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Imprint Review

2nd Australian Artists' Books Forum
25 February 2005

Artspace Mackay (Venue: Mackay Entertainment Centre)

In many regional areas, public galleries have restricted their collection policies to artworks with a strong connection to the local area. A more enlightened outlook has been adopted by Artspace Mackay. The decision to specialise mainly in artists' books produced by artists Australia-wide ensures that the collection represents the very best of current Australian arts practice. It has also meant that the gallery has been able to position itself as an innovative force and, in a relatively short time, carve a niche for itself in the north of Queensland.

Several individuals in Queensland have championed the artists' book genre for some years now, including staff at the James Hardy Library in Brisbane. Noreen Grahame from Grahame Galleries + Editions, Brisbane, has long held an avid interest in artists' books and for several years organised the Artists' Book + Multiples Fair. She was influential in the Mackay City Council's decision to include artists' books in its collection policy. Initially these were collected by the Library but just a few years later, the collection acquired a new home in Artspace Mackay under gallery director Robert Heather, who is providing a very strong focus for this special form of art.



Artspace Mackay is an award winning building designed by Cox Rayner Architects. Situated on a main thoroughfare, close to the city centre, it is a striking contemporary building that is very much a part of the social life of the Mackay township. Built quite close to the road, it has a strong presence and even a tourist strange to the area would be quite hard pressed to miss it.

For the past two years, Artspace Mackay has organised an annual forum, which includes a conference, informal displays and exhibitions, plus masterclasses. The 2005 forum, held earlier this year, attracted 130 delegates. The 5-day program included advanced workshops on printmaking, bookbinding and papermaking with leading artists from around Australia. The one-day conference held on Friday 25 February was the main event. Speakers included artists, curators and researchers who spoke on topics covering the history of the artist's book, its place in contemporary art and the influences of computer generated imagery. The difficulties in defining the term 'artist's book', the problems associated with exhibiting, and the need for research and accessible data were recurring themes in many of the papers.

In the very first session, Stephen Spurrier (Ugg Boot Press), artist and Lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba, asked: How precious is the artist's book? Although Stephen ensures for the most part that his artwork is durable, he also likes the idea of disposable books, which, in his view, should be ephemeral give-aways. Stephen and Alex Selenitsch, artist and Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Architecture, University of Melbourne, spent much of the conference at a side table, putting together art pieces from Mackay litter, inviting others to join in the collaborative efforts.

Alex Selenitsch, the second speaker for the day, outlined his experience during a two-week sojourn in the Australian Prints and Drawings Department at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra as the 2001 recipient of the Gordon Darling Foundation Fellowship. After exhaustive examination of over 500 items in the collection, from the 1950s up to 2000, Alex identified several phases: early experimental, highly political work in the 1970s including stencilled, photocopied and offset printing work; in the 80s the limited edition became more prevalent, whereas in the latest work, story telling seems to have taken over. Alex stressed that these themes he noticed at the NGA may not necessarily hold true for the overall development of artists' books.

The visual delights of 15th and 16th century manuscripts at the NGV International were introduced to the audience by Alisa Bunbury. She also mentioned the Gallery's dilemma in making extremely fragile work available for public access. One solution that has been mooted is to make images available on a touch screen, where virtual 'pages' can be turned. This suggestion did not meet with much audience enthusiasm. It has been trialled overseas but has not been popular.

Anne Kirker, from the Queensland Art Gallery focused on the Fluxus art movement of the 60s and their published multiples, discussing both the Fluxus editions and the New York Publishing house, Something Else Press, as complementary components.

A paper by Ross Woodrow from the University of Newcastle outlined the technical and theoretical issues associated with converting material images into digital formats. Although

digital translation does much to assist further scholarship of rare books and manuscripts, even Ross feels the direct translation of book to screen isn't satisfactory, and is in fact a very sad replication of the original. From the audience's reaction, it would seem that most conference participants agreed!

The final speaker, Linda Caroli, a Brisbane-based writer, is currently researching text-based artistic practises. She suggested that new media has in fact re-emphasised the book and has led, in practise at least, to much re-definition. In theoretical terms though, and nearly every speaker emphasised this, a succinct definition for artists' books is elusory. Caroli believes that a definition that describes work tendencies and processes is far more helpful.

As well as the informal displays at the Forum, there were also two excellent exhibitions in the gallery: 'How I entered there I cannot truly say' Collaborative works from the Editions + Artist Book Studio based at the National University School of Art in Canberra; and 'Covered, recovered', a survey exhibition of sculptural and collaborative artists' books by Wim de Vos and Adele Outteridge. Accompanying exhibition talks added much to the overall experience, as artists informed their audience of the ways the ideas for the books developed. For instance, Martin King described how his diary became the art piece and how satisfying it was to play with cerebral notions in a 3D format.

It is a cliché to say that an event provided something for everyone. It is true however, that the 2nd Artists' Books Forum provided interest at many levels, and indeed it comes highly recommended. The event stimulated critical debate yet left some things unresolved: defining the term 'artists' book', the difficulties associated with exhibiting artists' books, and the need for additional research. Extra discussion could 'tease out' these issues. Food for thought for next year!

Gwenda Flintoff, Print Council of Australia Administrator