



Art

Reading Between the Lines

Astra's latest exhibition proves you can't judge a book by its cover.

by Paulette Roberts-Pullen

In his book "The Museum," artist Larry Thomas' pages unfold to create a succession of art-gallery rooms in miniature. Erecting the spaces by turning pages and visually "traveling" the series of rooms, the reader discovers some fundamental parallels between the structure and content of books and architecture. Astra Design's current book art exhibition "Bookatecture" addresses both structural and conceptual connections with a range of book formats and a few furniture pieces. The books are the stars here, evoking experience and memory. Peter Thomas' text and imagery on two scrolls in "Architectural Concepts" stand vertically to literally support a wood lintel; the New York skyline emerges from Dick Kruger's boxlike binding. Diversity in form and concepts make this show both engaging and enlightening. The most complex books involve intricate cuts, folds, printing and bindings. Several capture a primary relationship of people to architecture — the home — with great success. Susan Hensel binds her book, "My House," in a house-shaped cover sculpted in a bas-relief. Printed on house-shaped pages are text and images of the artist's memories that build on each other as pages are turned. Hensel effectively translates the house that she recalls, obviously the container of more than physical objects in her mind, by designing each page to lead the reader through space and time. With her honest and intimate memoir, she makes instant contact with readers who have had similar experiences.

Lise Melhorn-Boe's "Once Upon a House" also deals with the domestic scene, but here the artist pushes the pages to do double duty, designing pop-ups to recreate stairs and other house features. A collage of paint, pencil and color photocopies, the artist's rendering of the house is an ideal but outdated stereotype that emphasizes the chasm between reality and our nostalgic image of domesticity. "Domestic Science" by Joan M. Soppe, a book and accompanying accessory objects bound within an actual brassiere, covers nostalgia for the days when women stayed home to clean, cook and tend to children. The book inside, apparently a guide to housekeeping comically altered and annotated, rests inside the garment like a body within a silk-lined coffin. Soppe's interpretation of container versus what is contained provides plenty of humorous metaphors for women in the home today.

Hara and Kuehn's "Hagoromo" offers an unexpected but fitting relationship of books and reading to theater, specifically to the Japanese Noh theater, in which a series of backdrops are suspended from beams above a simple platform stage. "Hagoromo" is both a play and a book, realized by turning delicate pages draped above a small version of a Noh Theater. The artists twist the conventional front-to-back reading of a book by layering delicate text and images on rice paper that transmit separate or overlapping messages, depending on how the pages are viewed. "Hagoromo" is not entirely successful as a book; it is awkward and a little too delicate to operate, but it reveals to the viewer/reader yet another correlation of books to architecture, and underscores the intimate relationship unique to books and readers. S

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