

REVIEW

A Gathering of Flowers from Shakespeare
By Gerard Brender à Brandis with F. David
Hoeniger (Porcupine's Quill, 2006, \$21.95)
Reviewed by Jim Westergard

When I was asked to write a review of *A Gathering of Flowers from Shakespeare*, I panicked.

Frightening memories of high school English classes came flooding back. "Shakespeare?" I thought. "Oh, no!"

But, to my relief, I was promised that my comments about this book did not have to include an analysis of Shakespeare's writings. I'm forced to admit here that I've never been able to understand Shakespeare without help... lots and lots of help! No fault of Shakespeare's, of that I'm sure. And if I can't understand Shakespeare, it would be true folly for me to review David Hoeniger's interpretations of Shakespeare (which I found very helpful, by the way). My focus here is on the wood engravings of Gerard Brender à Brandis.

I first saw a Gerard Brender à Brandis wood engraving in 1994 at Peter Mortimer-Rae's fine arts gallery on Calgary's 17th Avenue. Peter specialized in prints and wood engravings; sadly, he retired from the gallery business shortly thereafter and nobody stepped in to replace him. I was browsing the gallery, waiting to conclude some business with Peter, when I spotted a stunning little wood engraving of a flower, titled *Stanbopea oculata*. I'm not a gardener, nor do I know anything about flowers or their Latin names, but I think I know a good wood engraving when I see it and this one was good. It was engraved on a square block in a diamond format. It now hangs in our house.

A few months ago I received a notice from The Porcupine's Quill, announcing the release of *A Gathering of Flowers from Shakespeare*, a paperback book that includes reproductions of the wood engravings of Gerard Brender à Brandis. I ordered one for my wife, Carol, who is an avid gardener and an admirer of our Brender à Brandis wood engraving.

I opened the book when it arrived and turned the pages, one after the other, grazing with my eyes. The varied images kept me on my toes. Each wood engraving appeared on the recto, and there was always a pleasant surprise of one sort or another when I moved on to the next one. From page to page, the prints would change in scale and from square to rectangle to elongated rectangle to tondo to elongated triangle and back to

rectangle. The element of shape has power which attracts attention. (My Brender à Brandis wood engraving first caught my attention in the gallery that way with its diamond format.)

With my grazing finished, I settled down to study the reproductions individually.

The first wood engraving in the book, *Sundial at Hall's Croft Garden*, reminded me of gardens I've seen in England, with a gate in a wall behind a sundial. It is a well-chosen image for the beginning of a tour of flower prints. As I moved on, I lingered on each one, roaming over the textures and patterns which had been engraved in the wood's surface. As a wood engraver myself, I appreciate the skill and patience manifested in the intricate and descriptive surfaces in these prints. Then I came to a very small print called *Love-in-idleness*, an intimate little print of pansies in a vertical, long rectangular format. Some portions of the flowers, leaves and stems are cut off by the edge of the rectangle, and the white in the strong negative shapes brings the plant parts forward. This is a good example of the effective use of negative and positive space which Mr. Brender à Brandis handles so well.

I tore myself from *Love-in-idleness* and turned the page to *Titania's Bank of Flowers*, a large rectangle, with multiple flowering images dominating the print space. The many varieties of flowers are presented on a single plane with a minimum of negative space. The print challenged me and invited me to scrutinize the intricate shapes, textures and forms of the different species of flowers. The more I looked the more I found, and I'm sure a gardener who knows flowers would have a field day recognising the various species in this one print alone. An interesting commentary below the print indicates that the print contains blooming flowers which would not naturally bloom at the same time (of course, knowing nothing about flowers, I would never have known that). The commentary includes a reference to "the realm of Oberon, where anything is possible."

I could see echoes in some images of the floral designs of William Morris. *Rosemary and Rue* and *Wormwood*, and to some degree, *Common Mallow*, echo Morris in the rhythms of floral components that set up patterns on a single plane.

As I moved on at my slower pace, studying each print, time slipped by as it does when one is concentrating on something totally engaging. Brender à Brandis' skilful descriptions of the structures of various species of plants and flowers invite close study. Each print is loaded with intricate visual information and captivates the viewer

with a rich interplay of negative and positive space. There are often structures in the prints which, when followed, recall Celtic knots which move in, out and around.

The wood engravings in this book are strong examples of the prints so well known to fans of Brender à Brandis' work and are sure to be a delight to all. The commentaries of Mr. Hoeniger are very helpful and relevant, and they assisted me in understanding the Shakespeare I have feared for so many years.

REVIEW

The Janus Press – 50 Years

By Ruth Fine (University of Vermont
Libraries, 2006, US\$35)

Reviewed by Peter Mitham

Newark, Vermont book artist Claire van Vliet is no stranger to Vancouver. Two years ago, she visited the city to participate in the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design's summer institute on book arts. Among her comments that week, she observed that a broadside should be more than a page from a book; it should be a visual experience in its own right that entices readers to read.

Somewhat appropriately, then, *The Janus Press – 50 Years* offers an enticing design (though nowhere near as complex as some of van Vliet's latest works) and content that entices readers to discover more about this strong-spirited and committed book artist.

Last year, van Vliet's Janus Press marked its fiftieth anniversary and, as the current catalogue of its output by Ruth Fine (a sometime collaborator with the press) indicates, van Vliet continues to renew her creative vision and, often literally, the shape of her oeuvre with complex and dynamic projects that often integrate experimental examples of paper-making, typography and book assembly.

Published to accompany an exhibit of Janus Press publications at the Grolier Club in New York and other institutions, the catalogue includes an overview of van Vliet's career with a particular focus on the interests that have shaped the common threads running through her work. Fine, who previously produced three catalogues of the Janus Press for the years 1955 to 1990, divides the work of Janus and van Vliet into six clusters that reflect van Vliet's progress as an artist. What relationship these bear to the exhibition isn't clear, but the distinctions nevertheless help the reader of the catalogue in achieving greater insight into van Vliet's career.

Fine summarizes van Vliet's multi-faceted role as publisher, creative director and back-office staff at Janus Press in a way that gives new respect for the artist's dual role as both creator and business person. She also drops in biographical details that allow us to see van Vliet in a context shaped by personal circumstances, circumstances that remain discreetly in the background of the narrative.

The heart of the catalogue, in some ways the *raison d'être* of this catalogue raisonné, is an annotated checklist of Janus publications from 1991 to 2005. A three-part index of Janus publications from 1955 through 2005 concludes this 80-page volume.

Viewed as a catalogue raisonné, the checklist is less comprehensive in its description of van Vliet's output than such a catalogue typically is. Replete with descriptive information, the checklist is less than comprehensive when it comes to photos of the titles themselves. It also omits information on the major institutions holding van Vliet's work. The catalogue is closer to being a descriptive bibliography without being one of these, either.

No matter; a wealth of details on the materials, typefaces and production methods used to create each title, and (of course) details on print runs, keeps the reader busy. Illustrations of van Vliet's work appear not on every second page, but near to it, and often in colour. These help make the book as appealing to the eye as to the mind.

The index, arranged according to authors and translators, artists and title, is handy. The three parts reflect the diverse circle of creators van Vliet has drawn around Janus over 50 years, a network that reflects her belief "that all arts ... are interrelated."

Many of van Vliet's recent projects have concerned themselves with feminist and spiritual topics, such as Hildegard von Bingen, *Circulus Sapientiae/Circle of Wisdom* (2001), and a forthcoming edition of the Gnostic Gospel of Mary, translated by Karen King with commentary by the noted theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther. Fine acknowledges these interests, rooting them in van Vliet's past and suggesting that they "signal a new chapter in a long and productive working life." But there is nothing deeper to elaborate the philosophical (even theological) underpinnings of this latest current in van Vliet's work.

The same is true of the other currents Fine notes in van Vliet's work under the Janus imprint, however. Fine maintains a steady focus on the artistic aspects of van Vliet's work, creating a concise and illuminating glimpse of a career that