

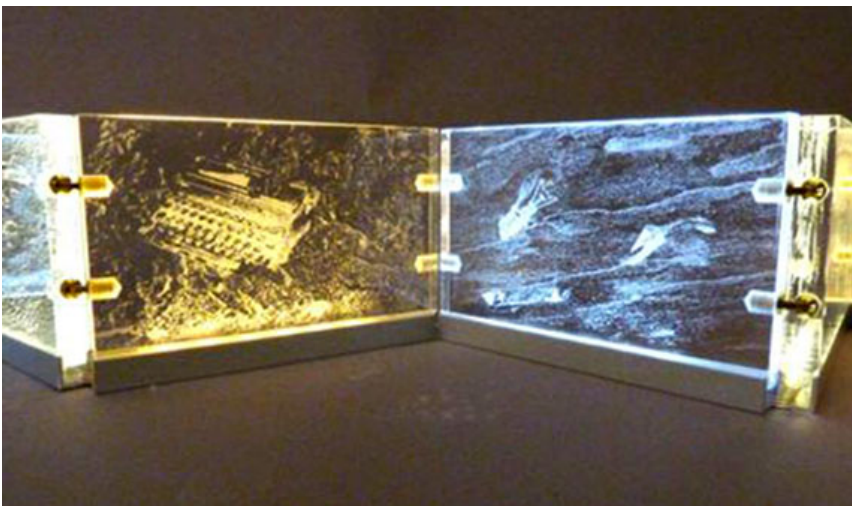
## Art of the Book @ Seager Gray

Posted on 13 May 2014.



Jessica Drenk (detail), *Cerebral Mapping III*, 2012, books, glue, wax, 44 x 126"

A ubiquitous feature of contemporary book art is the preponderance of scalpel-wielding artists who use their virtuosity to turn the contents of books literally inside out in the manner of antiquarian pop-up books. In shows like this, where the bar for inventiveness is set progressively higher with each installment, viewers can easily become inured to such practices. In this, the ninth edition of this event, two artists, Charles Dobson and Vince Koloski, offer fresh alternatives. In the manner of the *New Yorker's* cartoon caption contests, Dobson reproduces images from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and pairs them with rotating vowelles that allow you to read humorous descriptions of the now-arcaic commercial and industrial processes pictured in the originals, published between 1750 and 1770 in Paris. Appropriately, Dobson calls the series *Diderot Decaptioned*.



Vince Koloski, *20th Century Fossil Book*, 2013

My favorite work in this show isn't a book; it's six slabs of semi-transparent limestone shaped into hinged tablets by Vince Koloski and titled *20<sup>th</sup> Century Fossil Book*. These he laser-engraves with images of obsolete tools (safety razors, slide rules, vacuum tubes, typewriters) and illuminates with LED lights. They read as glowing fossils, literally lighting up this exhibit's unspoken subtext: that books may soon become history. No one hails that prospect. But there may be a silver lining. Just as fruit trees become more productive as they near death, so, I imagine, will artists as books edge closer to extinction. For exhibitions such as this, that is good news. On the other hand, if you venerate books as objects, you may, at certain junctures in the *Art of the Book*, find yourself unsettled. That is because the process by which books become art necessarily involves slicing, pulping, carving, shredding and bending. So much so, that it's sometimes difficult to imagine that some of the more innovative works in this show actually began life as image and text-filled pages bound between two covers.



Andrew Hayes, *Union*, 2014, steel, book pages

In Jessica Drenk's *Cerebral Mapping III*, for example, we see the carved remnants of a book sprawled across 10 linear feet of wall space. It resembles a kelp bed washed ashore. There are visible words, but you'd need to hang upside down with a magnifying glass to read them. The fluted edges of the chess pieces that comprise the Mexican artist's Arian Dylan's *Order and Chaos* could be made of pressed butterfly wings, so transformed is the source material. Likewise, the Canadian artist Guy Laramée's *Cold Mountain Poem*, a tondo framed by two chunks of carved paper pulp, appears more like a geology lesson than the book-based dimensional re-creation of a Japanese watercolor painting that actually is. Andrew Hayes' totemic Minimalist creations go further. Made of books bent into extreme contortions and locked into place with steel plates, they stand as resolutely formal sculptures, tabletop answers to the nonobjective works of Henry Moore. Emily Payne's glued-together pages, sanded smooth like river rock, reveal faint traces of words, pointing to the process of decay that will someday turn them to dust.

Such assaults on the linear conventions of reading are the foundation of book art's appeal. They toss authorial intent out the window and undermine the sanctity of the printed word, transgressing a value inculcated into every literate person during childhood. That indoctrination is what gives book art its subversive power, evidenced in varying degrees by the examples cited above. The only problem with this edition of the show is that too much of the work falls into the realm of craft, which, in the main, results in a lot of clever packaging of typography and graphics, though some artists who occupy that niche also transcend it.



Donna Ruff, *Es tu comme moi*, 2009, 18 x 7 x 4"

Donna Ruff sets two books of French morality tales side by side and connects them with long paper tendrils that, at a distance, resemble a jumble of intertwined computer cables. I doubt that the debate about net neutrality was uppermost in the artist's imagination when she created this piece, but to my eye the object serves as an apt metaphor for the messy legal arguments now shaping the electronic media frontier. Anyone familiar with dotcom-era décor will immediately recognize similarities between this object and those that littered the wire-strewn interiors of start-up companies from that period. I'd also guess that the thread artist Lisa Kokin wasn't thinking about technology when she embedded zippers into a book-shaped skein spun to the size of a broadsheet. Yet her submission, *History of the World*, reminds me of diodes in a printed circuit board and, alternately, of an illuminated manuscript: a composition that flips back and forth between antiquity and modernity, recalling the work of Agnes Martin. Indeed, if you find yourself in a state of oscillation while viewing this show, there's a very good reason: The artists themselves may be experiencing the same sensations, leaping back and forth between things that were originally printed and bound, and fresh creations, ripped and torn from things we once called books.

—DAVID M. ROTH

*"The Art of the Book: Ninth Annual Exhibition of Handmade Artist Books, Altered Books and Book-Related Materials" @ [Seager Gray Gallery](#) through June 1, 2014.*