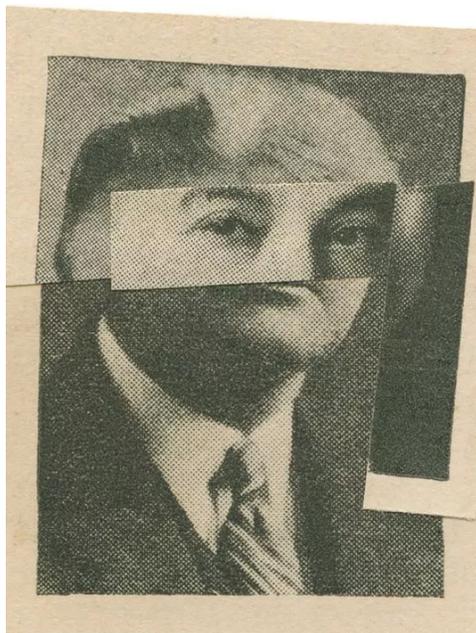


# Artist Scott Zieher makes collages to tune in to the past

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel *June 5, 2017*



(Photo: Usable Space)

Artist, poet and gallery owner Scott Zieher has come back to Wisconsin. His cumulative, collaged artworks are sourced from magazines, vintage radio journals and other ephemera. Together, they accumulate into a contemplation on the legacy of the Dada art movement and a testimonial to a missing father.

Zieher was born in Waukesha, but his prominence in the art world has expanded far beyond. He holds a master of fine arts degree in poetry from Columbia University and owns a contemporary art gallery in Manhattan. His wedding to co-owner Andrea Smith was featured in the society pages of the New York Times. Nevertheless, Zieher seems to find nourishment in his Midwestern roots and mines autobiography and history in his artwork. His exhibit at *Usable Space* is titled “Holy Dada, Holy Dad.”

The Dada movement emerged in Europe in the early 20th century as a reaction to the destruction and dehumanization wrought by World War I and as a revolt to entrenched social mores. It featured abstract performances, collage, automatic writing and purposely anti-establishment gestures.

As the exhibit title suggests, Zieher honors the Dada movement in his work and utilizes it to reflect on memory and family. Zieher’s father passed away before he was born, and his artistic process seems to function as a reconstruction of sorts, a way of building a narrative that may not have existed in reality.

“What do Magazines Mean?” is a vitrine of printed source material including Life magazine, a man holding a metal detector, a brownish paper clipping that reads “Phantasmagoria.” The wall text states that some of the material was published the week Zieher’s father died. The collaged elements combine into poignant coherence. They appear to be a quest by the artist to create memory through the process of collecting items in his current, waking world.

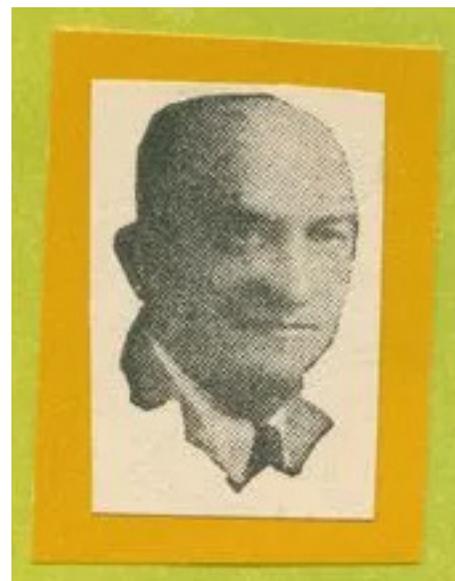
Other artworks use collage and metaphor similarly. Most of them revolve around photographs of ham radio operators from a journal printed in the 1930s. These tiny collages of portrait photographs, images of men on yellowed paper in halftone printed dots, were scanned and enlarged. A row of these figures is framed in decorative colors and textures, another grouping left more austere in black and white. Zieher has Frankensteined their facial features, combining multiple figures together into an amalgam of portraiture.

Ham radio operators were mostly amateurs and hobbyists, broadcasting their personal views of the world to anyone who was listening. Perhaps Zieher is using these radio operators as a type of conduit to the past. The artist employs them to try to communicate with the unconscious world, to unearth his own unknown history by broadcasting it via these radio men. It is poetic in its possibility.

The colored frames around the ham operators seem strangely whimsical, like decorative abstractions from the ‘80s. This creates a somewhat jarring contrast. In addition, while honoring the Dadaist past, Zieher has extracted the trauma and revolt that was fundamental to it, leaving his work at times devoted too much to formalism. Nonetheless I was moved by the artist’s quest to regain a past by accumulating in the present. Zieher’s obsessive nature of gleaning, of collecting and arranging words and images, lends itself beautifully to his project.

“Scott Zieher: Holy Dada, Holy Dad,” is on view through June 17 at *Usable Space*, 1950 S. Hilbert St. For information visit [www.usablespace.net/](http://www.usablespace.net/).

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Scott Zieher’s “Color Ham” (2017). Many of the works in Zieher’s *Usable Space* show draw on portraits of ham radio operators from the 1930s. (Photo: Usable Space)