

The Art of the Artist's Book

Oakland University Art Gallery

January 8 – April 4, 2010

Artists' books, produced as an ancillary form are often more privately subversive than an artist's primary oeuvre. This is because they are not generally meant for public scrutiny. Their scale and personal nature makes them the exclusive domain of one pair of eyes at a time. With works by more than thirty artists, including Matthew Barney, Anthony Caro, R.B. Kitaj, Donald Lipski, Kiki Smith, and Kara Walker, this survey, chiefly of one-of-a-kind books, features contemporary artists' books from the last two decades, a time when the artist's book has come of age. Books by artists are no longer viewed as eccentric oddities; they are a genre all their own.

The innate feeling of privacy encompassed by an artist's bookwork, whether documentarian or sculptural, encourages secrecy and exclusivity in both form and content. Artists' books are not made with the idea that they will be promulgated, opened up and unbound for all to see. Neither, like a singular work of art, can they be digested all at once. They are embedded in sequential disclosure, manifest in visual evidence that builds-up and accrues from the first leaf to the last. Their inner workings operate accumulatively in a way that a monolithic artwork cannot. Hidden within its covers, an artist's book is akin to a non-digital time-based medium with a beginning, middle and an end. This does not imply that such books are exclusively narrative devices, far from it. Each page's accumulation of data and sculptural materiality ultimately constructs a complex, fully realized, unique work of art.

The book form as a work of visual art, iterated and historicized during the 1970s and 80s, finds its roots in seminal 19th century works like *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, 1804-1820, by William Blake and Édouard Manet's book illustrations such as those for Stéphane Mallarmé's *L'Après midi d'un faune*, 1876. Initially, artists merely inserted prints into particular texts. Eventually this became a means of encapsulating multiple prints (something more substantial than a suite of prints) into a book format. It is from this that various genres of artist's books have evolved.

The development of artist-made books suggests distinct trajectories of expression that have tended to operate within discrete disciplinary factions. There exist artists of a certain eminence, for example Kara Walker, who collaborate with printers and bookbinders that then translate their work into "deluxe book" editions. In contrast there are purists, like Lynn Avadenka, whose immaculately crafted editions are the result of mastery in printing, typography, and bookbinding techniques. Then there are appropriators, Michael E. Smith for example, who deconstruct the physical configuration of an extant object (in this case a

telephone book); the object in their hands becomes a transitional and transformative device. Similarly, Jill Sylvia, cuts into ledgers pages, which become form and fodder for her own conceptual ends. Another antonymous group of book-art makers, like Ed Fraga for example, are those that make one-of-kind books. They may do it sporadically, only once or repeatedly. The majority of the artists in this exhibition fall into this category. Their works are particularly vulnerable and preservation could be compromised if repeatedly handled, but paradoxically their perusal requires such interaction. Finally, there are sculptors like Sir Anthony Caro and Donald Lipski who make three-dimensional works that use books or allude to them either metonymically or conceptually. However, whether typographical purists, casual interlopers or book transformers, the one thing that unites these artists is the book.

Hierarchically, one-of-a-kind artists' books cannot possess the iconic grandeur, scale and mass appeal of more singular works of art. Unlike paintings and sculptures they are generally not reproduced. Spending much time shelved and out of the light, each time they are handled their stored potency from being so long-archived reemerges. Nevertheless, an artists' book can easily be compared to a painting hanging in a museum. Due to potential overexposure, the ubiquity of well-known works of art in national museums might bring into question the authenticity of their so-called aura. Hyper-popular works, ravaged by a hundred million eyes, have become so commonplace a part of our cultural currency that they squarely satisfy particular egalitarian agendas — that of an artwork's need to be emancipated from its entrenchment in the magical (bourgeois) aura of its own unique (corrupt) authenticity. Walter Benjamin inferred that only little-known, little-seen works of art like those in obscure private collections could retain this pejoratively perceived aura. Artists' books are therefore problematic in the sense that they evade such mass appeal. They are chiefly seen and handled by collectors and curators. Their conversion into the realm of mass culture is almost impossible, which makes this exhibition all the more valuable; it is an exploration into a realm of intrinsically exclusive and private material.

For this very reason, artists' books present challenges to curators. They cannot be easily physically shared. They are too fragile and rare and pose security risks if not under glass. Everything about their exclusive materiality appears elitist. This exhibition attempts to dismiss this reputation for exclusiveness and share, open-up, and reveal the unique intimacy, vision and aesthetic value of an artist's book.

The artist's book in the first decade of the 21st century is a fertile incubator of the cultural zeitgeist, especially now with a dawdling distressed art market and dwindling revenues for art and culture in general. Grandiose art forms — stainless steel dogs and diamond-studded platinum skulls — are the works of merchant-venturers whose capital has imploded. Conversely, a book is a seminal form: a source, an archive, a plan, a vision - a starting point — a thing to be held and cherished and a good vane from which to assess cultural currency under relatively modest circumstances. To travel in books, to make art between the covers, is to speak one's mind with a sense of privacy and immunity.

Dick Goody, January 2010

EXHIBITION

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January 8 – April 4, 2010

Artists:

Lynne Avadenka

Matthew Barney

IAIN BAXTER&

Christian Boltanski

Susan Goethel

Campbell

Sir Antony Caro

Vija Celmins

Ed Fraga

Jane Hammond

Chido Johnson

Dennis Michael Jones

R. B. Kitaj

David Lambert

Ronald Allen Leax

Donald Lipski

Sabrina Nelson

Kathleen McShane

Eric Mesko

Matthew Shlian

Kiki Smith

Michael E. Smith

Jill Sylvia

Stella Waitzkin

Kara Walker

Peter Williamns



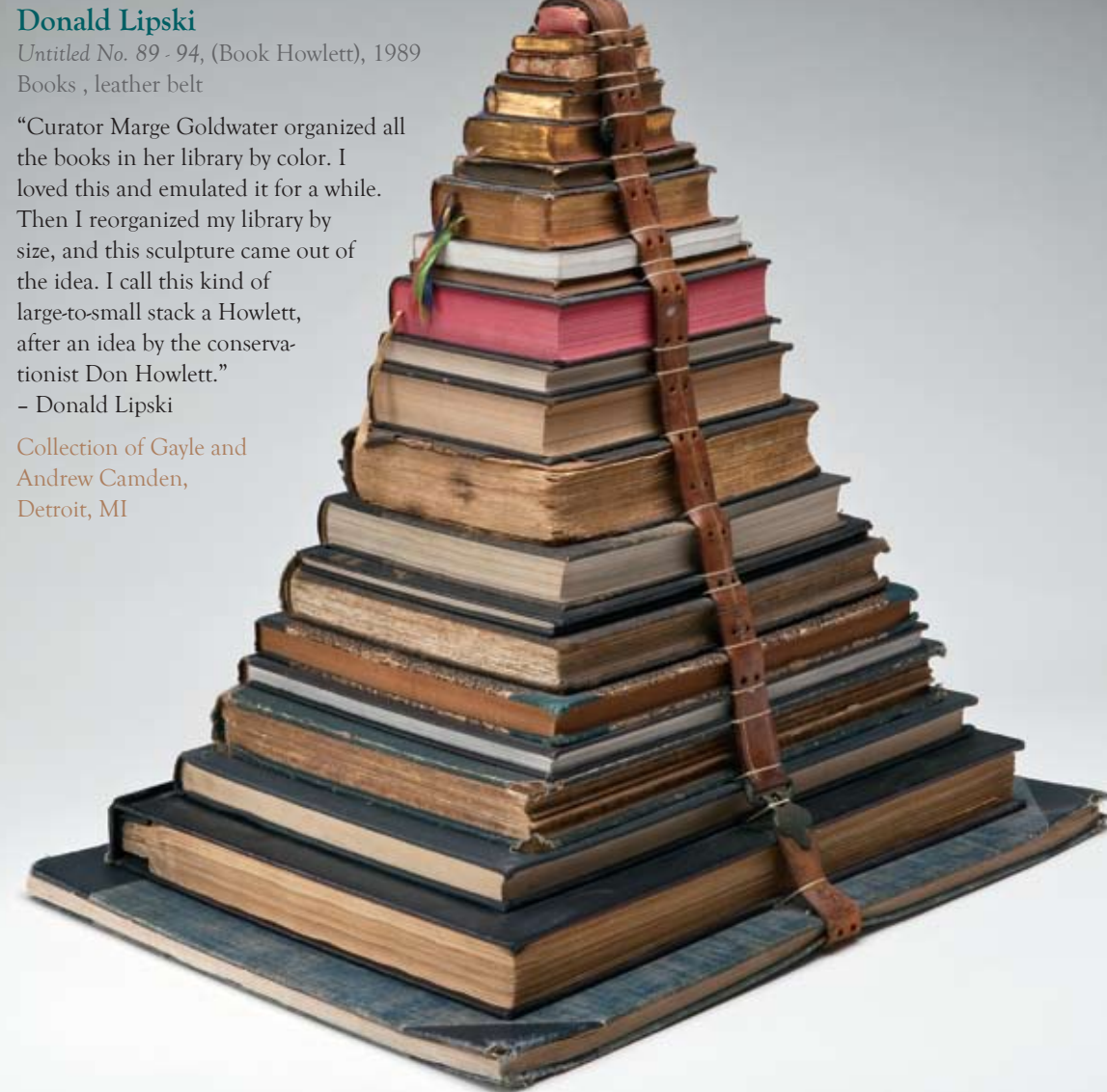
Sir Antony Caro

Little Bean Book, 1995-1997

Steel, wood, clay

This sculpture, *Little Bean Book*, is from a series of books created from 1995-1997. The ceramic elements were made in the studio of Hans Spinner while the steel and occasional brass or wood elements were retrofitted in Caro's London studio.

Collection of The Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art



Donald Lipski

Untitled No. 89 - 94, (Book Howlett), 1989

Books, leather belt

"Curator Marge Goldwater organized all the books in her library by color. I loved this and emulated it for a while. Then I reorganized my library by size, and this sculpture came out of the idea. I call this kind of large-to-small stack a Howlett, after an idea by the conservationist Don Howlett."

– Donald Lipski

Collection of Gayle and Andrew Camden, Detroit, MI



Kara Walker

Freedom: A Fable, 1997

Pop-up book

This concise work condenses Walker's monumental silhouette panoramas into an intimate book format. Her politically charged cut-outs explore identity and American history through the lens of folklore, Hollywood revisionism and contemporary postcolonial theory as it relates to racism, sexism and hate crimes.

Collection of Marc Schwartz



Ronald Allen Leax

Ontological Fragment (Tsunami), 1990

Porcelain pan, child's science book, salt and laundry bluing

Ontology is the theory and study of existence. For one year, Ronald Allen Leax collected over 800 objects, which would later comprise his Ontological Library. The artist has stated that: "The library was about trying to merge some kind of ontological experience (the activity of being) with the epistemological (how we know what we know)." In this quasi-scientific work, Leax initially stood a used book in brine. Evaporation left a residue of salt crystals, bringing the temporal nature of the physical world and our gradual accumulated knowledge of its existence into focus.

Collection of the Cranbrook Art Museum

Michael E. Smith

Untitled, 2008

Connecticut telephone book

The artist states:

people as a city as a book as pillow or bowl – empty and full

a collection of names/people/places that i drowned in a tray of water, until bloated and glue grey grotesque - then dried 'em out slowly and formed them to fit my head for rest to twist things, warp them till they bend into places they don't fit – forced fit/ like when you're loosing your mind and you just keep muttering and moving and doing because if you stop what then

Courtesy of the artist and Koch

Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin, Germany



Jill Sylvia

Yellowbook, 2008

Cut ledger paper

Jill Sylvia's *Yellowbook*, is hand cut ledger paper, dissected with a single-edged razor blade at a rate of one sheet per day for one month, two columns per day for 36 days, one month's budget in four days, one sheet in one month. She states: "I involve myself in this routine of trying to make time (and labor) palpable while communicating its loss."

Collection of The Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art



Susan Goethel Campbell

HUB, 2000

Mixed media, magnetic sheeting

This is one of three works about the layout, growth, and decline of cities and suburbs. Shaped like a worn brick and opening from a crack in the center once the title page is removed, *HUB* documents photographically, a building implosion in downtown Detroit, Michigan. The book is inspired by the loss of population in large industrial cities like Detroit and the numerous derelict buildings that are left behind. The eleven split, double-page images can be slid open to reveal how the immense cloud of dust moves outward along the ground plane or the pages can be separated for a sequential viewing of the implosion.

Courtesy of the artist and Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI

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Essay by Dick Goody

Oakland University Art Gallery
Department of Art and Art History
College of Arts and Sciences
208 Wilson Hall
2200 North Squirrel Road
Rochester, MI 48309-4401
(248) 372-3005
oakland.edu/ouag

Director, Dick Goody

Assistant to the Director & Registrar,
Jacqueline Leow

Designed by Debra Lashbrook
Printed by XXXX

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Oakland University Art Gallery
exhibitions are made possible through
the generous contribution of individuals,
companies and foundations.

This exhibition was made possible in
part by The Kresge Foundation and
the College of Arts and Sciences,
Oakland University.

Acknowledgements

Oakland University Art Gallery would like to thank lenders to this exhibition: Gayle and Andrew Camden, Detroit, MI, the Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI, The Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI, Koch Oberhuber Wolff, Berlin, Germany, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI, and Marc Schwartz, Birmingham, MI. Special thanks to Ed Fraga for his curatorial assistance and especially for his help in securing the loans for this exhibition, and many thanks to Chido Johnson for initiating his collaborative book project, LTALB, and premiering at OUAG. And, of course, we express our gratitude to all the exhibiting artists.

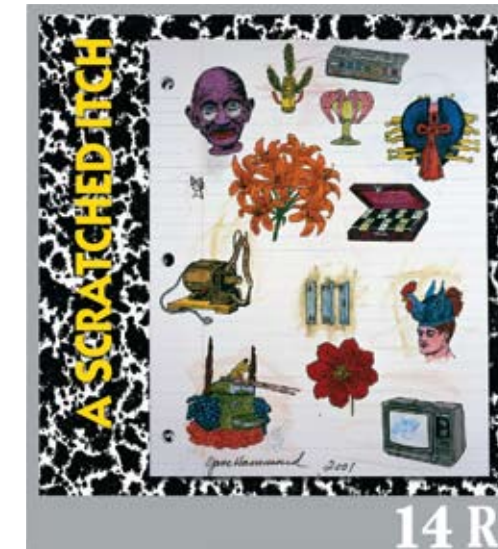


Ed Fraga

The Book of Experience - Found, 2007
Oil on paper and mixed media

"The Book of Experience Found" is one of a two part book series created between 2006 - 07 which explores sexual awakening and lost innocence. The works were inspired by the poetry of William Blake's, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. "I bought a box of ladies powder in Italy with an image of a child pouring powder over a woman's torso (perhaps the child's mother). I called this page of the book *Oedipus* because of the obvious sexual tension the image suggests. This image became the seed of the idea for the book". — Ed Fraga

Courtesy of the artist and Lemberg Gallery,
Ferndale, MI

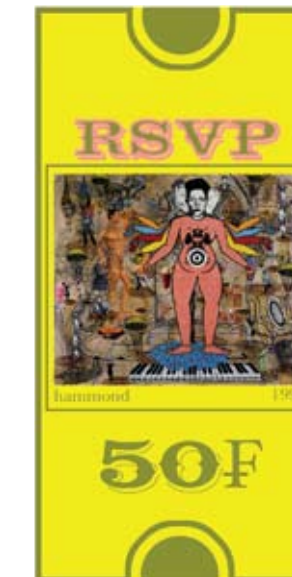


Jane Hammond

Stamp Book, 2004-05
Archival digital inkjet print on paper, bookboard, cotton thread and silk bookcloth

Jane Hammond's *Stamp Book* is an exercise in miniaturization. The product of an ongoing collaboration between Hammond and the poet John Ashbery, *Stamp Book* comprises 64 images inspired by the postage stamps of Monaco and based on the artist's own large-scale oil paintings. Ashbery's contributions are not whole poems but titles, which are sometimes incorporated as text into the stamps themselves. The stamps are digitally printed using archival ink, and the book is hand-bound.

Courtesy of Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan



Lynne Avadenka

Futile Beauty, 2009
Accordion book, powdered graphite, pencil

The symbols that make up the Roman alphabet are here translated to another series of symbols (ovals, ellipses) that spell out a passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes: "One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever. The sun rises and the sun sets and glides back to where it rises. Southward blowing, turning northward, ever turning blows the wind. On its rounds the wind returns. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place from which they flow the streams flow back again."

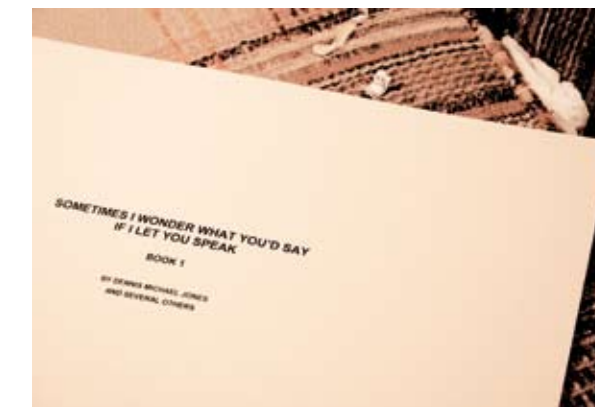
Courtesy of the artist and Lemberg Gallery,
Ferndale, MI

Dennis Jones

American, b. 1959
Sometimes I wonder what you'd say if I let you speak, 2009
50 books, bookshelves, ground coffee, coffee maker and mugs, area rug, recliner, table and lamp

This installation of fifty books/documents consists of 1000 photo copied, 11"x 14", charcoal text drawings, each beginning with the word "sometimes."

Artist's collection



Chido Johnson

Let's talk about love baby,
2009
Modified romance
novels, bookcase

Have you ever read a romance novel? In this project, I will be acting as the librarian for a collection of romance novels. Each book is individually fabricated by a select group of artists based on my admiration and respect for them. In return, they too invited one artist under the same context.

The premise of the romance novel is always the same. A man and a woman meet; they hate each other, but are forced due to circumstance to live and spend time together. Inevitably they fall in love and eventually live happily ever after.

In this project, each artist's interpretation of "love" is concealed and superficially homogenized under the guise of romance novels installed on a bookshelf.

The viewer is encouraged to participate by flipping through the catalogue, picking a book, sitting on a provided comfortable chair and immersing themselves with the object of affection. These objects are united in the most beautiful, yet complex and so easily misunderstood thing called love.

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Kathleen McShane

Hodgkin Book, 2009
Paint, papier-mâché and collage.

This is a sculpture of a closed book, in tribute to the artist Howard Hodgkin's "memory frame" paintings. The color bars from the collage images of books and the painted lines balance a sense of fixity in the ordered books and a sense of flow in the painted marks. They are both repositories of memory.

Artist's collection