

## *Art Made from Books: Altered, Sculpted, Carved, Transformed*

COMPILED BY LAURA HEYENGA  
(CHRONICLE BOOKS, 2013, \$27.50)



*Art Made from Books* introduces us to 27 artists whose medium is the physical book. Wielding X-Acto knives, rotary cutters, tweezers, pliers and files, they meticulously and obsessively reclaim unwanted books and “lovingly vandalize” them back to life.

Some of these bookworks, such as Thomas Allen’s *Phantom Tollbooth* or Su Blackwell’s *Last Unicorn*, resemble elaborate versions of children’s pop-up books, “an engaging way to illustrate the wonder of reading.” In others, the original narrative may provide both inspiration and fabric, or it may be transformed into a medium for something completely different.

Jennifer Collier makes *Cook Book Ballet Slippers*, *Curly Locks Gloves* and *Ladybird Book Baby Shoes*. Jeremy May crafts a ring and its jewel box from a single volume. Pablo Lehmann cuts pages, words and individual letters to create mesmerizing and labyrinthine forms, inviting the reader to “invent new paths of comprehension.” His *Scribe’s House*

is a limited-edition series of Lambda prints of installations from his personal arcane world.

The elegant front-cover image is *Explorer*, an archival pigment print on rag paper of a discarded copy of *The Ultimate World Atlas* transformed by Cara Barer into sculpture and then photographed.

Slighter and more accessible than Garrett Stewart’s *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art*, reviewed in *Amphora* 159 (Winter 2011), which delved into theories and used words such as “demediation,” *Art Made from Books* aims to charm us with objects of possible delectation.

According to artist Susan Porteous, for whom found books are both subject matter and raw material, “books become sensual objects no longer meant to be read from cover to cover, instead seen as an immediate and cohesive whole.” But bookworks inevitably refer to book-related puns and concepts: pulp, cutting pages, stitching, text-tiles, spinning a yarn, twisting a meaning, flights of mind, leaves, layers of meaning. By definition, this art is a tangible form of wordplay.

For artist and bibliophile alike, the destruction of a book is—as Georgia Russell observes in the comments alongside her work—an “emotional experience,” and we need to be convinced that the result is worth the trauma. Reactions can range from enchantment to “Why bother?” as some texts lend themselves all too obviously to the bookworker’s hand.

*Alice in Wonderland* and *Gray’s Anatomy*, for instance, recur in the works of more than one artist. For Kylie Stillman, outdated book volumes fall within a range of recycled materials such as paper stacks, timber, plastic bottles and venetian blinds, for works that may be, as the text suggests, “skillfully crafted,” but to this viewer have little to do with bookwork and could be made of anything.

I bought this book at Type Books in Toronto, a serious store with a witty website. *Art Made from Books* was shelved amidst a tempting selection of gorgeous art books. A few days later in Montreal I encountered the book again at Au Papier Japonais, which caters more to makers than to readers of books. Beside its racks and bins of fine paper, it devotes a corner to books on the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of books. On a shelf crammed with books about bookworks, this was one among many.

So is art made from books a trend? The text refers repeatedly to the possible influence of the Internet and the threatened obsolescence of print, but bookworks are not a new phenomenon—or at least, not merely a reaction to 21st-century technology. Books have been rearranged and distressed for still life paintings as varied as Colantonio’s *St. Jerome in His Study* (1445) and David Hockney’s *Still Life with Book on a Table* (1988).

They have been appropriated to serve as decor in *Architectural Digest*, to hide secret panels in countless mysteries and gothic novels, or—as in the 1956 film *High Society*—to camouflage a bar. As Brian Dettmer notes in the preface, bookwork artists “pull from the past to make something new, the way art always has.”

The book’s binding is itself something of a bookwork, exposing the spine to reveal the signatures and stitching, and reminding us that every book possesses a physical presence.

~ REVIEWED BY PHYLLIS REEVE



Brian Dettmer, *Tower of Babble*, 2012.  
Paperback books, acrylic medium.

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