From many shards, one

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By David Sachs

Megan Coyle likes it when people mistake her works of art for something that they're not. It may seem like an odd attitude for an artist — or any professional — to have toward the product of their toil. But, if you are browsing the studios at the Torpedo Factory Art Center and you mistake one of Coyle's collages for a painting, she'll be flattered.

"It's more interactive that way," says the Alexandria native and 2008 Elon University graduate, "so I like it when people think it's a painting. It pulls them in for a closer look."

Coyle, a 2004 graduate of T.C. Williams High School, has made a name for herself in her hometown by being juried into The Art League's visiting artist program, a new initiative at the Torpedo Factory on the waterfront.

Her solo collage exhibit, Stories in Paper, deconstructs photographs of everyday scenes — portraits, still-life and landscapes — and reassembles them, piece by piece, with magazine clippings.

The result is a blocky yet seamlessly realistic amalgamation of colorful shards that have been codified from Coyle's acute attention to detail. The final product has texture; it almost looks ceramic.

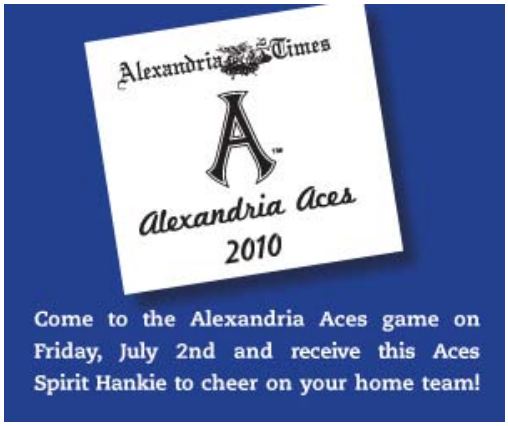
One of Coyle's mentors (incidentally a Torpedo Factory artist) once told her not to draw or paint with preconceived ideas of what an object should look like ("I had a tendency to make eyeballs look like footballs."), but to paint her interpretation of the object.

The advice stuck with her. She meticulously arranges the scraps of paper to evoke shadows, wrinkles, action — anything and everything that can (and cannot) be done with a brushstroke.

And she's as concerned with the big picture as much as the minutia of each individual feature — an eyeball or the nostril's of an elephant's trunk. The axiom that says one has to step back to appreciate a good work of art doesn't exactly apply to Coyle, or at least not to her artistic process.

"I stand back and take a look every once in a while," she says. "But it's more about looking at individual fragments of color than looking at the entire picture."

Holding degrees in both painting and creative writing, Coyle is admittedly new to the studio scene. As



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part of The Art League's visiting artist program, she shares a studio with a resident artist and must compete for the attention of tourists and other visitors wandering through the Torpedo Factory.

"I Get to work in the studio space of a resident artist and interact with the public," Coyle says. "It's been quite a change. It's quite different than what I'm used to — which is working in my apartment."

Though she's still learning about the business element of being a professional artist, Coyle seems to be doing alright. She has garnered some interest, sold some pieces and is learning that unless one wants to be a literal starving artist, self-promotion must trump humility.

"They never really taught us much about the business side in college," Coyle says. "But I'm learning pretty fast that you have to be your own public relations person."

If you venture to the Torpedo Factory and come across some of Coyle's collages, step back to appreciate it. Then step closer to revere it.

Stories in Paper begins July 8 with an opening reception at 6:30 p.m. and runs through August 2 at the Torpedo Factory Art Center in Old Town, 105 N. Union St.

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