

Artist's Statement

In some ways it was inevitable that books would become a focus of my art—but not simply because I'm also an author. Over the years I was immersed in various modes of minimalism, many of the artistic devices I gravitated towards then would eventually allow me to do more with volumes than write them. My preoccupation with the division of pictorial space into diptychs and quadrants, the iteration of images and openings, all brought me to the book as a visual object.

My initial book-based pieces evolved haphazardly from empty sketchbooks, journals, notebooks and damaged bindings I was reluctant to part with, even though I'd torn or sliced out their contents. I kept them going, in effect, by treating them as experimental surfaces for the compulsive drawing I've done since childhood. The loose facing pages of broken-backed texts became armatures for mark-making, which essentially reconstituted them as drawings.

The glossy shimmer of graphite hatching on this first generation of experiments let light play over their surfaces like fleeting references. This process obliterated the former meanings of the texts but at the same time called up the presence of lost ideas—all those vanished sketches, journals, plans, lists, stories and arguments—that still echoed from the missing pages ripped from their spines.

These books surprised me by coming to life again, like whole creatures conjured from skins and pelts. The process became its own force, and I turned to library discards and other dumped and forgotten volumes as sources of raw material and inspiration. Among the shelves of defaced, dog-eared, foxed and musty tomes I found specimens waiting to evoke a nimbus of new meanings.

Along with the narrative of loss clinging to those broken books, their flattened, often eviscerated forms suggested wings, petals, giant moths.... Inevitably, images erupted in the work, not only carrying their own meanings, but adding a gloss, another layer of associations to the radically altered books underneath. Bits of text, sometimes legible, sometimes not, started to appear along with figures and anatomical diagrams, animals, mathematics, and mountain ranges. Mute open mouths added their voices, metal bolts silenced others.

The book persists in a digital age that threatens to render it extinct. But now that it is increasingly viewed as superfluous, antique technology and a waste of space, we are reminded of how utterly remarkable the book is. A simple, side-hinged block of sheets of paper, given life by written language and graced with illustrations, has functioned for a millennium as a near-universal means of encoding vast amounts of human culture.

What one has done artistically often becomes apparent only in retrospect. I see now that I've been captivated by the splayed book, caught in the moment when the volume is open and proffering to the imagination a fragment of the lost world that was once between its covers.

—John Frederick Walker, April 2011