

Three Artist Books

David Garneau

Books are volumes; enormous expanses of time, space, human effort and imagination compressed into portable rectangles. Cracked, they reveal dimensions that belie their compact form. They permit time travel, shape shifting and mind reading. Books are porous vessels, decomposing word containers that melt with use. Dissolving books are demure objects, facilitators that endeavour not come between us and reading. They give way, accommodate. The type of such books is easy on the eyes and designed to disappear into images and ideas when we enter the space of reading. In dissolving books text is a medium we swim through on the way to meaning.

While the covers of conventional books are designed to appeal to the eye, the visual experience of the contents of novels, for example, is confined to symbol translation rather than an aesthetic, visual relationship. Illustrated publications are different, but even here, most confine themselves to serial linearity, one picture and page after another. As things, common books tend to be ergonomically sound, utilitarian. It is a rare book that provides a sensuous, tactile experience that echoes the textual content.

The artist book belongs to a special category. They are made by people who are artists in another medium, and who bring those skills and sensibilities to the construction of creative volumes. Most are hand made in very limited editions. Some are one of a kind. Most have larger runs, but in the spirit of printmaking editions, are still well under the number of copies of a typical commercial press run. Some artist books are simply books made by artists. But the majority are works of art. As such, the book is simply another medium to experiment with. Artist books regularly challenge bookish conventions. They usually emphasize a volume's tactility, its sensuous body. Artists use alternative materials; unpaginate or unbind; and manipulate formal, physical elements to echo or disrupt the text and its content. Artist books make us aware of the medium; make the medium the message, not just the messenger.



The World and Its Inhabitants, Aqua Abris and Power of Place

Power of Place: a fabric artist's response to the loss of the prairie elevator from our landscape, by Martha Cole, is a portfolio of images of the artist's quilts accompanied by a text. The hand-sized book (19.5cm x 14.5cm x 1.5cm) has an ochre coloured, wraparound hard cover subtly decorated with a pattern resembling wheat. There are 500 copies in three editions: accordion, wraparound and deluxe. This copy is #26 from the wraparound series. The interior consists of a booklet and a 45" strip of white paper folded accordion style into 15 panels, 14 of which are illustrated with prints of Cole's quilts. The quilts are photo-based images of grain elevators painted with fabric paints.



In the first section of the text, Cole describes her connection to rural Saskatchewan, and the economic and psychological effect of the increasing demolition of grain elevators. She writes of her attempts to memorialize the elevators. She describes her working method in the second part. Both accounts are straight forward. The quilts are equally no-nonsense records of the waning buildings. A few are parallel to the picture plane and recall David Thauberger's paintings. Most are three-quarter profiles with a low point of view that emphasizes their 'Prairie Icon' status.

The images are prints from photographs of quilts which have images painted on them that are themselves based on photographs of grain elevators. There is a tendency to try look through the prints to the original scenes, however, the subtle waving lines of machine stitching reminds us that the images are handmade and soft.

The book's flap is held in place by magnets. This small interaction, paired with the need to handle the accordion strip with care, makes this a special experience. Holding the book in your hands, feeling the cloth book jacket while you look at images of fibre works, is a subtle pleasure. Cole's quilts are small comforters for those in need of comfort. The book evokes the missing buildings but also the absent quilts. If they were just pictures of paintings or elevators, the tangible feeling of absence and loss would not be as acute.



The World and Its Inhabitants (1981-1997), by Paul Etienne Lincoln, is a deck of collector cards (12cm x 7.5cm) and a 24 page booklet. The box claims there are 24 cards but this edition has three extra duplicates. The booklet explains that this collection is based on a series of short performances the artist, as ‘ringmaster’, conducted with small mechanical figures for intimate groups. The events were eccentric combinations of miniature circus and science display—a collage of Enlightenment and Victorian-era entertainments peppered with pre-Dada nonsense (inspired by Alfred Jarry?). The parlour performances blended history with fiction, real things with imaginary. The booklet and cards document the performance artefacts.

Each card has on its face a black and white photo of one of the artist’s mechanical characters. They are small, motorized assemblages of found objects whose jittering movements can only be guessed. Some remind of Paul Kee’s “Twittering Machine” and Tingley’s self destructing machines. At the bottom of each card is a title. On the back is a small photo and text. Some titles refer to the once famous; Chung Ling Soo (magician), Pasteur (scientist), Marconi (inventor), the Dolly Sisters (entertainers), Ming Ming (a panda), etc., many with double lives. Others refer to peculiar medical devices or cures and pseudo scientific concepts: “the classification of idle causes” and “the spirit of subversion.” Most of the cards have factual information followed by explanations of how the pictured sculpture/character relates to the person or material in the title. One card shows a vitrine containing the ‘ringmaster’s’ costume and gadgets. The obscure entries on the obverse seem to come from Duchamp’s “Green Box”: obscure explanations and serious red herrings. The collection reads like pataphysician’s trading cards.

There is a fanciful earnestness to the project that sucks the reader into a strangely familiar world where everything seems equally silly and potentially profound:

“Chiropodist’s Dream is the fantasy of all lax chiropodists, to alleviate unbearable discomfort in the patient’s feet by the administration of a single amalgamated prescription. It is protected and cherished by the subconscious mind of the chiropodists, with the hope of gleaning respect and prosperity from the pitiful clientele. The Chiropodist’s feet are the jaws from a self-centering chuck, which is also a metaphor for the chiropodist’s quest to control the foot’s natural propensity for eccentric misbehaviour.”

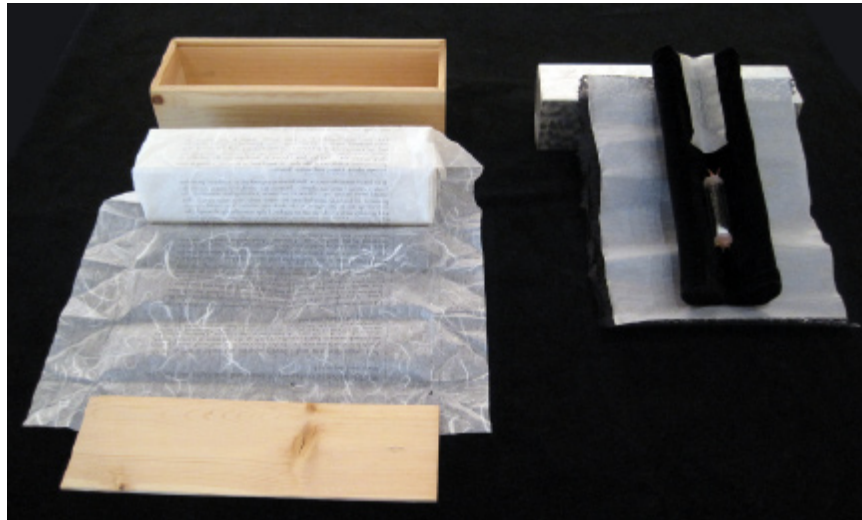
The author seems to want to both reveal chicanery and revel in it. Is this text a jab at psychoanalysis, at the artist’s own craft? The mood in this “book” is a playful longing for the heady days before the era before the specialization and industrialization of science when enthusiastic amateurs could participate in scientific exploration. Each project is giddy with magical thinking, the blending of materialist inquiry with metaphysical possibility. There is a desire throughout to create systems and devices to understand and manipulate the world through its secret nature. It is a delightful conceit.

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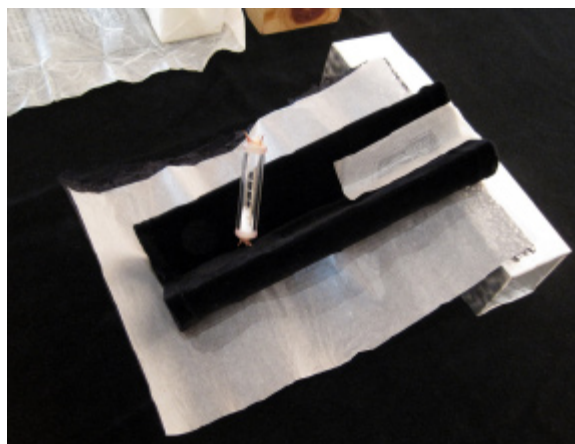
Chapter one of Aqua Aëris, by Lori Rogers and Jennifer Woodbury, is an unfinished pine box (23cm x 7.5cm x 6.5cm) with a sliding lid. It opens to reveal a fragile, translucent tissue paper (63cm x 29cm) surrounding a harder form nestled tightly in the chamber. The paper is unwrapped with great care for fear of tearing it, and of not being able to re-wrap it correctly. The more-durable-than-expected sheet has a long, typed letter/poem that begins: “We live in boxes; containers of desire and loss, light and dark, the body and world.” The reader realizes that he or she is becoming a performer, implicated as a voyeur, breaching privacy as they rummage through this tender space. The voice in the text recalls sharing a suburban home with the person she is addressing this letter/poem—a room mate who’s moved on and missed; an absent lover? The images are homey, finding magic in the mundane.



The tissue covers a rectangular aluminium tube (21cm x 5cm x 5cm) with open ends. Inside is a snugly fitted cylinder wrapped in two layers of paper. The outside layer is a black lace-like paper that protects a white tissue paper, of the same size (25cm x 17cm), which is printed with another poem. It evokes an early morning ocean swim. The swimmer floats alone, but close to others. You have the sense that she is not necessarily lonely—yet her self containment does not exclude desire for companionship. The poem ends with an ambiguous symbol: two cords, one silver one red unwinding yet becoming one. This echoes elegantly with what lies beneath.



Peeling back the sheet reveals a solid cylinder covered with black velvet (20.5cm long; circumference, 14cm). There is a seam. If you press your thumbs into the crack, the magnets release and the tube splits to reveal a tiny item cushioned in the cylinder's softer center. The object is a glass tube (6 cm x 1.5cm). Its ends are capped with wax embedded with four thorns each. Inside is a tiny brass ladder and bit of salt. Around the tube is a tissue (9cm x 4cm) printed with a Renaissance-era woodcut of a supine king and queen who have merged into a single being with separate heads but a shared body. It is an alchemist metaphor called the 'chemical marriage' (see Carl Jung).



This sensuous “book’s” chapters are layers of hard and soft, vaginal and phallic, things within things; metaphors moving from death (pine box), through a personal journey to extra-personal transcendence. Initial images are of being alone, friendship, longing and belonging. There is a paradox of wanting to be contained and to be free, to contain and to release. Throughout are tactile evocations of sexuality. All this eventually gives way to a desire for individuation. At the literal core of the work, in a black chamber—the nigredo that destroys one self so another can emerge—subjectivity and ego is sloughed off in favour of the Mysterium Coniunctionis, the marriage of seeming opposites (Aqua Aëris/water and air), the resolution of dualities required (by alchemy) before a final transcendent stage; here figured in the thorny vessel that shelters salt (a preservative) and a ladder, which may symbolize the transition to another plane—or at least the desire to do so.

It is impossible to describe the great wealth of possibilities embodied by artist books. Each project is unique and worthy of consideration as works of art. I hope this modest consideration of these three volumes will encourage you to take time with the remaining members of this exhibition.

David Garneau
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