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REVIEWS & PRESS

Charles Bernstein & Susan Bee. *Little Orphan Anagram*. Granary Books, 1997.

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Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Are You Experienced?" *Sulfur* 41: 201-204.

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:

A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And "Thou shalt not" writ over the door;

So I turn'd to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore;

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;

And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys & desires.

- William Blake, "The Garden of Love", *Songs of Experience*

I recently received a phone call from a mother of a one-year old girl asking for a curious favor. It seemed that the child, eager to indulge in the wonders of language, had ripped through all of the books for children her age in the local Barnes & Noble. This particular kid loved the sound of language; rhymes in particular lulled her into a trance-state to which she was becoming addicted. In a panic, her mother called me and asked me to compose some simple formal rhymes to slake the child's thirst.

The image of a child in a relative state of innocence, barely able to maintain a vocabulary, yet reveling in the sound of language detached from meaning brought to mind Wittgenstein's struggles with language, meaning, sound and experience:

"I can speak of 'experiencing' a sentence. I am not merely saying this, I mean something by it... Understanding a sentence is more akin to understanding a piece of music than one might think" (*Philosophical Grammar*, p. 41). At what temporal and conceptual juncture do our "Songs of Innocence" become "Songs of Experience?" Susan Bee and Charles Bernstein take up these large questions in their new collaboration, *Little Orphan Anagram* (Granary Books, 1997). The pages of this children's book gone astray are mixed with light and shadow, sweetness and violence, whimsy and pain; in a way, it's *Alice In Wonderland* meeting "The Raven."

The title page alone bespeaks of the compound experience that awaits the reader: there are bright colors and polka dots sharing the page with an image of a little girl shedding a tear; this trip is not going to be entirely pleasant. The next page restates this theme: we are shown a glorious image of country life—a rustic farmhouse, lush green trees and busy beehives all captioned by a text that begins "It was on summer's day/ Found myself alone and gray." The book proceeds this way throughout: light children's "rimes" are illustrated by images of ghouls, gargoyles, and insects. Sweet colored patterns of numbers and letters are tempered with screaming warnings from overbearing mothers. Angel-faced children floating about in pajamas are accompanied by lines like "Burns all over but no pain." And, three-quarters of the way through the book, children disappear entirely and the problems of misogyny are taken up: women are sliced, diced, weighed, measured, and scopophilically viewed by menacing male gazes. The book's final pages end on a similar note of doom: violent black jagged fallopian tube-like shapes are dolefully captioned by a text that begins "Yes, forty dents, forty dents & not a minute more."

All of this would be quite gloomy if not for the tension created between the dark content of the book and the buoyant mastery of the authors in their respective crafts. Rarely has a collaboration been so seamlessly melded and interwoven. One can hardly imagine Bee's images existing without Bernstein's texts and vice versa. It's a collaboration from the heart, from the family; it's two parents observing the transformation of their children from states of innocence to realms of experience and at the same time observing the changes in themselves as a result of the child rearing experience. Just as Blake's songs are parables for all times of life, Bee and Bernstein, through the medium of the "children's book," grapple with the transformative experiences that never seem to resolve themselves over the course of one's lifetime.

To underscore the perfection of this current collaboration, one must look at Bee's previous book, *Tailspin* (Granary Books, 1995). Here, we are presented with a book that looks very similar to *Little Orphan Anagram*: it's the same size and at first glance, even the imagery looks identical. However, upon closer inspection, *Tailspin* reveals itself to be something quite different: it's a thing of beauty and innocence. The images comprising each plate are appropriated from Victorian clip-art. All the pages are lusciously and laboriously painted (as

with *Little Orphan Anagram*, Bee actually spent over a year hand-painting the entire edition). Symbolist and Surrealistic imagery abounds: there are dreamy images of two women dressed in Victorian garb duking it out underwater, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*-like characters probe the depths of the ocean in a hot air balloon, and sexy mermaids embrace in loving caresses. It's dreamy, it's sunny, it's happy-it's light. There are children in this book as well-they're all smiling, playing, and swinging from trees. Even the "violent" scenes have a fantastic whimsy about them; it's a an old-fashioned book, a bit of nostalgia for the sunshiney days of yesteryear. Fragments of appropriated text add to the breezy pleasures of this book: poems by Christina Rossetti, nursery rhymes, instructions on how to draw, and bits of *Alice in Wonderland* gently skip across the pages. A love of playful language and formal beauty set the stage for *Tailspin*, which perhaps is Bee's own "Songs of Innocence."

However, something quite different happens in *Little Orphan Anagram*. The first clues are visual: the field is deeper, darker, and stronger than the previous book. We encounter an aggression and angularity that was hitherto absent. The color is cleaner and stronger, the brush strokes are more sure of themselves, and every mark seems to be executed with a firm sense of purpose. This time around, Bee's image choices are more focused and rigorous; even the compositions seem more geometric, more severe. Judging by the artist's leaps made from *Talespin*, the reader will draw the conclusion that the book is Bee's medium-she's really at her best here, bringing beauty, strength and intelligence to each page she lovingly paints. It's rare to see a painter feeling so comfortable and assured within the confines of the book format.

"An Exhibition on Susan Bee." Review by Robert C. Morgan. (through Feb. 28).

There are many aspects to Susan Bee's paintings which are important to consider. They are generally not large-scale works. Rather they are reasonably intimate, but not pretentiously so. The viewer can make close contact with the surface, but one also is invited to step back and take in the whole picture. Bee's approach to painting is part gestural and part collage. The collage and assemblage elements are taken from children's stickers, decals, paperback covers from the 40s, fragments of dolls and older toys. The aesthetic tendency is located somewhere in the realm of Neo-Dada. It represents a kind of Beat Feminism.

There is nothing slick about these works. If anything, Bee goes toward the older direction... There is seemingly no particular attention given to color coordination. The structure of the painting is loose, never too clearly defined. Often she makes use of swirls or drips of paint a la Pollock. This is a very deliberate and conscious maneuver. One might say that Bee's paintings offer a kind of implicit critique of the masterful brush stroke or the sacred drip.

What exactly are these paintings about? Frivolity? Cynicism? I think not. Rather they seem to be about a layering of traces, an embedding of a certain kind of history. They are like memory traces in which the self cannot separate itself from the effects of devolution wrought by popular (patriarchal) culture. Even where children's toys and images are concerned, there is the struggle to find what is real amid the simulated glut which abounds even at a young age.

Bee is aware of these traces. Her paintings offer a kind of playfulness, yet they are, on a more serious note, a semiotics of play. In so doing, the offhand innocence of these strokes and drips enclosing popular imagery and appropriated from other sources makes us reflect on the condition of life as a system of signs that are perpetually enforcing their ideology upon us.

Accompanying the exhibition is a new artist book, entitled *Little Orphan Anagram*, which is a collaboration with her husband, the poet Charles Bernstein. Bee and Bernstein have worked together in the past on other book projects, some of which can be seen in a glass vitrine. The book format functions well for both artist and poet, often calling upon the condition of the absurd as seen in conflicting images or juxtaposed image/text fusions. There is a delightful interplay of linguistic resonances as Bernstein's light, yet heady, verse reverberates off the images, and vice versa. As with the paintings, semiotics is the name of the game—a game worth the play, and a play constructed from unburdened insight.

Robins, Corinne. "Collaborations." *American Book Review*.

Word plus picture, visual plus verbal image, the old Surrealist dream of collaboration between the arts continues to inspire artists and poets. Certainly the word as a visual form in and of itself began with Apollinaire. In any case, collaboration between artist and writers became one of Surrealism's many battle cries. Surrealism, in and of itself the most literary of art forms, tent itself to the depiction of the unconscious, to explicating Freud's ideas on language games. But despite the Surrealist revolution, eighty years later we still read the poem on the page in and of itself. In the nineteen seventies, the writer's book, the artist's book emerged as separate entities with now and then an attempt at collaboration... Before this, before the advent of the artist's book (and the creation of Printed Matter, a bookstore now on Wooster Street in SoHo), the page was the writer's turf to which the artist, standing aside politely, donated his/ her talents, serving (at best) as a wrong way mirror or (at worst) a guest illustrator illuminating the writer's thoughts.

In not a few recent books in the last several years a new kind of collaboration is taking place where visual and verbal artists are equals. Kelsey Street Press has published a series of books that attempt such collaborations with varying degrees of success. A few of these still belong under the head of poems plus illustrations, but in others it seems to this writer real collaboration is achieved in which the word and image are finally and, it would seem, irrevocably married.

"We have this in common: art and life, children, daughters named Maddy, indefatigable acrobatic capacity to surf multiple projects from zero to upheaval," Alison Saar and Erica Hunt write in their collaborative statement at the end of *Arcade*. Both women are talented, innovative artists. Alison Saar's figural sculpture in various media have an atavistic flavor that harks back to primitive art, but take its almost recognizable statuary a step further and converts, for example, the face of a woman, the tower of her body, the action of her river of hair into an unforgettable sculptural icon. The best description I know of the power that Saar brings to her depictions of the female body is in Erica Hunt's poem "Science of the Concrete":

At first you see
only its description
the skin
a container of its
umber
its beauty
folded into the carved
surface
then you don't know
what you are seeing
whether it is the abject
you see or the shadow
you see
failing
completely before
the body stops
falling
in its dream
that hangs
there.

But unlike her sculptures, Saar's handsome red/mauve, purple, and white woodcuts dealing with the body beginning with a female image in a fetal position, have a flatness, a mannered matter-of-factness, an air of generalization that does away with issues of discovery or surprise.

Her only hundred percent successful woodcut appeal on the cover as well as opposite a Hunt poem entitled "so sex, the throne whose abrasions we crave." On the cover, the title *Arcade* is printed on an arch above an almost demure black nude, her image-bearing body incised with symbols that are seemingly tattooed to its surface. This unforgettable image, surrounded by tiding cloth squares, surprises and stops us, as do HUM'S poems over and over. For the rest, the handsome woodcuts remain apart (and perhaps tell a separate story) from the poems in *Arcade*.

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Little Orphan Anagram represents a more successful collaboration between poet and artist in which pans and nursery language poems run through... the meaning of the visual imagery romping across *O's* pages. The themes set forth in *Little Orphan Annie* are innocence in a world of violence, desire... procreation, sex for its own sake, and birth and JJCJ&. Artist Susan Bee, preoccupied with images from the end of the 19th century, paints heroines in high-necked dresses, anatomically correct nudes in high heeled shoes, images from ladies magazines and early 20th century children's books. On the book's white page... black, and vermilion nursery book colors shine. [On] the first page, Charles Bernstein's postmodern language nursery rhymes announce "My breast is bursting WJA pride to see my son go down the slide." And the woe continues its own brand of mockery. [In a] pseudo-cautionary trip through the wild, wilder, and wildest of Susan Bee's paintings, which include an iron-clad Greek holding his head in one hand, a staff in other, and standing on a green sky road... "Poetry fakes nothing" shining down from [the]... moon. Both Bernstein and Bee dish out a wise wrong-sided world apart from straight up and down truths. The book is at once beautiful and tremendously energetic. Here again, the letters of the words are—active visual element as *Little Orphan Anagram* succeeds in reminding us art can be, above all, serious play.

Corinne Robins, art critic and poet, is the author of Facing It (Pratt Press, 1996) and a contributing editor to American Book Review.