

Conversation with Jeff Stevenson: About Altered Books

Q. 1. Why books? What do they represent to you personally? What universal representation might they have?

Stevenson: Books are intimate objects to those who read them. Books can be held in our hands, taken with us easily, and reflect a part of who we are. The evolution of the book with regard to culture is interesting to observe with the onslaught of electronic entertainment and information. In some ways the book is more important and meaningful than ever, and in some ways it has become less so. Many of the books I choose are old and outdated, like encyclopedias that were once common in many households. Now we are more likely to use the internet to research that type of information. Reading a novel can produce a flow experience when the reader is caught up in the story, losing track of time and other cares. So, books as objects in these art pieces hold dualities that I want to explore.

Q. 2. Do you remember your first book alteration and how you got started with it? How did it feel?

Stevenson: I do remember my first altered book and it was inspired by Edwin Jager's "Book Implosions". There was just something about his work that made me want to do it. So at first I just tried to copy his with little innovation or novelty added. Well, before that, as a teenager, I had taken an old book, glued all the pages' edges together and cut out the center of the book to make it a secret hiding place box, so I guess technically that was my first book work. My more recent books incorporate painting and that has been natural for me because I have the most experience with paint, and the books lend themselves well to the fragmentation of imagery that I am interested in exploring in my larger paintings.

It felt, and still feels naughty. We're taught as children, rightfully so, to respect books and care for them. We make covers for them, are instructed not to write in them, etc. So, the first time I altered a book it probably felt more like vandalism. But it is also freeing and liberating to break rules and find new territory.

Q. 4. How is an exhibition of altered books different from other art in the gallery setting?

Stevenson: My goal is to get viewers to question what they know, and what they believe, and to investigate their life process of acquiring knowledge and beliefs. Our culture and its many aspects is simply the end result of what we all have agreed on as reality. But many of our beliefs are givens or assumed, so that we never even observe them. I'm trying to get viewers to observe that thing, that assumption they might not otherwise observe. That's why I am so drawn to the line between abstraction and realism. A "real" image abstracted into fragments but still maintaining enough content to leap into the viewer's mind as the "real" object it represents, connotes our thought process of gathering information and coming to conclusions. But the art piece still remains as fragmented information.

Q. 5. Why can't I open the books?

Stevenson: To be able to consider the books fully as objects, it helps to take them completely out of their old function and their intended purpose. However in many of the pieces the books, or certain pages in the books are accessible, and the title of the book is often available, so the viewer could find another copy of the book. This idea of books as objects also calls up the issue of books as decoration; the coffee table book, or the antique book collection to lend authenticity to a well appointed home library or office. These examples are also the object-ness of books so I have just taken that another step into books as art.

Q. 6. Is the content of the books important?

Stevenson: I am selecting pages from books that interest me. These pages are sometimes humorous, sometimes disturbing, and surprisingly sometimes not so bad. I think I am more interested in the content of the books that is not there; seeing historical information as flawed or at least questionable in terms of its exclusionary efforts. Who is under-represented,

misrepresented, and left out completely?