Michael Velliquette: Intuitive Patterns

Digital mockup of *Intuitive Patterns*
Courtesy of the Artist

Wisconsin-based Michael Velliquette has created an installation for RAM's Windows on Fifth Gallery that reflects his interest in color theory, pattern-making, and papercraft. Building on a long-term relationship with paper—studying its history and physical capabilities—Velliquette transfers his knowledge to light durable Tyvek panels that he has cut into compelling designs. In addition, he plays with the perceptual possibilities of color as he presents the intensely saturated panels in arrangements that will change midway through this year-long exhibition.

Velliquette discusses his practice and his love for the possibilities of materials, especially paper, in the following interview.

Interview with Michael Velliquette
Conducted by Katelyn Mitchell, RAM Associate Curator
March 2026

What first spurred your interest to work with paper?

I first began using paper in my studio practice in the early 2000s. At the time, I was creating large-scale immersive installations using a range of materials, and paper was always part of that process. Like many artists, I've also routinely used paper for studies—improvisational sketches, maquettes, and preparatory experiments for more ambitious works.

Over time, however, I began to make more elaborate paper-based forms within my installation works, and to see the paper studies not as secondary, but as central to my practice. As I continued exploring and pushing the medium, paper gradually became my primary focus. That shift happened over twenty years ago, and the work I make today reflects an ongoing and sustained dialogue with the material.

Paper remains endlessly generative for me. It is flexible, adaptive, and capable of remarkable transformation. Its accessibility invites experimentation and invention, and I never tire of discovering new possibilities within it.

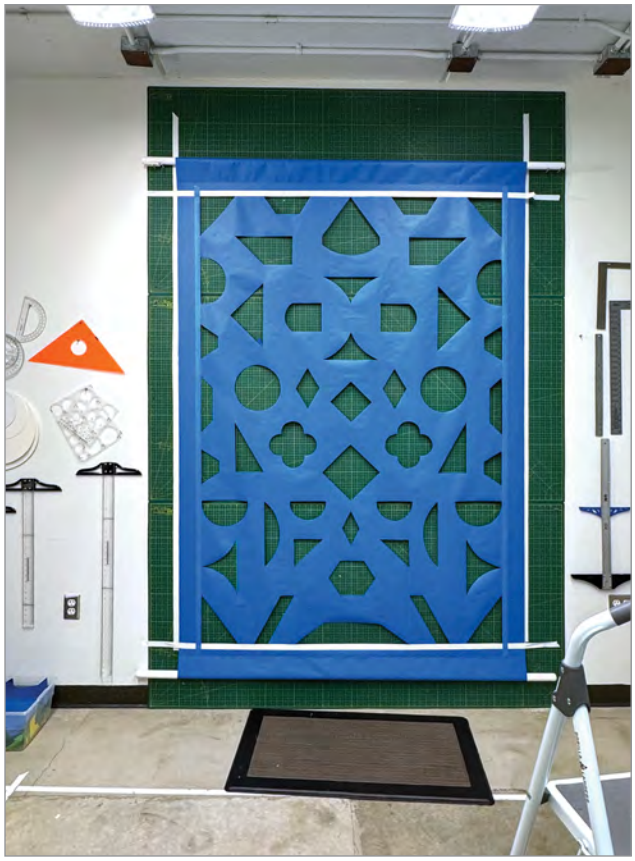
How do you see your work tying into larger papercutting traditions (or not)?

I think any artist who works with paper is inevitably connected to the broader craft history of the medium. In my sculptural works I employ techniques rooted in papercraft traditions—paper cutting, folding, quilling (paper filigree), weaving, paper engineering, and other structural methods. While I don't work exclusively within any single tradition, my practice draws broadly from all of them.

Early in my career, I was thinking more about the history of collage and early twentieth-century artists who used paper to create pictorial constructions, such as Henri Matisse and Romare Bearden. I've also been inspired by the foundational design exercises at the Bauhaus, particularly the preliminary courses associated with figures like Josef Albers, where students explored paper engineering and formal construction as a means of understanding structure and material. That pedagogical approach has deeply informed my own thinking about process and form.

In recent years, I have taught courses focused specifically on paper craft traditions at places like Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and Penland School of Craft. In 2026, I'm curating an exhibition at the Robert C. Williams Museum of Papermaking titled *The Craft of Paper: Contemporary Takes on Tradition*, which will feature artists whose work innovates upon core paper crafting techniques.

(above and bottom left)
In-progress studio view
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

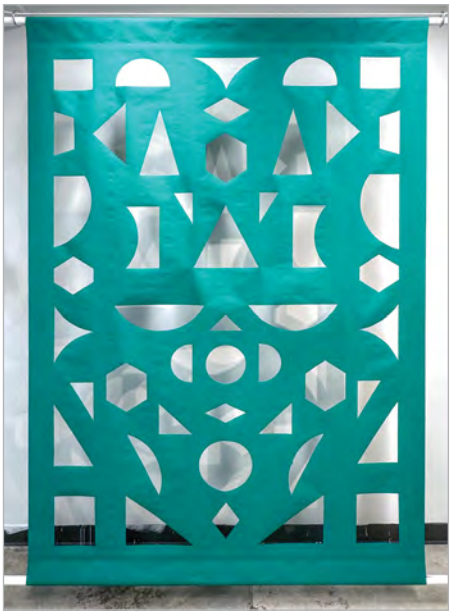


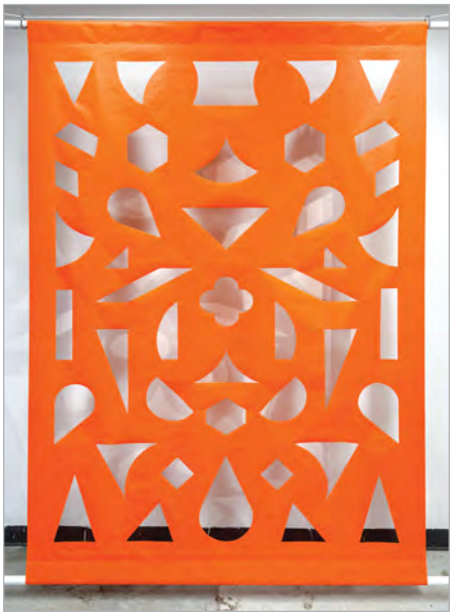
What does your process look like? Do you make many sketches before beginning a new piece? Is there any improvisation involved or is everything carefully planned ahead of time?

It begins with an inkling—an image, structure, or spatial idea that piques my imagination. I'll start by playing with paper directly, making something small and provisional to understand how a particular shape, fold, or technique might behave. That initial study helps me see whether the idea has structural and visual potential.

I don't typically produce extensive preliminary drawings in the traditional sense. Instead, I think through a form or process materially. Once the work begins to take shape, I make schematic drawings—especially when I'm engineering complex components or need to reproduce elements in multiples. Those function more as construction diagrams than expressive sketches.

While the labor is methodical and highly controlled, I rarely determine the final scale at the outset. Because the process is so controlled and deliberate, I allow space for discovery. I like to be surprised by where the work ultimately leads. I often describe the process as "slow-motion improvisation."





What was the motivation for your Windows on Fifth Gallery installation? Why did you use Tyvek instead of paper? How did it impact your process?

I was first struck by the Windows on Fifth Gallery a couple of years ago while visiting the museum. It's such a distinctive space—roughly nine feet high and nearly 90 feet long—and I was immediately drawn to the challenge of translating my typically dense, intimate paper sculptures to that scale. At the time, I had been making compact works that could take 300–500 hours to complete. The idea of creating something expansive, architectural, and publicly visible felt both daunting and energizing.

There were also practical considerations. The gallery's direct sunlight raised concerns about lightfastness, and my work generally relies on intense visual density and intricate detail. I had to rethink how to achieve a sense of optical fullness across such a large span, and how to retain a degree of detail that wouldn't be lost at scale.

Initially, I imagined enlarging some of the cut and suspended modules I had developed in earlier works—forms that twist and shift as the viewer moves past them. But as the project evolved, I became increasingly interested in the rectilinear framework of the windows themselves and how they mirror the proportions of a sheet of paper. That conceptual link shifted the direction of the installation.

Finding the right material was critical. I needed something available in large sheets that could withstand prolonged exposure to sunlight without fading. I ultimately chose Tyvek for its tensile strength and durability. Tyvek is a synthetic, high-density polyethylene fiber material that behaves similarly to paper in many ways. It is lightweight and thin, cuts cleanly with a blade, and can be drawn and painted on. Most importantly, it resists tearing—making it ideal for large-scale hand-cut forms.

In thinking about color, I drew inspiration from the *Spectrum* series by Ellsworth Kelly, particularly a work in the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum. I was interested in smooth chromatic gradations across the sequence of panels. Because one of the conditions of the Windows on Fifth program is that installations remain up for a full year but shift midway through, I designed the work so that the panels will initially be hung in a seamless gradient and later rearranged into more contrasting color relationships—creating a second visual composition within the same framework.

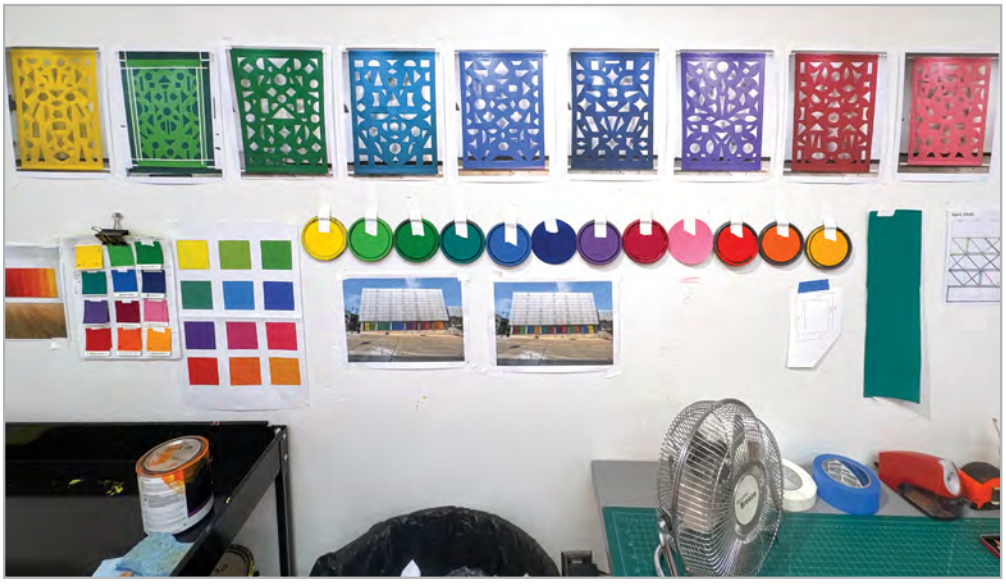
The scale of the project also required me to reconfigure my studio. I mounted large 3 x 6-foot self-healing cutting mats directly to the wall so I could work vertically. After painting the Tyvek, I taped each sheet in place, mapped out the patterns using water-soluble white crayons I could later wipe away and then cut everything by hand with an X-Acto knife, ruler, and drafting templates. While each panel is unique and improvised, I was broadly thinking about the architecture of windows, doors, and portals—imagining them as thresholds or even "magic doors" that viewers might enter visually.

In-progress studio view, Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

How do you select the imagery for your work? Are there certain themes that you gravitate towards? Has this changed throughout your career?

There are certain pictorial motifs I've returned to for decades—eyes, hands, mandalas, teardrops, stars. These forms feel timeless to me. They reference archetypal imagery that cultures have generated for centuries and may even connect to what Carl Jung described as the collective unconscious: symbols that recur across time and place because they resonate on a deep psychological level.

That said, I don't over-intellectualize my imagery. The decision to use a particular sign or symbol is often intuitive. If I feel like making a smiley face, I will. The image functions less as a subject to analyze and more as a conduit into the act of making. It gives me a structure through which I can explore the material. The process itself—cutting, layering, building—is ultimately more compelling to me than constructing a tightly coded symbolic program. At the same time, I'm attentive to composition, design, and visual language. I want the finished work to feel cohesive, dynamic, and pleasurable to behold.



What role does color play in your work?

Color has always played a central role in my work. In my earlier pieces, which were often strongly polychromatic, color functioned as a source of optical stimulation and joy. I was interested in visual abundance—creating surfaces that felt generous, saturated, and alive. In those works, color helped build complexity and offered viewers a rich field of visual information to explore.

In my later monochromatic works, color operates differently. It becomes singular and declarative. Because those pieces are often composed of thousands of individually cut elements, a unified color creates cohesion and visual gravity. The restraint allows the structure of the construction to come forward, and it heightens the drama of light and shadow across the surface.

How long do your pieces typically take to complete? What is the most time-consuming part?

It's true that my work is labor-intensive. A single piece can take anywhere from 300 to 500 hours to complete, depending on its scale and complexity. The most time-consuming part is the cutting and construction—the slow accumulation of thousands of individual elements that must be shaped, layered, and assembled by hand and with precision.

I'm asked this question often in tandem with the observation that I must have a lot of patience. To me, patience implies enduring something unpleasant. What I experience instead is concentration—the mind state that happens naturally when you're deeply engaged in something absorbing and pleasurable. The studio is a refuge for me, and I'm almost always working, so rather than measuring time piece by piece, I think of it as part of a continuous flow of making that extends over the span of this lifetime.

It's a sustained practice—one I never tire of.