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## Good Books

### Susan Hensel's handmade books tell the story with a slippery, mystical edge

By Chuck Twardy



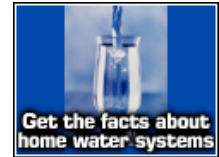
"The Gift"

Photograph by Keith Shimada

The handmade book, that abiding assertion of craft over mechanics, has been a haven for artists in recent years. For some, books are an outlet for polemics, or for conceptualist shenanigans, for others they offer a chance to explore papermaking and print processes. This latter group, it seems, most often turns out work both precious and personal—delicately wrought and soulfully expressive, visually and verbally.

Michigan artist Susan Hensel, whose handmade-book exhibition, *A Way With Words*, continues through August 24 at the Charleston Heights Arts Center Gallery, is in this camp. A biographical sketch in the gallery explains that she forsook ceramics for papermaking, and you can imagine the exchange of mute dirt for eloquent sheaves, relatively speaking. Not that you can't be expressive in clay; but expression is the point of paper, and in turn of books. Hensel uses them to articulate autobiography, social ideals and Christian mysticism. You can read her limited editions using the gloves provided.

In one text, she takes a gentle swipe at "fundamentalists," and it's clear her religiosity is anchored not in biblical inerrancy but in the fluid dynamics of sacred metaphor, the quicksilver meanings of the essential Christian story. The first-person narrator of the book *First Sight* speaks of struggling progress in shifting sand, apt allegory both of life's march and of the quest for sacred meaning, firm ground for



faith. A small volume nestled into a sand-dune diorama, *First Sight* relates a narrative about meeting a Christ-like figure on the beach who speaks of humankind's ruinous stewardship of the Earth. (The beachcomber is left "agape," a fine pun; "Ah-ga-pay" is sacred love.) Flip the last page and you reveal a glass-covered tomb, of sorts, a dead fledgling in a sandy landscape of trash.

Elsewhere, Hensel's mysticism takes the shape of *Creation*, a simple volume, bound in standard wheat-colored cloth, whose folio leaves fold out to disclose a story in a Celtic font and loose line drawings about a woman bearing a son. Or it might yield the accordion leaves of *Whispers*, with two stylized faces growing larger as a text surveys God's spirit investing the universe.

Hensel also makes what she calls "narrative sculpture" and "literary sculpture" (find out more at [www.susanhenseldesign.com/index.html](http://www.susanhenseldesign.com/index.html)). An installation in the center of the gallery perhaps qualifies as the former, using that pre-literate "book," the fold-out, triptych altar panel. Only Hensel spreads one image across all three panels, that of the Virgin Mary pulling a string of pearls from her bosom, and a sacramental cloth of burgundy relates, simultaneously in biblical and modern prose, the essence of physical sacrifice Mary both endures and embraces.

Not all is mysticism here, though. Hensel takes a political turn in *Responsive Prayer in the Imminence of War*, whose leaves fold out a gothic window with a litany that concludes, "Preserve us from the madness of ourselves." And a variety of other works are mostly secular in intent, such as *George's Banana*, a whimsical tale of a man and a fruit, or the richly constructed *Stamp Album*, which examines postage stamps as emblems of government repression. *Cliches* offers a Victorian-flavored sequence of visual juxtapositions explained at the end; a house half-built is a "halfway house," for example.

Clearly, Hensel has a touch for both the visual and the verbal. In *My House*, Hensel pens a rich reminiscence of a childhood home, down to the area by a side door "always dappled dark and loamy." Too often, artist book-binders fail the literary test. (Hey, if you can be a "performer," why can't you be a "writer," too?) Hensel's no Hemingway, as they say, but she can write with grace.

The thing about books is that what's between the covers matters.

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*Muy No Mas*: Closing last week's column, I unilaterally redefined a Spanish word. *Muy*, of course, means "very." Apologies to Spanish-speakers everywhere.

*Chuck Twardy* has written about art and architecture for several daily newspapers and for magazines such as *Metropolis*.

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