

Book Box Print Poem: The Right Place for Things

By Thomas O'Sullivan

Jody Williams wields a collagist's sensibility with a printmaker's craft. Her poems evolve into books; prints and collages grow, shell-like, into boxes. Witty and nimble, these creations approach whimsy—but only as closely as the artist's firm grip allows.

Economy based in certainty is the fundamental characteristic of both the artist and the work. Williams sums up her career: "Essentially I teach and make books." That initial adverb is the key. Williams searches out essentials that she can craft into expressive fullness—verbal and visual, flat and folding, hand-held and wall-hung. Her statement in *American Craft* magazine is an interdisciplinary manifesto in fifteen words (nine of them monosyllabic, all of them necessary): "I strive for a concise, careful use of image and language that honors good craftsmanship."

Economy, but not austerity. The artist alone decides what is essential in her world, and then fills it generously with colored trapezoids, wiry line, whimsical figures and canny words. She frequently works in sets of three that constitute internally consistent systems of marks and hues. Her early work tended to the geometric in form and constructivist in spirit. That cool detachment has given

way in recent years to densely populated fields of found or invented elements: stamps and pictures, patterns lush or spare, quirky figures. Williams' imagery serves as a reminder of Nature's own surprises. What, after all, is inevitable about the structure of a dragonfly or the color of a hummingbird? And why should this artist's output seem any less arbitrary and plentiful, when her palette and touch are consistently recognizable as hers alone?

The question of scale is unavoidable in considering Williams' work. In this age of bombast when SUVs roam the Earth with impunity and one steel ribbon may dominate a gallery, a work of art that fits in your pocket can be an act of defiance. Williams dares to be diminutive in her books and box-works, compressing vast notions into short lines of small words. This distillation to the basics demands that every letter earn its multi-sensory place: "In finalizing the text and combining it with the images, I consider each word's appearance, its meaning, its sound, and how it plays into the rhythms of the book in phrase, image, and pattern." She transmutes the obsessive attentions of a master typesetter or a mad watchmaker into fantasias worthy of Klee or Miró.

Impeccably crafted and richly upholstered, Williams' books read like owner's manuals from a parallel universe. Metaphysical nuggets of text are embedded in objects whose construction and materials demand attention: rigorously mortised bookboard, Japanese papers like gifts or fireworks, brass hinges and string ties,

cutouts and cases. This hands-on reading makes for painstaking work. Once the reader has found his or her way in, the content requires further mental manipulation. *Word for Word* adopts the look of a familiar game only to hijack its conventions for the author's ends: "Unopposed, the artist wins!" she writes.

Syntax plays by its own rules, on its own schedule:

in the meantime,
time flies
seamlessly
and sometime
tomorrow
time will be lost
and then found
and then killed.

-from *Time Will Tell* (1991)

Three-dimensional work seems inevitable for an artist who could house a Smithsonian in a shoebox. Williams' box works are a logical evolution of her books: not just books outgrown, but cabinets of personal and cultural curiosity. The earliest boxes utilized graphic elements that appear throughout Williams' work, but had no text. Mismatched beads or buttons, squares of painted metal screen, lozenges of matboard printed with fragments of larger patterns were suspended like the contents of a drawer that was tipping toward chaos. These "Not Empty Boxes" are hardly empty of objects or of meaning. They hum with

a formal resonance among parts and patterns, each one an abstract painting wearing its own gallery.

With the turn of the millennium Williams began a trio of gray containers she calls "The Small Files." As she incorporated objects treasured since childhood she found epiphanies in sorting and arranging. "I'm a super-organized person and boxes are a way for me to group things and contain them and protect them and find a home for them," she told an interviewer. "It is not storage; it is finding the right place for things." Unique and editioned box-works followed, each with partitions for playful assemblies of pictures and findings. Text entered the boxes, too, along with an increasingly architectonic presence that culminated in 2004 with a major commission for her alma mater, "The Nancy Gast Riss '77 Carleton Cabinet of Wonders."

Williams's certainty revels in questions: "Questions are what bring people to books, and what bring people to open boxes." She plumbs the big questions in these deceptively small words and works, fashioning just the right containers for thoughts that don't fit anywhere else.

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