

SPOWART - THOUGHTS ON NOOSA 06, 2006 (<http://www.pretext.com.au/?p=450>)

Doug Spowart *ART OF BOOKS ~ BOOKS OF ART*, Number 11, 2006. ISSN of 1832-2638.

### Encountering an artists' book at an exhibition – or – Selective browsing artists' books: Doug Spowart

*Noosa Books 06* [at the Noosa Regional Gallery, Qld] once again provided dilettantes of artists' books with a privileged opportunity to view an expansive selection of contemporary practice. Eighty-one books from around Australia and around the world were on display with a large number available for direct handling. Concurrent with this juried exhibition [titled *Books10+*] is a show by the dynamic duo Adele Outteridge and Wim de Vos presenting a retrospective of their extensive and vital practice. At this time I will comment on the works in the *Books10+* show.

As a third time visitor to this annual event I was aware of what I was to encounter. My interest in books is more than a casual one – I have a range of behaviours and expectations relating to viewing books at an exhibition. I generally want to connect with the message – the narrative the story. I want to feel the item – explore the construction, the production and the finish of the product.



For me *Books10+* is kind of like being a kid visiting the lolly shop and I, like most children, would probably want to gorge myself on the goodies available until reaching the point of gluttonous bliss. However this time I had a viewing strategy – I had no intension to analyse each book, to turn each page from cover to cover, to check technique for clues on how the maker made the book, or to carry out an assessment like a schoolteacher or passionate judge. This time I was going to explore the art of selective browsing. I found it to be an interesting experience – but what does it mean for my experience of the work in the show, and how does it inform my own artists' book practice? Here are my impressions of the browse and commentary on a selection of books I was drawn to encounter.



There are so many expectations that we have for the book – we expect that it will demand that we will engage with it. But what happens when you are in a library surrounded by hundreds of books? Something has to stand out and attract attention. In browsing I found the first victim of the strategy to be the often-touted dictum of 'You can't judge a book by its cover'. Because the cover is the first thing we encounter its outer visual exterior needs to be seductive, alluring and ready to entice the eye-hand coordination response to bring about the pickup. What may work may be a snazzy picture or graphic, a luxurious paper, a perfect coptic-stitched spine, slipcase or box of fine craftsmanship.

Scanning the book-covered tables I was drawn to the sight of the tactile form of crinkled handmade paper with a pressed-in title, *What you will need to make a book* by Liz Jenied. My gloved hands spontaneously reach out and pick up and gently turn the pages. The form of bone folder, brushes and a cutting knife become visible as embossed shapes in the paper – I am rewarded. In a wall of miniature 'bookettes' I encounter a black book of white printed roses – *Against nature* by Sarah Bodman and read the didactic panel's cryptic clue.

There are a number of examples of hybrid book-forms represented in the exhibition. These are from the ‘book as sculpture’ faction who really have subverted the need for a cover, as their works are immediately and completely visible. In this show several sculptural books attract the browse – these are works in which the narrative is not so much found ‘in’ the book but rather it is something what the viewer ‘gets’ from looking at the work.



Richie Ares Dona: Rhythm Knowledge

Richie Ares Dona’s *Rhythm Knowledge* has its strength in the grand scale of the work, its meticulously folded construction and Chinese lantern symmetry.



Luella Price: Flow

Luella Price’s *Flow* was most obvious due to its curious yellow gelatine colouring and its melting book form. Another book-like sculptural form is *H KIMONO* by Judy Barrass and consists 136 small origami jackets folded from manga comics sandwiched between Perspex in a hinged large-scale concertina screen form.



Judy Barrass: H KIMONO

Strangely my browsing seemed to develop a bias for the sculptural book – no need to pickup or turn the page – the only decision is the viewing position in proximity to the work. I move on, aesthetically and conceptually, there are other things to see. A book is a thing of beauty, and in an attempt explore the range of practice within the exhibition I come across an unassuming soft green cloth covered book by Sandi Rigby entitled *Paris Gardens*.



Sandi Rigby: Paris Gardens



One thing about being in the presence of a great number of artists’ books is that you can’t help but notice the predominance of overtly hand-made product in the genre. I was drawn to this book by its presentation. It is an exquisitely designed book of fine etchings and patternings – a visual diary of experience in which the sensibility of the artist and their ability to distil visual experience to image and sequence that informs and entertains. For my browsing eye this book provided an experience that firmly placed me in the space of the artist.

I wander on – there is so much more to see . . . tactile things, trickily resolved sculptural forms, books driven by concept and/or technique, the highly didactic, the monumentally deluxe, easy-lookers, ones to come back to, rustic art trouvé collages and books with humour and a twist of the unexpected. Ultimately, browsing or not, my head always spins after a few hours of engagement with artists’ books. The required intensity of gaze and attentiveness to respond to nuances of intellectual or quasi-intellectual discourse takes its toll.

When I withdraw from the fray a gradual process of recollection emerges. Things seen, sensed and experienced, rise to consciousness in the hours, days and months beyond the viewing. Maybe it is here, where we truly come to know what are the best books and the most successful communiqués. Books where the message has resonance and meaning far beyond the maker and our first viewing. Visiting an exhibition of artists’ books is indeed something more than a browse – it is a visit to the artist’s engine room where we discover a place of innovation, creativity and many, many stories.

DS, 3 November 2006

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