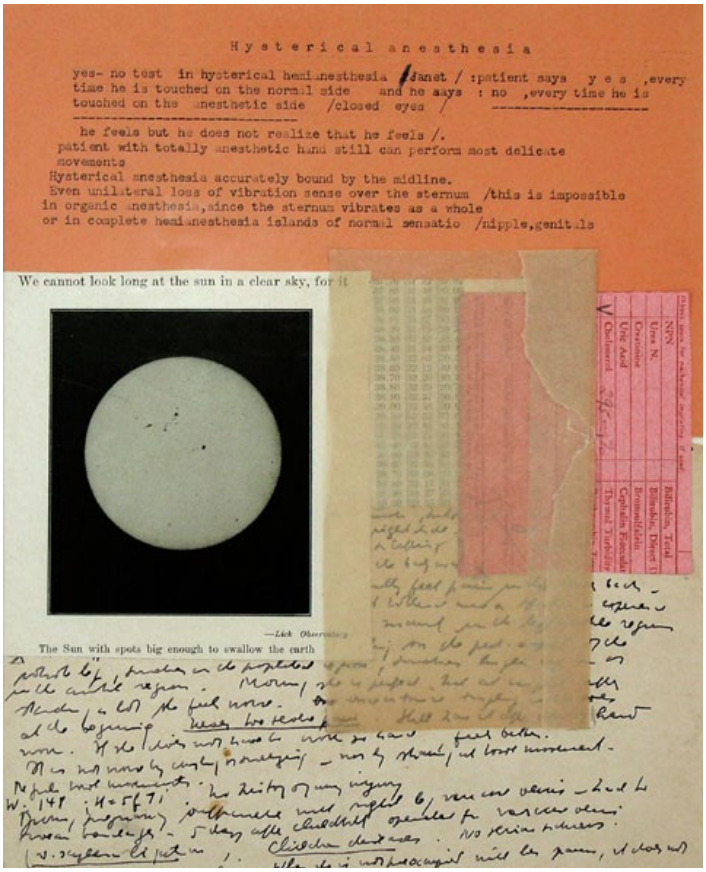
Formally, the collages, including *The Sun with Spots Big Enough to Swallow the Earth* (2011) and *Untitled* (2011), reflect Malcolm's fluency in the international dialects of collage, from Cubism to Dada to Pop art. Malcolm's aesthetic vocabulary is attuned to the utopian Constructivist collages of the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, who fled his Bauhaus teaching post in Germany, upon the rise of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party, for Chicago in 1937. (Fleeing Nazi persecution in 1939, Malcolm's family emigrated to New York from Czechoslovakia when she was just five years old.) Snippets of text and images—often repeated—are precisely cut, torn, arranged, and affixed primarily along horizontal and vertical axes. How often do we use our hands to untangle messy papers to arrange them in classic grids? Malcolm's underlying compositional architecture is occasionally transgressed by strips of creased and yellowing tracing paper, strewn diagonally like the detachable collars of nineteenth-century men's shirts in a laundry basket.



Janet Malcolm, *The Sun with Spots Big Enough to Swallow the Earth*, 2011. Collage on paper, 10 x 8 inches. Courtesy Bookstein Projects.

In contrast with the diminutive, sumptuous collages of the poet Anne Ryan, made from handmade rag papers and textile fragments, for example, Malcolm's works are chillier, stiller, and more cerebral. Sometimes they have a deadpan opacity, like the Pictures Generation artists of the 1970s who critiqued the vapidness and sexism of media culture. David Salle, who enjoyed a long friendship with Malcolm, described in a posthumous remembrance an unguarded moment when she sought his opinion: "'Were they art?' [she asked]. I advised her to use more black. ... Janet evenetually had a show of her collages at a Chelsea gallery and was avid to do more, even as she was sheepish about taking attention away from a 'real' artist."

Transit of Venus (from The Emily Dickinson Series) (2013) incorporates a reproduction of Eva Hesse's 1968 sculpture *Accession IV*—a steel box pierced by creepy, finger-like rubber tubes. This is juxtaposed with a typed transcription of Dickinson's poem: "But are not all Facts Dreams as soon as we put them behind us –." Here is collage as force multiplier, conjuring in my mind Meret Oppenheim's 1936 *Object* and by extension, the last resort of unlikely comfort that is to be found in absurdity.

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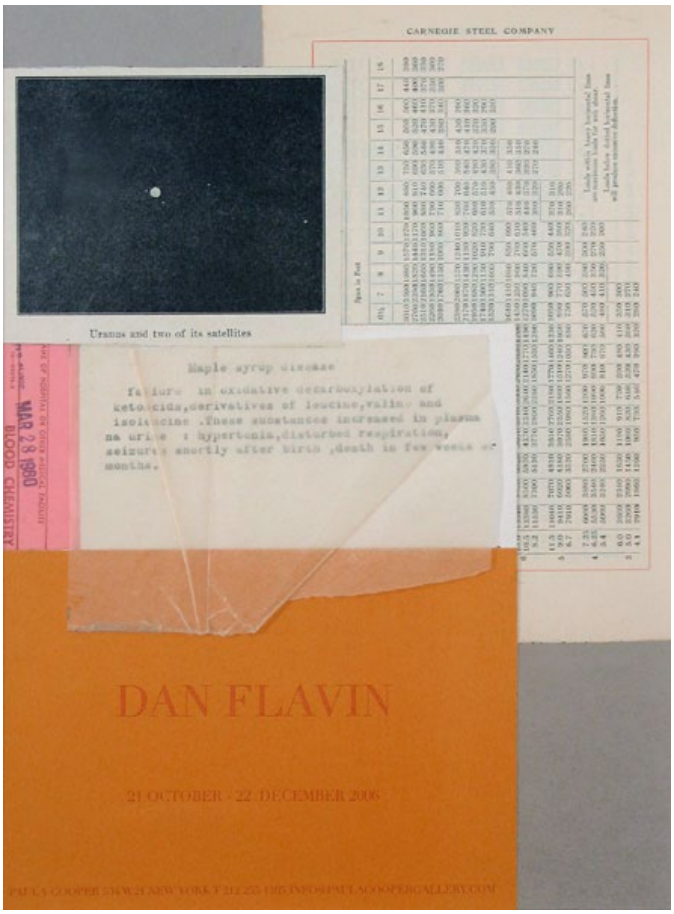

Janet Malcolm, *Maple Syrup Disease,* 2011. Collage on paper, 18 3/4 x 16 inches. Courtesy Bookstein Projects.

The tangerine cardstock of a Dan Flavin exhibition announcement, partly covered by a petticoat of tracing paper in *Maple Syrup Disease* (2011), is a rare instance of delicious color amidst the daguerrotype greys and lunar whites of the majority of collages. The title alone (a genetic disorder of the urinary system defined on a typewritten card included in the composition) signals a withering of vitality.

Untitled (2015) combines an image of the revolving moon with a stop-action Eadweard Muybridge photograph of an unclothed woman turning to mount a staircase. A holy card print of Jesus as handsome saviour is multiplied. I wonder whether these iconographic images served as absurd comforts to Malcolm in her later years, when she faced lung cancer. Or were they symbolic of the otherwise unknowable universes that telescopes, x–ray technologies, and spiritual faith promise access to?

Collage, as both a process and an art form, was central to the early experiments of modern art, upending the Renaissance notion of painting as a window onto a world beyond. Picasso and Braque broke down the illusionistic rendering of the external, perceptual world. As scientists at the turn of the twentieth century began to reveal the unstable nature of matter itself, microscopy, collage, and photomontage anticipated a new form that replicated the experience of seeing things in motion and over time. While the term “collé” (as in *papier collé*) simply means "to glue," collage has come to represent even the logic of our dreams and to kindle new meanings through reclamation and juxtaposition.

Janet Malcolm’s collages offer the companionship of a fellow traveler on the road of art history, but they also make me feel like a borrower who opens the library book to pore over the card containing signatures of previous readers. Who were they, and why were they, too, interested in this subject? I want to be privy to more of Malcolm’s thoughts about her subjects. But unfettered access is, rightfully and understandably, not allowed.

Rebecca Allan is a painter, horticulturist, and founder of Painterly Gardens, based in Mount Vernon, New York.

Allan, Rebecca. “Janet Malcolm: Collages,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2025.
https://brooklynrail.org/2025/02/artseen/janet-malcolm-collages/