



Granary Books, Inc.
168 Mercer Street, Ste 2

TELEPHONE: 212.337.9979
FACSIMILE: 212.337.9774
New York, NY 10012

sclay@granarybooks.com
www.granarybooks.com

REVIEWS & PRESS

Jay Saunders & Charles Bernstein, eds. *Poetry Plastique*. Granary Books & Marianne Boesky, 2001.

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Princenthal, Nancy. "Artist's Book Beat." *Art On Paper* (May- June 2001): 94- 95.

Another strong assortment of page art, visual poetry, and other hardy hybrids is available in *Poetry Plastique*, which accompanied a February exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery (Boesky co-published the book with Granary Books in New York, 2001). Both publication and show, and also an unusually lively day-long series of panels, film screenings, and readings, were co-organized by Jay Sanders, an intrepid new curator at the gallery, and poet Charles Bernstein. "We organized a show of art overrun by poetry and a show of poetry riddled with art," says Sanders. "Not words and pictures but poems as visual objects (read: subjects)," Bernstein adds.

Some of the works were best seen in the round (a wonderful spiraling word sculpture made collaboratively by Bernstein and Richard Tuttle, for instance), while others (a visual poem by Emily McVarish, a "folding pattern from Yesterday's Tomorrow," by Darren Wershler-Henry) thrive in book form. The black-and-white paperback, which doesn't reproduce everything in the show (or even contain a checklist), has 29 entries under the heading "Essays" by such contributors as Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Robert Creeley, Kenneth Goldsmith, Jason Mac Low, Tom Phillips, and Mira Schor. Given the disparate inclinations and anarchic tendencies these artists represent it is hardly surprising that several depart considerably from conventional expository prose.

Among the younger participants, Tan Lin, whose work in the show ran on flat-screen monitors, here offers a thoughtful if rather harsh assessment of current prospects for his medium ("The time for poems written with words is over... Today, no poem should be written to be read and the best form of reading would make all our feelings disappear the moment we were having them"). Earlier work can seem, by comparison, sweetly ingenuous, though ignoring it has been costly. Thus David Antin's Skypoems, produced in 1987- 88 by skywriting airplanes—a great idea that has occurred to at least two artists since. And thus Michael Snow's 1982 word-based (and imageless) film, written to a standard of verbal economy—and intelligent humor—still

eminently worth following.

Nancy Princenthal, one of Art On Paper's contributing editors, writes this column regularly for the magazine.

Rubinstein, Raphael. "Review of Books: Poets and Painters." *Art in America* 90.2 (February 2002): 42-43.

Drawn & Quartered, by Robert Creeley and Archie Rand, New York, Granary Books, 2001; 100 pages.

To Repel Ghosts, by Kevin Young, Cambridge, Mass., Zoland Books, 2001; 350 pages.

Purloined: A Novel, by Joseph Kosuth, Cologne, Salon Verlag, 2000; 120 pages.

A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections About the Book and Writing, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay, New York, Granary Books, 2000, 537 pages.

Poetry Plastique, edited by Jay Saunders and Charles Bernstein, New York, Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books, 2001; 96 pages.

The most recent golden age of American poet-painter collaborations was nearly half a century ago, in New York City in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was the period when, to cite just a few examples, Frank O'Hara was making "poem-paintings" with Norman Bluhm, lithographs with Larry Rivers and collages with Joe Brainard; Joan Mitchell was contributing illustrations to a volume of her friend John Ashbery's poems; the indefatigable Brainard was making collaborative comics with seemingly every poet he encountered, including James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch, and Ted Berrigan; and even Andy Warhol, later to worship at the altar of Eurotrash, was pursuing dialogue with serious poets such as Berrigan. The era has been recently chronicled in exhibitions such as "In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art" [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '00] and last year's retrospective devoted to Joe Brainard at P.S. 1. Warhol's unexpectedly extensive involvement with poetry is examined in Reva Wolfs 1997 study, *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s*.

This creative density appeared to diminish in the decades that followed. The poetry scene changed as poets entered academia in increasingly large numbers and were dispersed from the Lower East Side to college campuses around the country. At the same time, styles of art arose—Minimalism, Conceptual art, Earth art—that seemingly offered less scope for poetic collaboration than those which had preceded them. By the 1980s, not only had the presence of poets been dispensed with in some sectors of the art world, but even a sense of community with other artists was under threat. Speaking during a 1993 panel on artist-writer collaborations, Neo-Expressionist painter Eric Fischl described how, compared to the 1950s, "the 1980s were darker and more alienated, we lost that romantic feeling. One worked alone. Then because of the explosion of media you didn't hang out the same way you used to, you

read about each other." And when successful artists like himself did hang out, it was at expensive restaurants. "Poets are poor," the pragmatic (or perhaps just hard-hearted) Fischl pointed out and thus had a difficult time keeping up socially with the prominent artists of the day. What distinguished the 1950s from the 1980s, apparently, was the difference between the price of a beer at the Cedar Bar and the cost of a dinner at Barocco.

This is not to suggest that poet-painter collaborations abruptly came to an end in the mid-1960s. The 1970s saw impressive (though at the time practically clandestine) collaborations between Philip Guston and poets such as Clark Coolidge, William Corbett, and Bill Berkson [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '95]. In the 1980s, the independent French publisher Collectif Generation brought together a wide range of poets and artists, many of them Americans, to create experimental volumes in limited editions. There have also been isolated cases of painters such as Francesco Clemente, Trevor Winkfield, and Jane Hammond who have a passion for working with poets. Lately, however, there have been signs of a wider rapprochement between the realms of poetry and visual art.

In contrast to the 1950s, when painters and poets often turned out collaborative paintings, prints, and drawings, these days the book seems to be the favored form for such interactions. An excellent example of a recently published book made by a painter and a poet is *Drawn & Quartered*, a volume that reproduces 54 drawings by Archie Rand, each of which is accompanied by a quatrain by poet Robert Creeley. A New York painter known for creating image-rich canvases, often at mural scale or in lengthy series, Rand here exercises his virtuosic drawing abilities. Each vignette, usually showing one or two figures, is a little anthology of effects, combining contour drawing, crosshatching, chiaroscuro, graphic boldness and delicate detailing. The atmosphere is rarely contemporary, with many of the scenes evoking a 19th-century Europe of salons, shtetlach, military campaigns, and eccentric scholars. There are also occasional sorties into the biblical Middle East. Rand fields a wonderful cast of characters and architectural backdrops, all drawn with an unmatched wit, vigor, and sense of art history.

Creeley, who wrote the accompanying verses in a single session as Rand passed him the previously completed drawings, varies his approach. Sometimes he puts words into the mouths (or minds) of Rand's figures, as when a naked female model says to the man making a sculpture of her, "Am I only material/ for you to feel?/ Is that all you see/ when you look at me?" For other drawings, the poet provides condensed commentary. Underneath a drawing of an anxious-looking woman and child, he writes, "Are they together?/ Grandmother and granddaughter?/ Is there some fact of pain/ in their waiting?" Rather than straining to compose perfectly finished verses, Creeley responded to the impulsive spirit of Rand's drawings. Occasionally the speed shows, as when Creeley has a farmer lamenting the death of his horse when the deceased animal in the drawing is clearly bovine, but more often he comes up with pithy, plausible captions, sometimes of wonderful elegance. My favorite, accompanying a dramatic drawing of a man kneeling before a stack of paper sheets, is this memorable expression of how, in life, futility and exuberance can go hand in hand: "All these pages/ to turn,/ all these bridges/ to burn."

Created under very different circumstances, Kevin Young's collection of poetry, *To Repel Ghosts* is also a testament to the common ground still available to poets and painters. In this case, the artist in question, Jean-Michel Basquiat, was no longer alive when Young sat down to write poems in response to his paintings, but the results are nevertheless intensely collaborative in nature. Taking advantage of the fact that Basquiat's work is densely inscribed with words and names, lists and phrases, trademarks and abbreviations, Young incorporated large quantities of the artist's painted and drawn words into his poems. Indeed, this is as much a meeting of two writers as it is a posthumous encounter between a poet and a painter: Basquiat's use of language was highly distinctive and nuanced, not just in graphic terms but also at the level of structure and sound.

When Young samples words found in Basquiat's works, he always makes the source clear by setting the words in small caps. (Perhaps not since James Merrill's ouija-board-inspired trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, has an American poet opened his work so bravely to another voice.) As well as giving the poems an additional graphic punch (Young also visually activates his short lines with frequent dashes and ampersands), Basquiat's words work like cross-cuts in a movie. In one especially cinematic poem, Young quotes lines from a Basquiat painting that happens to appear in a film about Dennis Hopper:

HEART AS ARENA
Hopper in a docu-trauma
discussing Warhol

After his own comeback,
Seated before
his giant Basquiat—

PROMETHEUS.
BLACK TEETH.
Andy's already bit

the dust
& Basquiat's just
about to...

As Young describes it, Basquiat's life and work served "as a bass line, a rhythm section, a melody from which the poems improvise." While he borrows inspiration from Basquiat's distinctive prosody, Young is a resourceful poet who can make a lyric from something as inauspicious as the name "Langston Hughes" repeated twice somewhere in Basquiat. For all their formal experimentation, the poems also lucidly chronicle Basquiat's rapid rise and fall, from his beginning as a graffiti artist to his apotheosis as the wild man of Neo-Expressionism to his desperate, drug-plagued final years. Although Young never met Basquiat, he sketches a knowledgeable portrait of the now-vanished downtown milieu of the early 1980s. At the same time, he places Basquiat in a broader historical context. Some 20 pages in the middle of the

book are devoted to boxer Jack Johnson, and figures from African-American cultural life such as Charlie Parker, Max Roach, and Richard Pryor are evoked. One poem focuses on Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee, who made a portrait of Basquiat in 1982. The poem begins with an allusive description of the shot:

Antennae, antlers,
rabbit ears
for better reception—

Basquiat's hair
a bundle of dreadlocks,
coiled, clenched

in two fists
above his head.
A matador's hat.

A few poems come across as set pieces, such as one about Warhol attending a 1985 party for Roy Cohn at the Palladium nightclub, but set pieces are hard to avoid when dealing with the lives of well-known people, and they hardly affect the overall power of this 117-poem tour de force. This is not only compelling, innovative contemporary poetry, it may be the best interpretive study yet of Basquiat's art.

Approaching authorship from the other end of the artist-writer equation, veteran Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth has recently published a book that adopts a much more extreme version of the appropriative method employed by Young. Every page of *Purloined: A Novel* is, as the title hints, derived from the work of other authors. Kosuth's procedure is shamelessly direct. He simply made photographic copies of single pages from over 100 different novels—ranging from works of serious fiction to popular crime novels—and combined them to produce a collagelike book. Kosuth hides nothing about his method. Each page retains the typography and layout of the original and the author of each page is given credit in a page titled "List of Characters" in the front of the book. The only things withheld are the titles of the books Kosuth used and the original page numbers.

Purloined, which was published in an edition of 750 numbered copies, isn't an easy book to read. The constant shift of styles is initially interesting but the novelty of having a new plot and set of characters every page quickly pales and Kosuth seems not to have worked very hard at establishing smooth syntactical transitions. If readers are interested in seeing a more developed and satisfying instance of textual appropriation, they should take a look at Walter Abish's *99: A New Meaning*, a 1990 volume that consists wholly of quotations. While Kosuth simply sticks together complete pages from other people's books, Abish, an innovative novelist perhaps best known for his volume *Alphabetical Africa*, carefully trims and tailors his borrowed phrases so that they coalesce into a revelatory—and readable—whole. Kosuth's appropriative "novel" may possess a conceptual purity but it remains an art work, an artist's book, rather than a work of

literature.

But are these mutually exclusive categories? It seems to be the thesis of the recent anthology *A Book of the Book* that they are not. Subtitled "Some Works & Projections About the Book & Writing," this 500-plus-page compendium brings together texts by and about literary figures such as Stephane Mallarme, Emily Dickinson, and Edmond Jabes with others on visual artists such as Faith Ringgold and Carolee Schneemann. Throughout the selections, there is an emphasis on the blurring of categories. Scholar Richard Sieburth, examining Mallarme's *Le Livre*—202 pages of notes for an unfinished work—finds "a kind of 'action writing,' whose random jottings, scrawlings, scribbings, graphings, diagrammings, and erasures reminded me of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings or Cy Twombly's works on blackboard or paper." Citing text-installations and performances by Allan Kaprow and Kenneth Goldsmith, another contributor, Thomas A. Vogler, insists that "we sorely need a new definition of the concept of text that has been separated from its immediate association with the specific form of the book—the codex—that some 17 or 18 centuries ago replaced another form, the volumen or scroll."

Much of the anthology addresses the history and esthetics of the artist's book, broadly defined to include pre-Columbian codices, 19th-century novelty books and the illustrated volumes of outsider Adolf Wolfli, as well as more familiar examples by William Blake, Dieter Roth, and Tom Phillips. In addition to numerous illustrations in black and white, there is a full-color foldout of "The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France," the famous 1913 collaboration between Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay. Recent figures are also touched on, such as Xu Bing, for his calligraphic installation *Book from the Sky*, and Buzz Spector, a visual artist who uses books as his chief material. Co-editor Jerome Rothenberg idealistically sees the late 20th century as the period when, through self-published books, "artists & poets took control of their own work apart from the nexus of dealers and markets." The final section of the anthology, "The Book to Come," ends with a thoughtful consideration by poet Charles Bernstein of the changing role of poetry in the digital age.

"Why aren't poets more central to contemporary visual art?" This was the question posed last winter by "Poetry Plastique," an exhibition curated by Bernstein and Jay Saunders. Held at Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea, which copublished the accompanying catalogue, it sought to present poems as visual objects, ranging from one of Carl Andre's concrete poems to a Guston-Coolidge drawing to a hypnotic digital poem by Tan Lin and an intriguing 'poem-sculpture' by Bernstein and Richard Tuttle. Perhaps not since the heyday of O'Hara and his painter friends had a commercial New York gallery been the site of so much poetry-related activity. We may be nowhere near a new golden age of poet-painter collaborations, and poets may be as poor as ever, but "Poetry Plastique" suggested that contemporary art, having recycled every modern style and attitude to the point of sheer inconsequence, may be turning to poetry as a source of more productive ideas and inspiration. When it comes to current poet-artist collaborations, I suspect that "Poetry Plastique" and the books reviewed here represent merely the tip of the iceberg.