

## At Sherry Leedy, Cindy Kane and Tanya Hartman slice into notebooks

By [Chris Packham](#)

Published on January 19, 2010 at 1:05pm



Ward Just's helmet by Cindy Kane



"Prayer Paddle #2 (To Speak in Wonder and in Kindness)" by Tanya Hartman

### Details:

**The Helmet Project** and **Rhyming the Lines**  
Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, 2004 Baltimore, 816-221-2626, sherryleedy.com

The content of other people's notebooks somehow seems more substantial and meaningful than one's own. The notes present the person behind the writer — someone in the moment, without the deliberation, editing or polish that come later. A pair of exhibits at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art explore this fascination in divergent but complementary ways.

For **The Helmet Project**, multimedia artist **Cindy Kane** has created a series of 50 portraits of individual journalists. Using their donated notebooks, airline itineraries, ticket stubs, press badges and foreign currency, she layers this ephemera of international reporting and travel as collages over worn steel combat

helmets. Kane's hand-painted accents — disembodied eyes, birds, colorful stripes, simple shapes — illuminate the pieces.

Journalism's artlessness can be profound, embedded in the coffee-stained utilitarianism of the newsroom, with its inelegant **J.C. Penney** fashion aesthetic. But Kane reconfigures the field's unsightly constituents as tributes to the courage and enduring sense of adventure that are the core of an often grubby, ink-smeared vocation.

The resulting circumstantial portraits frame, among others, **National Public Radio's** **Neal Conan**, **Jacki Lyden** and **Charlayne Hunter-Gault**; *The New York Times'* **Nelson Bryant**; and *The Kansas City Star's* **Scott Canon**. The helmets, suspended at eye level from the gallery ceiling, afford the viewer maximal proximity and intimacy. Inches away, you can read NPR correspondent **Deborah Amos'** handwritten notes, situated amid travel documents and Iraqi *dinars*. That currency is among the most common elements in the exhibit, an artifact of the decade's prevailing conflict.

Kansas City Arts – At Sherry Leedy, Cindy Kane and Tanya Hartman slice into notebooks

Among the personal items contributed by the *The New York Times'* **Chris Hedges** is a piece of hate mail that he received in response to his reporting on the war in **Iraq**, a right-wing diatribe of invectiveness and racism directed at the "commie pinko traitors in the Jew-run media." It's a catalog of the nastiest pejoratives in the American hate lexicon and a reminder of the right wing's attacks on fundamental journalistic precepts of fairness. "You rotten scum," it reads. "You should be eradicated from the face of the earth." The yellow sun with which Kane decorates the helmet consumes but does not blot out the writer's vituperation.

The boarding pass that decorates former *Washington Post* reporter **Ward Just's** helmet is dated April 1968, destination **Saigon**. Kane has adorned his baggage-claim documents with butterfly wings, instruments of travel that are as delicate and lovely as the airline documents are blunt and disposable. Kane's approach is rife with these contrasts, the chief example being the helmets themselves, which put her subjects' internal lives outside their heads. That Kane uses notebooks rather than finished, typeset copy affords a glimpse at spontaneous thoughts. Despite cross-outs, semi-legible handwriting and prosaic ballpoint ink, the swift jottings are somehow more real than the finished work. This manifest humanity stems from these undervalued professionals' sense of purpose, the heavy lifting they perform in the field.

**Tanya Hartman's** **Rhyming the Lines**, a vastly different project, is similar in its painstaking textual focus, intimacy and candor. First, Hartman writes her short story or poetic essay. Then she cuts out each word from the printed page (conjuring images of X-Acto blades scattered like autumn leaves in her studio) and affixes them, one at a time, to paper she has already layered with acrylic paint and laboriously embroidered with lines resembling those in a child's writing tablet. The exhibit's namesake piece, "I Wrote a Short Story (Rhyming the Lines)," tells the story of a child (presumably the artist) whose father gives her **Richard Wright's** short story "Big Boy Leaves Home," a horrifying account of a lynching.

In a brilliant stroke, Hartman sets off a quote from Wright's story as a small, separate abstraction in the middle of one panel. It's printed in a different type size and edged with her characteristic embroidery. Her own text wraps around Wright's, as if in embrace. Up close, you can see ghostly strata of copy beneath the pale layers of paint, a doubling of the topmost layer of text that adds visual depth without sacrificing clarity. Presumably, it's also a shit-ton of extra work.

"What Was Beautiful" and "Reliquary" are essentially Hartman's lifework, ongoing projects in which she applies her method to a journal-like documenting of her life. In "What Was Beautiful," she records discrete moments of beauty as she encounters them: stepping away from a boisterous party for a moment of silence; watching a muddy turtle splashing in the water; the bird song and the wet laundry signaling a bird's nest in her home's dryer. Each is composed as a small, lovely prose poem.

Each panel of "Reliquary" represents a year of Hartman's life. The piece is stitched together in a configuration that suggests a network of cells as seen through a microscope, the tissue of a biography. "They hated a girl, not me, when I was nine," she writes. "But the hate was in me, too, when I was nine, and cellophane crackled when I was nine, and torment was mine." Complicated and labor-intensive, Hartman's work is too thoughtful to mistake for an actual notebook, but it's too personal and intimate to hold at arm's length.