

## ARTWORK AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

Viewer is left to ponder meaning between covers

**BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY** 3/22/19

Books invite and inveigle. They tempt us into their thicket of the imaginary and the real, promising that once seized within their covers we will be edified or made more empathetic. Or both.

But what if that seduction itself is a ruse? What if the innards of the book were rent, leaving only the carcass of the book itself, its august but deceptive covers?

That is the landscape that John Frederick Walker investigates in his elegant and thoughtful new exhibit, "Book Works," at Judy Black Memorial Gardens & Park in Washington Depot. And these are vistas, these abstract ruminations on absence, framed by the heavily worked covers of books.

This, in Walker's work, is the terrain of loss. And it looks awfully like a story that's been taken from us.

Walker, a Washington artist and author whose work is in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, Yale University Art Gallery and Brooklyn Museum Library, is a bibliophile. He is also a minimalist, whose early work was preoccupied with the division of pictorial space. For the last 20 years, however, his art has opened up, as it were, into the boundaries of actual books, which have been radically altered into what look like abstract paintings, or the bruised artifacts from a natural history museum.

But at the center of all these works is the spine of a book, its pages ripped out, shredded or, in some cases, sliced by what looks to be a hedge trimmer. Walker then alters the end-papers and disfigured gutter of the book. What is left is a world of promises betrayed, altered or perhaps censored by some absent tyrant.

And what remains on the end papers seems a violent reaction to that disgorgement. Thick black lines seem to shout in inchoate horror, or exult in mute ecstasy. The papers themselves, some of them so thoroughly disemboweled that no trace of ink remains, become something Other — odd,

suggestive shapes that call to mind the torso of a woman, the silhouette of an owl, a lonely sleeping bat.

“Horned Tufted Text,” for instance, appears from a distance like an owl impaled on a slab of slate. A ribbon from the interior of the book hangs from the center, like a tail.

**IT IS FAR FROM THE ONLY PIECE** in this meditative exhibit that seems animate. All of these open, maimed, lacerated pieces suggest, to use Joyce’s phrase, the presence of absence. It is not just the end papers, which can look, as in “Flayed Codex,” excoriated. It’s also the mutilation itself, which seems less inadvertent than intentional. Who sundered the innards and why? And did mutilating them create something more invigorating and kinetic, like the symphonic “Truncated Text,” whose marbled end papers seem almost psychedelic. Or did it create something more sinister, like the wounded looking “Vulned Volume.”

“Vulned” itself is an archaic word, usually linked to a pelican plunging its beak into its breast to feed its young — a symbol of the sacrificial Jesus. And Walker enjoys playing with words and the notion of culture being transmitted through them. Throughout his work, the framing device of the book suggests stories left untold, knowledge intentionally defaced, lives whose details have been erased.

**WHAT’S LEFT ARE THE SKELETAL SUGGESTIONS** of what was, artifacts siphoned of individuality and nuance. In a way, the art functions as a reliquary on which others have scribbled their notions.

As a writer, Walker must have a more acute sense than most of what is vital in a single volume. A work like his “Lost Codex” is as much a stunning work of art as an indictment of a society lacking reverence for what has come before.

The barely visible writing in the frayed pages mimics that of Leonardo, whose “Codex Leicester” Bill Gates purchased in 1994 for \$30.8 million. Here, the implication seems more direct — what if Leonardo’s text were ripped to shreds? What would we have lost? But, with its enormous rusted bolts bolted into the remnants of the book’s fleshy pages, viewers are left to consider the many unknown texts lost to history through violence or censorship or neglect.

All books are meant to bring us to some other place, of course, inside another’s mind or to a fuller understanding. Some of Walker’s pieces, like “Fading Folio,” whose middle expands into rippling echoes, suggest the sheer power of ingesting whatever lay within those pages and being elevated into some other place. Sometimes, a book can do that. So, too, can a piece of art.