



Laura Davidson, *Three Buildings*, 1995, artists' book, 11" x 14" (photo courtesy of Astra Design Gallery).

VIRGINIA

Bookatecture: Artists' Books and Book Furnishings

Astra Design Gallery, Richmond
May 15 - June 20

For this exhibition which explores the relationship of the book to architectural form and space, well-known book artist and curator of book art Carol Barton selected 34 book artists from the United States, Canada, and Italy. Their work was supplemented by the work of 12 sculptors, architects, and furniture artists who were selected by Louise Ellis, Astra Design's Gallery Director. Participants responded with interpretations and forms that examine both pragmatic and meta-physical significance of the relationships of books, furniture, and architecture.

The domestic space of the house is treated evocatively in Susan Hensel's work and ironically in Miriam Schaer's. Hensel's *My House* is a book with covers made of matboard, putty, toner and paint. The artist's text, set against old photographic images on pages shaped like the outer contours of a house, recounts moments of her childhood. The work has a dreamlike, elegiac quality. Schaer's *Housekeeping*, on the other hand, is a sardonically funny work with a distinct sculptural quality. The book is made from a small girdle or corset painted with red and green acrylic paint; its edges open to reveal small packets filled with tiny plastic dolls, kitchen utensils and household items, all appearing to be votive offerings. Schaer's breastplate-book is a woman's armor and can be thought of architecturally and symbolically as a domestic fortress; it is both a refuge and a trap with its treasure of small objects.

The more conceptual works are reminiscent of 1970s book art, though using laser print technology and finer materials. Barton's *House Dreams*, another work with domestic undertones,

displays an open book with small red text and three brilliantly colored paper models, one of which is a house placed along the center of the open book. The text is made up of different descriptive sentences relating to domestic scenes and landscapes, which do not follow one another in narrative order; the paper models are objects made from an illogical text.

Both Barton and Barbara Tentenbaum share an interest in the potential concrete reality of words. Tentenbaum uses a concrete approach in a work titled *Construction*, which is composed of 50 wooden building blocks painted mauve, off-white, orange, and ochre and of words in a flat black lettering in different sizes and fonts. The block-words can be picked up and arranged to make a structure or to create phrases. The idea behind the book, which brings to mind the practice of the concrete poets, is that words can be objectified.

Angela Lorenz's *Bologna Sample* shows four folded-paper boxes opened at the top and attached to a stiff backing. On the front of each module are descriptions in red type of the artist's perceptions of how light, weather, and time affect the color values and intensities of the facades of Bolognese houses. Inside the four units are small squares of warm colors, similar to sampler sheets found in the paint section of a hardware store or in an artist's paint kit. One is also reminded of Josef Albers' *Interaction of Color*. Lorenz's book is minimalist in its presentation, yet somehow touching in its quotidian and poetic reflections on the facades.

In one of the more compelling works, the sometimes fragile nature of the artist's book plays a key role in the work's conception. K. Hara and K. Kuehm's *Hagorama* is a book about watching a performance of Japanese Noh theater, with its series of evocative backdrops suspended from wooden beams above a box-like stage. Text and delicately colored images are printed on rice paper which transmits light and faint echoes of underlying images. This beautiful work has a haunting quality; its delicate nature forces one to investigate its mysteries slowly and carefully.

Two furniture pieces which are also effective as sculptures are by Tom Chenoweth and Doug Finkel. Both works achieve the meditative presence of books though neither incorporates the book into its design. Chenoweth's *Modern Lectern* is made of steel and glass with its legs formed with triangular struts which support a small glass top. The work is very striking, and asks to be completed as a sculptural object by an open book resting on its top. Doug Finkel's *Library Stairs*, made of cherry and mahogany, is exquisitely crafted and shows the beginning section of a circling wooden staircase. Finkel's work is reminiscent of a 19th-century American library perhaps one designed by H.H. Richardson for a small New England town.

Myron Helfgott's *In Black and White* is dryly humorous. A group of wide-angle colored photographs are horizontally set in two wooden panels painted black and white. The pictures show library aisles with rows of large, brightly colored bound volumes in orange, green, blue and red. The books are like modular units, very sculptural and architectural in their shape and size yet minimalist in their sameness of scale. While there is a sense of play here, the artist's formalist interests in these objects and in their escape from textuality is also evident.

Dawn Latané, Richmond

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