



For more than fifty years, Irwin Kremen has been refining the practice of collage. He began to work professionally in the visual arts relatively late in life, at the age of forty-one, having already become established as a professor of psychology at Duke University. The primary impetus for his involvement in art, though, was a visit in 1966 by his friend and former writing instructor at Black Mountain College, M.C. Richards, who encouraged him to try making a cloth collage. Even before he began to make art, though, Kremen was part of an artistically rich milieu that included figures connected to his Black Mountain days, such as David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage (who, in 1955, dedicated his groundbreaking composition *4'33"* to Kremen). Kremen also cites the surrealist magazine *Dyn* and the 1945 Jean Arp exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, as early prompts to the making of art. Shortly after making his first collage, Kremen spent a month in Ascona, Switzerland, where he found an extraordinarily inspiring community of artists and saw memorable works by Jean Arp, Mark Tobey, Ben Nicholson, Jules Bissier, and Italo Valenti. It was in Valenti's studio, Kremen says, that he grasped "what minimally must happen for the making of a successful collage." On subsequent trips to Europe, he deepened his awareness of Valenti's work, which he valued for its lyrical sensibility that harkened back to the simple intensity of archaic Mediterranean art.

Kremen's collages are composed of fragments of paper, sometimes just a few millimeters wide, that have been torn off walls in public places in cities from London, Paris, and Rome to New York, Chicago, and Berkeley. He values these often-decomposing scraps of paper for their unique color, texture, and affective resonance: "I hunt out unduplicable papers," he has said, "experienced papers, papers that have been in sun, in rain, in dust, in snows, covered with the dirt of the city." Kremen arranges and rearranges these elements until he arrives at a satisfying composition.

Kremen has pointed to three sources underlying his free use of diverse materials: Josef Albers's encouragement of his students at Black Mountain College to make art out of almost anything; John Cage's and Merce Cunningham's open-ended compositional techniques in music and dance; and James Joyce's construction of new words made out of parts of words from many different languages in *Finnegans Wake*. (Consider, for example, the sound of the thunderclap that marks the downfall of Adam and Eve: "bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnonntuonnthunntrovarrhounaw nskawntoohooorderenthur-nuk!") Because Kremen's collages are derived from advertisements and other signage, the fragments often include letters or numbers; however, these are never meant to be meaningful in a semantic sense. Rather, they simply contribute to a specific compositional solution.

Since 1977, Kremen has used extremely thin Japanese-paper hinges to attach the torn fragments. This painstaking method endows the collages with a sculptural quality, as the body of each piece of paper is independent and the edges, no longer adhered to the backing, become expressively alive. This subtle quality of his works—which might be lost on a viewer who gives the collages only a cursory glance—connects his work to two important currents in twentieth-century art. First, one can see in the modulation of overlapping fragments a distant echo of Cézanne's fracturing of the image in a technique called *passage*, in which each brushstroke is individually articulated while also being tightly woven into the overall composition. Second, this foregrounding of the physical qualities of the material resonates with the ethos of Art Concrete, a mid-twentieth century international art

movement that aimed to focus viewers' attention on the immediate physical properties of materials in the absence of any referential meaning. While much work made in the spirit of Art Concrete was based on mathematical and geometric principles, however, Kremen's work is composed intuitively based on resonances among the various fragments.

There are a number of compositional strategies that recur in Kremen's works. We see, for example, a strong tendency to enliven the edges of the generally rectilinear collages by placing fragments that extend beyond the regular geometric bounds or adjusting a border inward like the angular face of an eroded stone. The interior areas of the collages are sometimes amorously composed; in these, structure is largely a consequence of subtle relationships among colors and color tones. In other works, the visual material is organized within a frame that echoes the external edge.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Kremen's collage work is its almost-miniature scale. While some of his compositions may recall the bold gestures of Abstract Expressionist painting, and his use of small street-poster fragments may initially seem to echo the torn billboards of the so-called *décollagists* (Villeglé, Rotella, Hains, et al.), the small scale of Kremen's work—and the deliberateness of his compositions—immediately signals a very different kind of attention and care. We are drawn in, and by looking closely come to appreciate the fineness of the works' construction. We notice, for example, that even an apparently all-over monochrome surface such as that in *Blues for Adam* is composed of many carefully assembled, tiny paper pieces.

In this fast-paced information age, Kremen's art is important as a reminder of what can be achieved when we focus on real things, trust our intuition, and have the patience to build something new from scratch.

Lawrence Rinder  
DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR, BAMPFA

### Biography

Born in Chicago in 1925, Irwin Kremen enrolled in 1946 at Black Mountain College, where he devoted himself to writing and studied poetry and literature with M.C. Richards. A year later, he moved to New York City, where he eventually studied at the New School for Social Research. Kremen received his PhD in clinical psychology from Harvard University in 1961. He is professor emeritus at Duke University, where he began teaching in 1963, becoming director of the Graduate Clinical Psychology Training Program, a position he held until 1971. His work has been featured in solo exhibitions at Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Black Mountain College Museum and Art Center, Brooklyn Museum, Chicago Cultural Center, Carnegie Museum of Art, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, and Smithsonian American Art Museum. He resides in Durham, North Carolina.

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## Checklist

*B4*  
1980  
Paper  
10 1/2 x 3 1/16 in.  
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of the artist in memory of Mary Caroline (M.C.) Richards, PhD 1942, UC Berkeley 2014.3.1

*Blues for Adam*  
1975/79-1980  
Paper and paint  
5 3/16 x 3 1/8 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Capital C*  
1980  
Paper  
4 13/16 x 3 3/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Changeover*  
1989/90  
Paper, canvas, and acrylic  
7 1/16 x 6 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Ciao, Venezia (In Memory of Aline Valangin)*  
1988  
Paper  
6 1/16 x 5 1/4 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Clearly*  
1992  
Paper  
5 x 4 1/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Countdown 1*  
2003  
Paper  
4 3/8 x 4 3/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Countdown 3 (neo-Boogie Woogie, No. 2)*  
2003  
Paper, canvas, and acrylic  
6 1/16 x 5 3/4 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Dots for You*  
1993/2007  
Paper  
5 7/8 x 5 1/4 in.  
Lent by Ethan Kremen

*Ecco!*  
1973  
Paper  
3 3/8 x 4 5/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Five Plus A*  
1973  
Paper  
3 3/8 x 4 1/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*From That Day to This*  
1983  
Paper  
8 1/4 x 5 5/16 in.  
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of the artist in honor of Professor Emerita Catherine Gallagher 2014.3.2

*Imagine Inventing Yellow (for M.C. Richards)*  
1976  
Paper and luminescent paint  
5 3/16 x 5 1/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*La Bruyère I*  
1976  
Paper and luminescent paint  
5 15/16 x 4 1/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*La Bruyère III*  
1976  
Paper  
5 5/16 x 4 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Make Fast*  
1980  
Paper  
4 x 3 1/2 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Peers*  
1998  
Paper and paint  
6 1/2 x 15 in.  
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of the artist in honor of: Professor Claire Kremen; Adam Merrill Kremen, PhD 1995, UC Berkeley; Kristina Whitney Kremen, B.A. Class of 1988, PhD 1994, UC Berkeley 2014.3.3

*Prime Number*  
1978  
Paper  
6 x 6 1/4 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Quimper Pink*  
1973  
Paper  
5 5/8 x 2 7/8 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Seek*  
1975  
Paper  
4 x 3 15/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Seescape*  
1995  
Paper, spray paint, and acrylic  
6 3/16 x 6 13/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

*Two in One*  
1994  
Sandpaper and paint dust  
5 5/8 x 5 15/16 in.  
Lent by the Kremen Family Collections

Irwin Kremen and Anya Fineman  
*Yanya*  
2007  
Acrylic and paper  
5 7/8 x 4 1/4 in.  
Lent by Anya Fineman

FRONT *Imagine Inventing Yellow (for M.C. Richards)*

ABOVE *B4, Blues for Adam*

BACK *Countdown 3 (neo-Boogie Woogie, No. 2)*