

Monochrome Magic

Michael Velliquette takes paper to new heights with his quilling sculptures.

By Maija Inveiss Photos by Nikki Hansen

AT FIRST GLANCE, you might struggle to guess what material Michael Velliquette uses to create his intricate sculptures. His pieces seem like small-scale architectural wonders where you have no idea where to start looking, but each entry point leads to endless exploration.

"I like there to be something everywhere that the eye rests [on] that sort of engages you or pushes you to the next thing," Velliquette says.

What makes each piece even more fascinating is the fact that every stacked structure, every circular gear-like piece, every shape, every layer and every accent is made out of heavyweight cover stock paper. Using glue, paper and various tools, Velliquette spends hundreds of hours—he says on average 500 hours per piece—putting together his fine art monochrome paper sculptures for gallery shows around the country.

A classically trained artist, Velliquette graduated from Florida State University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1993 and from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a Master of Arts and Master in Fine Arts in 2000. The Florida Gulf Coast native then moved to various places,



where he practiced mixed-media sculpture and created large-scale installations before returning to Madison to teach a summer course at the university in 2005. He met his now-husband – Tehshik Yoon, a UW-Madison professor of chemistry – that summer and officially moved to Madison for good in 2007. He still works with UW-Madison as a faculty associate in the art department along with maintaining his private art practice and showings.

During the earlier part of his career, Velliquette created immersive environments out of cardboard, foil, paper, curtains, sound, lighting, mobiles, sculptural furniture and other materials. He also worked on paintings and drawings. The inspiration to experiment with paper started 15 years ago when he was working on a large mixed media painting – he had tested it with paper before moving to his intended material, which was painted cut canvas.

“It was just a moment of inspiration – maybe I could just work with paper for a while instead of all of these mixed-media bells and whistles,” Velliquette says.

From there he kept creating art from paper, ultimately finding critical and commercial success. These early pieces



were multicolored and ranged in size, and they often incorporated eyes, animals, his own profile and hands reaching for things.

“At a certain point you know it’s paper, but then it doesn’t look like paper,” Velliquette says. “It’s accessible on a level where people know it because it’s so familiar to them.”

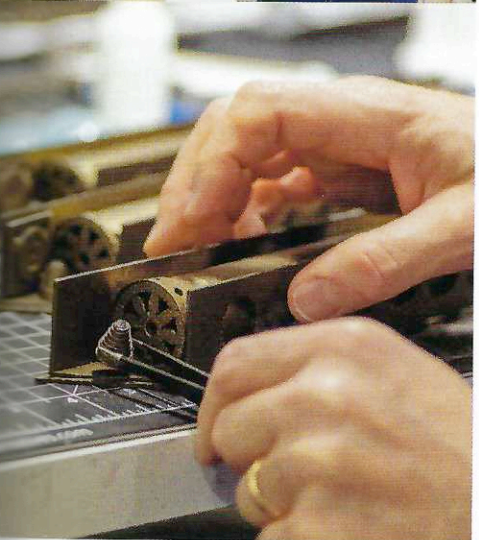
Velliquette estimates that he made 200 to 300 pieces in a 10-year span, but he took a break in 2015 to work on a public art piece for an elementary school in Queens. That piece took a year and half, and by the time he was ready to get back into the studio and return to his early, colorful paper work, he decided to start searching for what was next. He says he thought, “Maybe I’ve said everything I’m going to say, maybe I’m done.”

He pivoted to a new way of expressing his paper practice—one that continues to this day. Velliquette says it all started with cutting simple shapes out of paper.

“I became interested in this idea that a blank sheet of paper, traditionally... you think it’s not about the material but



Michael Velliquette (left and below center) has a studio (below) in downtown Madison where he creates sculptures out of paper (right and opposite page left and bottom).



what's on the material, your words or the image," Velliquette says. "The blank surface becomes the space [in which] this world takes shape, but if I take this away and just use this material, can I also have the material produce... the things that are in my imagination?"

And that's what he did. Velliquette started repeating designs, stacking sheets and finding new ways to use paper. He created sculptures using the basic shapes and elements of quilling, an art where paper pieces are rolled, shaped and glued together to create designs.

"A lot of trial and error, a ton of trial and error, thousands of hours of trial and error," Velliquette says. "I probably have the 10,000 hours invested in it that they say one needs to be masterful at something."

Over the years, he's made about 20 sculptures. Each takes months to create from start to finish. "The pace of my work has really slowed down," Velliquette says.

While Velliquette's work incorporates a lot of vibrant colors, each of his paper sculptures is monochrome, using only one color for the entire process. Velliquette says he felt like he lost his touch with color after he returned to his art practice, but the use of a singular color allows the viewer to look at the dimensionality without having to understand different layers.

Each piece is different from the one before it. "Often the discovery of a tool or a technique will coalesce into affecting a new piece," he says. The first couple were made with matte paper. Then he went with taller, brightly colored structures and now he's working on a series of metallic-coated paper pieces.

He says he's constantly finding new ways to make them and new tools to use, which has held his interest. "That's just endlessly fascinating," he says.

"At a certain point you know it's paper, but then it doesn't look like paper," Velliquette says.



He's also gone from having two pairs of scissors in his toolkit to owning a full cart of gadgets, including leather punches, a Japanese punch tool, tools used for ceramics, several varieties of scissors and different tips for glue bottles. There is no laser cutting involved – Velliquette cuts every piece by hand. He says he often lets the work lead him as he goes along and will build along the way, maintaining symmetry and repeating elements. Then he'll think about how to fill gaps so there is something in every corner.

"[I have] two intentions. One is just to push paper art into these kind of new territories," Velliquette says. "Then the second one is to convey to the viewer a similar sense of calm and peace... kind of a focused, quiet concentration, that [excitement] that I get when I make them."

FIND MICHAEL VELLIQUETTE:

✉ velliquette.com

📷 [@michaelvelliquette](https://www.instagram.com/michaelvelliquette)

📱 [@michaelvelliquettpaper](https://www.instagram.com/michaelvelliquettpaper)

Maija Inveiss is an associate editor of Madison Magazine.
 @maija.inveiss