

Jane Buyers: *Inscriptions*

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Jane BUYERS,

Inscriptions #10, 2004.
Porcelain with pigmented shellac, plaster, watercolour. 32 x 37 x 10 cm.
Photo: courtesy of the University of Waterloo Art Gallery and the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

Jane Buyers' mixed media exhibition, *Inscriptions*, connects the artistic disciplines of sculpture and printing through an exploration of the object most connected to both practices—the book. She establishes a magical relationship between text and thought, as images come to life, springing forth from sculptured pages in the *Inscription* pieces, and punctuating the works on paper in *100 Review Exercises*, *Black Rose Project*, and the *Notes* on several pieces from English literature.

Under the exhibition title, each series expresses particular aspects of a range of notions surrounding contained ideas, literature, and learning, culminating in a contemplation of the problematic intersection of nature and culture. While Buyers has used annotated textbooks for raw material, any hint of didacticism is easily dispelled by the human experience of viewing the appealing pieces and resisting the urge to touch them.

Eleven open books are displayed on plinths or as wall installations, their fragility emphasized by the manner in which they are supported. The largest three are nestled gently on pillows that support delicate plaster flora emerging from leaves of unglazed porcelain. The word "leaf" not only puns but also makes literal the images that reside within. Pressings and castings of flowers and other vegetation are seemingly willed into existence from a botanical text. Capillary structures and veining is accentuated with muted pigment. Buyers rarely uses colour, stating that it often does not make sense in her work.¹ When she does, it consists of a light staining in watercolour or vegetable dye. The result is a gentle beauty and calm elegance.

There is a Victorian cast to both the floral imagery and the idea of the book on a stand, evoking suggestions of the family bible in its place in the parlour beside the aspidistra and the flowered wallpaper. In the catalogue interview with Robert Enright, Buyers touches on the decorative aspects of this work, relating it to a feminist-inspired identification with crafts that have been historically trivialized as "women's hobbies." Because her past practices include foundry work and extensive printmaking, the artist is clearly making a conscious selection of material and method. In these softly coloured works, she underscores the complex duality between culture and nature, using textbooks and canonical volumes that are studied universally, where texts become both touchstones to memory and reminders that culture delivers certain particularities in terms of perspective. As Kristjana Gunnars writes in her novel *The Prowler*, "Words are suitcases crammed with culture."²

Tinged with muted colours taken from the natural world, the sculptures and the works on paper suggest both their origin and an acculturated and domesticated environment. Floral imagery reflects the botanical in its natural state and in its depictions in wallpapers and fabric patterns. Here Buyers plays with notions of nature and culture with delicacy and wit.

Using lithography and etching techniques in her *Black Rose Project Series*, she superimposes a black rose shape onto patterned organza, over which are printed the images of well-used schoolbook pages and marks sheets. Handwritten explanatory notes clearly indicate that the images are derived from student textbooks. Buyers finds these worn objects in flea markets and garage sales, unwanted by the used-book trade. In *Notes on Macbeth*, an unknown student has dutifully and carefully



inscribed interpretations beside various passages. *Notes on Tintern Abbey* exhibits a played tulip image across Wordsworth's splendid lines, annotated as they are by a diligent student. The viewer becomes privy to a layering of meaning: the poem and the tulip are beautiful; the words evoke not only the flower, but also nostalgia for a Romantic vision of Nature. The student notes bring back sleepy English classes and memories of youth and study. The combination leads to a larger understanding of the implied connections. Buyers describes her interest in "the contrast between heavy, didactic, 'official' knowledge or 'truth' presented by the text, and the . . . fragile, groping ways that the reader or student is trying to grab hold of the information, somehow make it their own."³

Inscriptions delivers not only the simple pleasure of beautiful things, but also a range of measured and connected ideas that are as intellectually gratifying as they are aesthetically satisfying. ←

A touring exhibition curated by Carol Podedworny and organized by The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, and the University of Waterloo Art Gallery. Exhibition itinerary:

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery
Oshawa, Ontario
Nov. 11 2005 – Jan. 8 2006

University of Waterloo Art Gallery
Waterloo Ontario
Feb. 16 – March 23 2006

Koffler Gallery
Toronto Ontario
Oct. 25 – Dec. 17 2006

Margaret RODGERS is the author of *Locating Alexandra*, a book about artist Alexandra Luke, and has had writings published in *Canadian Art*, *Artfocus*, and the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, among others. Also, as director/curator for VAC Clarington from 1989 to 2004, she contributed essays for numerous exhibitions.

NOTES

1. Email from the artist.
2. Kristjana Gunnars, *The Prowler* (Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1996).
3. Email from the artist.