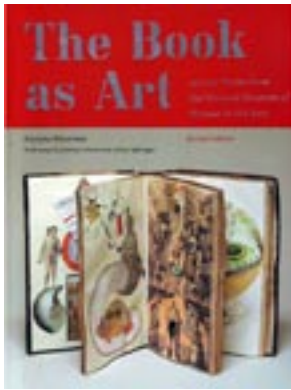


## Book Reviews



### The Book as Art: Artists' Books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2nd ed.

By *Krystyna Wasserman*, with essays by *Johanna Drucker* and *Audrey Niffenegger* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2011, \$39.95)

IT'S BEEN FIVE YEARS since Princeton Architectural Press published *The Book as Art: Artists' Books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts* (2007). The book coincided with a major exhibition of some of the more than 800 artists' books in the museum's collection, painstakingly assembled by Krystyna Wasserman during her tenure as director of the museum's library and research centre from 1987 to 2002. A second, paperback edition has now been issued to commemorate the museum's 25th anniversary and to reflect the growth of the collection to over 1,000 artists' books.

As with the first edition, this beautiful and carefully produced book is introduced with a series of essays by the book artist Audrey Niffenegger; the book artist, scholar and professor Johanna Drucker; and Krystyna Wasserman, currently the museum's curator of book arts. It also features a new foreword by Susan Fisher Sterling, the current director of the museum.

Twelve additional books were included in this edition, which presents a total of 120 artists' books representing an incredibly diverse range of structures, forms, content and use of materials—indeed, many interpretations of what constitutes a book.

The artists' books are organized around nine themes: Storytellers; Histories; Nature; Food and the Body; Autobiographers; Dreams and Magicians; Mothers, Wives and Daughters; Travelers; and Inspired by the Muses. Techniques and materials are well represented: etching, lithography, photography, woodcuts, graphite, oil sticks and pastels, to name only a few. There is also a panoply of supporting materials—handmade paper, flattened pop cans, acetate, pulped and tinted cardboard, for instance—and a diversity of bookbinding structures, including the traditional codex, accordion- and concertina-fold books, flag books, scrolls, venetian blind structures, altered books and sculpted books.

All of the books I found intriguing; however, particularly captivating was Elena Prosser's *Unfinished Symphony*. At 39 by 29 inches, the book is large, as is its subject, the *Unfinished Symphony* of Franz Schubert. In place of words, tiny squares of sheet music and coloured images shimmer on oceans of silvery sheets covered with finely done calligraphic markings.

The books of Karen Kunc similarly drew me, with their distinctive palette of clear colours that glow and pull the viewer in; even the deep blues and greens have a magnetic intensity. The colours, together with Kunc's personal vocabulary of lines, shadings and shapes both positive and negative, suggest above all a profound happiness and a sense of spiritual peace.

Elizabeth McKee's *For Immediate Release* made me want to go out and make my own walnut ink. And Elisabetta Gut's representation of the firebird in her book *L'Uccello di fuoco (Da Stravinsky)* exploded on the border between book and sculpture!

*The Book as Art* is remarkable both for its photographs and for the accompanying texts; the inclusion of a statement by the artist herself for each of the books contributes to the intimate feel of this publication, adding another dimension to our understanding of the books and their creators.

Although the photographs in this book are very good and in some cases show more than one view of a book, they leave unexplained many aspects of each piece—how the books were actually constructed, for instance, or how the text might have been printed onto the papers. In some cases, the text that was visible was too small to read comfortably, if at all.

For a while the NMWA was able to somewhat address this limitation on its website: several of

the artists' books included here could be accessed in a virtual display that included a page-turning device, permitting curious readers to peer inside the books. It was a pleasant surprise, for instance, to be able to see that the pop-up structures in Carol Barton's *Five Luminous Towers*, about various towers she visited during a trip to Italy, are echoed in the pages between the tower pop-ups: the explanatory texts about each of the towers sit on their own little pop-up plateaus.

The virtual display also included a zoom feature that enabled the reader to examine small (too small!) portions of each page in greater detail. Unfortunately, this virtual display has now been discontinued on the NMWA website.

This is a well-produced and affordable book of compelling examples of artists' books in the collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts. One hopes that the museum will continue to thrive and to collect further examples of artists' books that increasingly reflect the artistic sensitivities and cultural diversity of women.

These glimpses of the museum's collection made me wish, if not for a trip to Washington, DC, then at least for a touring exhibition of some of the books; in my case, a tour stop somewhere in the Pacific Northwest would be handy. Treat yourself: buy a copy of this book and prepare to spend hours curled up in contemplation of the imaginative world each of these wonderful books represents.

Reviewed by *Gina Page*

## 111 West Coast Literary Portraits

By various authors. Introduction by *Alan Twigg*. Photographs by *Barry Peterson* and *Blaise Enright*. (Mother Tongue Publishing, 2012, \$48)

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT TIME, and it took time to make.

The story began 15 years ago when the earliest photograph was taken as part of a five-year collaboration between Barry Peterson and Blaise Enright. With guidance from *BC BookWorld* publisher Alan Twigg, the duo travelled the West Coast and Gulf Islands seeking writers in their natural habitats: a living-room corner, a woodpile,

a greenhouse, even a bathtub. They shot more than 60 black-and-white portraits and evolved an art quite different from routine studio photography—more revealing of the characters behind the written word. The photographs became part of *Lit Happens*, a travelling exhibition that criss-crossed B.C. between 1999 and 2008.

When their artistic and personal collaboration ended in 2002, Peterson continued to photograph B.C. writers, with the intention of creating a photographic archive of B.C. literature. But who should publish the record? Mona Fertig and Peter Haase of what was then Mother Tongue Press saw the book as an impressive project that should be handled by an outfit with greater capabilities than their letterpress studio. But as time passed, Fertig and Haase established Mother Tongue Publishing, a trade publisher with a mandate to produce quality art books with a West Coast connection. And so the book, like the travelling exhibit of *Lit*, happened.

Peterson was patient, however, having honed his discipline in the darkroom.

The photos for *111 West Coast Literary Portraits* were primarily taken with a Hasselblad camera with Carl Zeiss lenses—"the best in the world," he says. The film was hand-processed to ensure the highest possible quality. From a negative selected by the author, Peterson developed archival fibre-based photographic prints, a time-consuming process that is used very rarely in what he calls "this instantaneous and impermanent" digital age.

In a darkroom built in his basement, he took all the time and effort required to achieve the envisioned result. He explains: "Film photographs have a depth to them that digital can't duplicate. Digital images are printed flat on paper, and film images are printed on layers of emulsion within the paper. Film and fibre-based prints have been around for 186 years, and many of the first prints are still around—and that was before they knew how to archivally process prints."

MTP has showcased the photographs in a fit manner, giving each writer two facing pages, one for the photograph and one for a minimal text set in Jim Rimmer's Amethyst Pro. The images range from elegiac (Al Purdy, P.K. Page) to cheeky (Linda Rogers, Gregory Scofield), and they include some historians and journalists as well as the expected poets and novelists.

A few of the writers, like Alice Munro, who graces the front cover, enjoy international