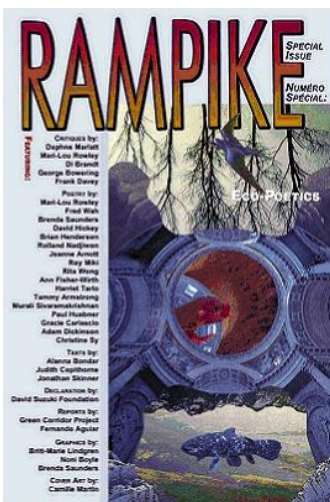


## Collage: An Interview with Camille Martin

Poet and collage artist Camille Martin is the author of three collections of poetry: [Sonnets](#), [Codes of Public Sleep](#) and *Sesame Kiosk*. Her collages have been exhibited in galleries in Toronto and at the Toronto Public Library, and published in books and magazines in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Many of her collages can be viewed at her [website](#), and she blogs on poetry and art at [Rogue Embryo](#).

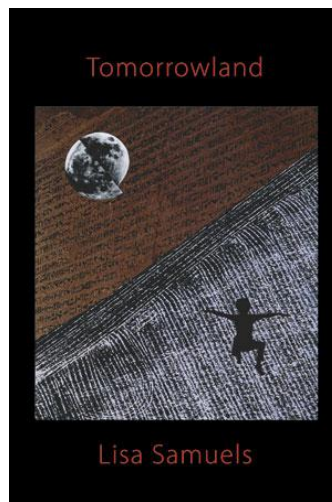
### [Rampike \(18:1\)](#)



*Openings*

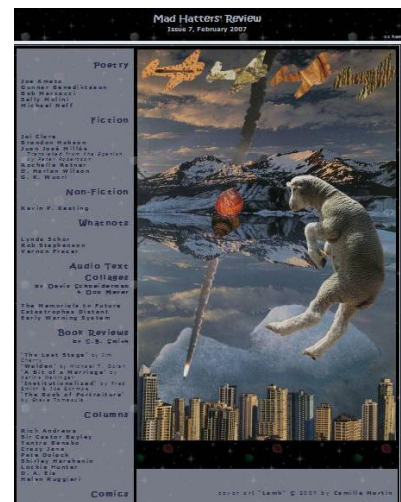
### [Tomorrowland](#)

Lisa Samuels (Shearsman  
Books, 2009)



*Hieroglyphic Night*

### [Mad Hatters' Review \(7\)](#)



*Lamb*

AHP: What drew you to making collages? Who were some of your initial influences?

CM: I've always been interested in a blending of the arts, maybe partly stemming from my childhood experience of synesthesia, in which I experience musical notes associated with colours. Also, I think my musical training has crept into my poetry over the years. For me, the spilling over of one discipline into the other seems natural.

I wanted to work in a visual arts medium, and since I don't have formal training in drawing or painting, I turned to collage in 2003. I was particularly intrigued by [the collage-poems of Charles Henri Ford in Silver Flower Coo](#). As an extension of my poetry I began shaping "ransom note poems" with cut-out words and

images. I filled my dining room table with these words and as my eyes wandered over the table, I picked up words that were drawing my attention and placed them on a cutting mat. These little cut-out words started gravitating towards each other to form phrases and sentences. It's a variation on an old Surrealist technique, and I found it exhilarating.

At that time, I had just finished my MFA in Poetry and was pleased that Cynthia Hogue, my thesis advisor, asked me to email her images of some of these to show to her classes at Arizona State University. Also, several of them got published in [Moria Magazine](#). This positive response encouraged me to continue. Images were also a part of these word-collages from the start, and over time the images began taking over.

As to influences in the art of collage, I'm an admirer of the work of David Wojnarowicz, Joseph Cornell, Jess, Jiří Kolář, Henry Darger, Georges Braque, and Max Ernst, to name just a handful.

AHP: It's interesting that the galleries on your site are almost exclusively images, with some featuring images and letters. What kinds of sources do you use in your work? Have the sources changed over the years? Do you keep exclusively to print sources or do you also find sources on the Internet?

CM: Magazines are great—once I obtained inexpensively a big stack of 1960s *Life* magazines from a public library and found useful images of the Vietnam War, neurons, and early photography.

Books from flea markets often yield unusual images. For example, I found some vintage Boy Scout magazines from the 1950s, from which I used a diagram of a model aircraft and comic strips of “cowboys and Indians” and sci-fi stories.

Old photograph record jackets are cool. I inherited some old records from an aunt and used images from a jacket for children's songs.

Other sources include seed catalogues, atlases (those pages of national flags are great), Medieval and Renaissance art, illustrations of semaphore flag signaling, and historical anatomy atlases. I can't remember using anything from the internet.

I don't think the nature of the images has changed much over the years, but sometimes themes emerge, such as my Americana and Canadiana series.

Another series that's coalescing I call "Patterns of Otherness." Collages in this group often use images from pop culture and show the consequences of alienating and objectifying others in society, and the loss of humanity that occurs within those who reject as well as those who are rejected.

AHP: Like many art forms, collage can borrow elements to create new art. Such elements can include found items such as bits of wood, but they can also be newspaper clippings, brand name advertisements, such as the Campbell's soup can, elements from other art works and so forth. Your Americana series includes Disney characters. In your opinion are there limits to what can or should be used to create collages? What kinds of images would you be unwilling to include in your collages? Are there any constraints or rules that you follow when creating collages?

CM: Great questions, and timely ones, considering controversies in the recent past. Appropriation has a long history in both art and poetry, and some high-profile court cases in the visual arts are shaping the legal ramifications of using images borrowed from sources. Jeff Koons, for example, has been involved in at least two major lawsuits. Judges are increasingly applying the notion of the "transformative" value of appropriation more liberally in cases that make their way into the courts.

I like Koons' own defence in his affidavit for one of his cases: "My paintings are not about objects or images that I might invent, but rather about how we relate to things that we actually experience. . . . Therefore, in order to make statements about contemporary society and in order for the artwork to be valid, I must use images from the real world. I must present real things that are actually in our mass consciousness." Although the issues of appropriation are sometimes more complicated than artistic license, I believe that artists need to have the freedom to take on iconic images in our culture, whether the approach is playful or critical, and to transform existing material to create new work.

When I create collages, I don't think about limiting myself or excluding materials. I use whatever materials I have at hand to shape a concept or a narrative. My use of materials from popular culture sometimes has a parodic effect implying cultural critique, but I don't think that this is always and necessarily the case. If, for example, I use a stereotypical image of childhood innocence (from that record jacket, for example), I'm not necessarily parodying the original image in a cultural context, but using the image to explore notions of innocence or naivety that might have little to do with a cultural stereotype

associated with such vintage images. So I can't say categorically that I use pop culture for a particular kind of purpose. But I do believe that there is always a creation of something new out of the borrowed materials.

I don't usually follow rules or constraints when I'm making collages, though I do sometimes limit the colour palette to give the whole more inner coherence. I try various juxtapositions until I can feel a spark of attraction among the images, and play with different uses of space to give that attraction free reign to show me what it wants to say. It does often feel as though I'm a conduit who facilitates the dramas that reveal themselves in the collages.

AHP: All the sources you've mentioned have been print sources, such as magazines. Do you ever find sources for your collages on line? Has the advent of technology, such as scanners, colour printers, programs like PhotoShop & the Internet changed your process since you began?

CM: The image from the cover of *Mad Hatters' Review* is actually internet-based, though its format gives the impression of being a print source. Other than your own [Experiment-O](#), in which you generously published several of my collages, I've also been published in online sources such as [Cella's Round Trip](#) and [Talking Writing](#).

I've always been a scissors-and-paper collagist, but the images that I exhibit in galleries and libraries are digitalized prints of the originals. Working with a scanner, a graphics editing program such as PhotoShop, and a professional printing service allows me to make minor alterations and to expand the size of the final image for greater impact.

AHP: I especially love the combination of textures and colours in your collages, such as the rich reds and browns, the juxtaposition of the grandfather clock and the stage and the starfish in *Apple Picking* ( in *Cella's Round Trip*). What's your work environment like for collage making? Do you have a space where you can keep your collage materials within easy reach? Do you reuse any of the elements you've used for a collage in other collages?

CM: The way I work, collaging takes a certain amount of space and the freedom to use that space as I please. My collage work really took off when I moved out of a former partner's house and had a dining table of my own, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf. For a couple of years that was my work space. In my current situation I have a room that's part library, part collage work space. I constructed a long,

narrow table from sawhorses and plywood in order to spread out my images in a kind palette of cutouts. Images that I'm not considering, I store in a taboret. A drafting table serves for the actual arranging and gluing. It works out pretty well.

When I'm working with a restricted colour range, my work space makes it possible for me to spread out images only in that range, as in *Apple Picking*.



*photo by Jiri Novak*

AHP: I first encountered your poetry when you read here in Ottawa at the Tree Reading Series in 2008 shortly after the launch of *Codes of Public Sleep* (BookThug). What stood out for me was your layering of sound and unusual images, and the sensorial nature of your work. It felt very much like a collage of word, image and sound. What relationship does your collage-making have with your poetry? Do you ever write poems in response to a collage or vice-versa?

CM: I don't consciously write poems in response to my collages or vice versa. Nonetheless, I think there are strong interdisciplinary correspondences. Before the collages, I was playing with the juxtaposition of poetry and photographs. My MFA thesis, *at peril*, was a collection of poetry interspersed with my photographs. And the title poem of *Codes of Public Sleep* was originally intended to be performed with a randomized slide show of photographs that I took in downtown New Orleans; poem and photographs both explored ideas about public and private realms in society.

So those explorations fed into my later work with collages, which evolved from word-based cut-outs (my ransom note collage-poems inspired by the above-mentioned *Silver Flower Coo*) to almost exclusively image-based work. So there was a more or less natural and linked progression from poetry to visual work.

From the time that I started making collages with images, there was already a resonance between my poetics and aesthetics. The collaging techniques in both give a sense of continuity from some echo, some centripetal force in the work, yet also interrupt that feeling. So there's tension in the disparate elements that the mind attempts to narrativize.

Rae Armantrout speaks of the "compound creatures" that inhabit her poems: "I mean/don't mean. I mean that experience is double, that doubleness is the essence of consciousness." And this doubleness for me constitutes the drama of the work, thought's recognition of both fusion and abyss that engage without annihilating each other.

Nonetheless, the links between image and word remain more mysterious to me than those between poetry and music. From an early age, music and language were linked. In my childhood home, music and song were a natural part of life. Later, when I was studying piano performance at a conservatory learning, say, a Beethoven Sonata, I would scribble words to the melodies in my score (to the amusement of my instructor). At that time, I was also setting poems to music, which I've taken up again recently by [composing music for several poems from Sonnets](#), arranged for soprano with piano accompaniment. In a graduate seminar years ago, I studied intensively the relationship between literature and music. And in the recent past I've written several essays about [the musicality of poetry in general](#), and in the work of [Barbara Guest](#), [Adam Seelig](#), [Scott Thurston](#), and [Kaie Kellough](#).

But also from an early age there was a blending of music and the visual sense, stemming in part from my synesthetic experience of tonal colours as well as from my attempts as a child to paint what music sounded like to me. The art that I pored over as a child, such as Kandinsky and Klee, always seemed to me to have an underlying current of musicality in the interplay of form and colour.

Although the musical, linguistic, and visual are inextricably linked and swirling around in my head, I think it's fair to say that for me, music, the mutual friend of poetry and art, was the host who introduced the two.

AHP: Thanks very much, Camille. It's been a pleasure to learn more about your collage-making.