

The Lakeville Journal

‘Book Art’ a paean to words on paper

By Emily Soell

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SHARON — John Frederick Walker is in his kitchen, brewing us tea. Awaiting his return, I am drawn to a series of open shelves that separate the staircase from the living room, each displaying what appears to be an exquisite small book. On closer inspection I realize the books are without pages.

The backs are there. The bindings. The stitching. The spines. But these are the skeletons of books. A book reliquary, if you will. And a tribute.

Walker, you see, is not interested in depicting books, or the illustrations within books, as the title of his show at the Hotchkiss Library of Sharon might imply.

He is interested in the book as object, the book as form, a book’s essential physicality. Part sculpture, part collage, Walker’s “Book Art” at the library — which opened June 1 and remains up until July 31 — ranges from dramatic, wall-dominating pieces to charming diminutive works.

In some the “book” is barely recognizable, as if Walker has extrapolated and abstracted to its bare fundamentals. In others the book is completely apparent: the ribbon marker dangling, the endpapers in place. But the pages have been ripped out, or spiked fast with metal bolts, or highlighted with a

montage of images, or marked with a circle of embossed sealing wax.

To the question, “How did this start?”, Walker, an inveterate traveler and (from an early age) an artist, talks about the journals he kept and the sketchbooks that were his constant companions. When he had no further use for their contents, he would slice out the pages. But somehow he couldn’t part with the book. His instincts told him he would have further use for them.

Indeed, these “maimed” books have come back to life through his art. Now he seeks them out in thrift shops, from library discards, in garage sales, rescuing the most dog-eared, abused and neglected specimens, measuring with a ruler for the right size — often to the bewilderment of bystanders.

Sometimes the content of a particular “rescue” inspires or informs the work. A Baedeker, an old medical dictionary, a personal address book. Other times it is simply a matter of putting together elements that please him and letting viewers find the meaning.

“I’m always suspicious when art has a complete explanation,” he says. “I think there should be a bit of mystery. Don’t you?”

In another part of his life, Walker writes books — best-selling books. He is particularly interested in the natural world and endangered species. For example, “Ivory’s Ghosts,” about the human lust for ivory that has led to the slaughter of elephant herds in Africa. Or “A Certain Curve of Horn,” about the survival struggle of the giant sable antelope in Angola.

Walker claims that the books he writes and the art he creates aren’t that closely related. Yet considering today’s trend toward e-readers, one wonders if the book isn’t another endangered species Walker is passionate to preserve.

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