

## WHAT'S NEW

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# Artist succeeds in blurring the edges

THE TITLE "book artist" conjures up a number of images to me. It suggests a cross-over; uniting words and pictures but also someone who uses the book in all its forms as a medium. It might even delve into the area of poetry.

This cross-over idea is pertinent because the book artist in my mind is someone for whom one particular discipline is just too limiting. So they might explore form because a book is three-dimensional. Printmaking might also follow as could illustration, collage, drawing, writing and even papermaking.

Finally it's the professional approach to a very old and noble craft, that of bookbinding, which I see as another part of the book artist's role.

Many of these images are prominent in the new show, *Island Journals*, at the Bonhoga Gallery by book artist Rachel Hazell.

She's not a stranger to these isles, having done a spell at The Booth in Scalloway as artist in residence last year. And now she's back again, this time with a

selection of work which displays her craft.

There are many forms of "book" here from traditional ideas of pages stitched together to imaginative book sculptures. The concept of "a word place" is perhaps a good place to start. She uses this as a title within her work but I think it serves to highlight various features of the exhibition. Indeed, as its most basic, a book is often a "word place", somewhere to store words or images.

*Why Books Still* serves as a good introduction. Here are nine images cream on cream with stitching and showing through symbols what the role of a book is. It's a very simple but very imaginative idea.

Books as sculpture can be found in one of the glass cabinets. *A River in Somerset* and *Booklace Hill* are both continuous forms in paper and stitching, each brief "page" contributing to its extended form. If you think of the paper air filter in a car you'll have a basic, if mundane, idea of what the sculpture looks like. The ribbed texture is delicately coloured.

Next to these are some of Rachel's *Island Journals* both from here in Shetland and from her other haunt at the opposite end of the country in the Isles of Scilly. These are very simple illustrations not too far removed from cartoon in their use of pen and watercolour.

The love affair with the clean page, page after page, leads Rachel to create small books such as the *Dots and Dashes* series in variable sizes on Somerset Velvet paper with comments on what books are for and other big questions.

Books are also about edges, creases and folds. This leads neatly to another of Rachel Hazell's interests, that of photography which in this show highlights the edges, creases and folds not only of book but also the world around us, particularly the coastline. *Book Butterflies* has 49 small photographs of a miniature stitched book, its shadow cast in the shapes resembling a butterfly with lots of movement and rhythm. I was less taken by the straightforward images of another book in *Book, Photo, Block*.

Her interest in texture and tone extends to three photographs of rusting metal found in the Scilly Isles. The staining, welding and bolts makes significant reference to the staining and stitching found in her handmade books. I didn't find the photography the high spot of the show with the exception of one item where the medium is used as documentary evidence.

*The Making of Amygdala* charts the construction of a two metre high paper book sculpture, a piece of public art. I'm told by Rachel that in its completed state it has its pages covered with myriad comments, some quite poignant. If there is one regret I have in this exhibition it is that there is no really large piece similar to that work on show here.

Books can also function as depositories not only of words but also objects. *Scalloway Tops* and *Meal Beach Random Plastic* are yet another take on the redd-up bug that most visiting artists to Shetland seem to be drawn to. Bits and pieces from Shetland's coastline have found their way

into Rachel's work displayed in stitched envelopes hung at the windows. *Lines of Wave* is closer to poetry, the stitching weaving its way down through the strips of words.

What I find interesting in this work is the extent to which the artist has accepted the blank page. By that I mean the page does not have to be covered. In fact some of these books have pages so small you couldn't use them for their traditional purpose. The blank page is part of the work as is the very visible stitching.

Rachel Hazell has succeeded in blurring the edges between what some see as separate areas; bookbinding, sculpture, graphic design, poetry, painting and illustration. And of course its timing with the Wordplay Book Festival is completely intentional. The artist will be demonstrating her craft in workshops over the next few weeks.

You can see the show at Bonhoga Gallery until 28th September.

Peter Davis