

The Binnewater Tides
Women's Studio Workshop Press
Volume 9, 1992

Changing History: A Review of Artists' Books

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Curators across the United States presented thousands of artworks and artifacts in the many "1492-1992" commemorative exhibitions. This anniversary was a special occasion, when we were enlightened by displays of culture, philosophy and artistic vision by formerly invisible contemporary artists.

By December, these curatorial gifts had all but disappeared.

For the Institute of Art, artist Armando Gutierrez designed a mural entitled **Quetzalcoatl Cries, 1492-1992**. A complex depiction of both historical and contemporary events, the giant mural was painted by artists John Acosta, Carlos Menchaca, Michael Russell, and Gutierrez over a period of months. It was on display only a short while before being painted over with gallery white. A large painting by Frank Stella hung on the opposite wall, serving as a reminder that soon business would be back to normal.

Unlike art exhibitions, a book is not painted over, nor crated and shipped back to the sender to be stored for the next issues-related exhibition. A book sends its message out long after the event it commemorates is over, extending the time of current events and their impact upon us. Current events become the recent past; our interpretation of them becomes history.

*For the Maya,
time was born and had a name
when the sky didn't exist
and the earth had not yet awakened.
The day set out from the east
and started walking.
The first day produced
from its entrails
the sky and
the earth.*

So begins a Mayan story from ancient Mexico, long before it had that name. The story is retold by Uruguayan writer **Eduardo Galeano** in the first book of his trilogy, **Memory of Fire: I. Genesis**.ⁱ The author begins this ambitious and engaging work of literature by laying out the pre-Columbian territory of the Maya, Inca and other indigenous peoples of what is now Central and South America. Lyrical yet harsh, the creation stories come to us from oral tradition. Some still sound like song- the words and cadence eventually recorded for future generations. The song was transformed dramatically, frighteningly in 1492. Dissonant and violent, the words came from explorers and conquerors. The world changed.

*The second day
made the stairway
for the rain to run down.
The cycles of the sea
and the land,
and the multitude of things,
were the work of the third day.*

The explorers came looking for gold and exotic spices. With visions of the Orient in their minds, they could not recognize the new land. **The Los Angeles: River Inside a River**, by **Cheri Gualke** traces the history of the changes in just one place on that land.ⁱⁱ It is not only a story from the past, but also very much of the present. Like a river, the accordion book is a flowing continuous line with multiple layers. It is offset and letterpress printed in three colors, with parallel texts and images running across the folds. The course of the river basin history is traced through a time line that starts with the ancestors of the Chumash inhabiting the area in 450 A.D. The river changed form with each sign of progress, from village and pueblo to irrigation system and dam. Farms were replaced by city and industry. In 1937, the Army Corps of Engineers began to pave over the riverbed, eventually burying it under 18 inches of concrete. Quotes from city officials compare this industrial sewer to a local Berlin Wall. The nadir comes in 1989 when Assemblyman Richard Katz suggested that the river be turned into a freeway express lane. The public woke up. Newspaper stories reproduced in the book record the reaction. The accompanying photo shows a heron and a cormorant as mute witnesses. This is a soft-spoken plea for a paradigm shift, so that the river can once again be a waterway and not a sewer. Based on a video installation, the book was produced with a collaborative team from a Los Angeles high school. By including the community in its making, the call to action reiterates that environmental political action must also be community-based.

*The fourth day
willed the earth
and the sky to tilt
so that they could meet.*

In the open-ended query of **Black & Blue: Hearts and Minds**, **Mel Watkin** explores the space where earth and sky do not meet.ⁱⁱⁱ This is the space between heart and mind, between words and actions, between intentions and results. An accordion book that is offset printed in black, blue and silver, it has only three text blocks. Each quotes a writer from the Plymouth Plantation from the 1620s. On one side of the accordion, alternating with the quotes, are anatomical drawings of hearts floating in a nebulous sky. With truncated veins and arteries they are unconnected to earth or body. These are represented on the reverse side as biomorphic lines: the liquid lines of flowing blood or the sinuous line of thin tree limbs blowing in the wind. The two sides are related to each other, but not conjoined. As with the images, the quotes of the colonists represent two very different sides. Edward Winslow “found the Indians very faithful in the covenant of peace with us, very loving, ...ripe-witted, just.” At the same time, Robert Cushman wrote “they (have) not...skill or faculty to use either the land or the commodities of it.” The conceptual joining of all the images and texts takes place with the third quote, also by

Cushman. He questions what would happen if this new land were populated by lawless men from England whose vices “the heathens would shame to speak of?” We know what happened, and Watkin subtly exposes the black and blue pain of the solution to Cushman’s question.

*The ninth day
created the nether worlds;
the tenth earmarked for them
those who had poison
in their souls.*

Doing away with subtlety, **1492: What Is It Like to Be Discovered?** by artist **Deborah Small** with writer **Maggie Jaffe**, is a more emphatic examination of the impact of the conquerors on the conquered: not bruises, but murder, rape, genocide.^{iv} In many ways the book is a visual counterpart to Galeano’s *Memory of Fire: I. Genesis* in that it covers many of the same very specific events and people. Where Galeano builds word pictures through gifted storytelling, Small adapted the more graphic 16th century woodcuts and engravings that illustrated early accounts of the conquistadores. Done in the style of early flora and fauna taxonomies, these are damning images of a hell created by conquering devils.

While the images may be explicit, the book centers on language: language as a weapon. In an anecdote from 1991, two instructors use the phrase “Columbus discovers America” to teach English to Spanish speaking children. Neither language is that of the indigenous people. And in another, from 1573, King Phillip II of Spain declares that the *conquest* will be referred to as the *pacification*. It is the language of teaching and learning, curriculum guides, bibliographies and textbooks, which has softened and refined the facts over time. Small and Jaffe put the hard truth back in. This is a selected non-chronological history that careens over continents and cultures. These are pairings and triplings of seemingly disjunctive facts which force a reading that cannot be made from standard history books: “It is 1494. Extermination is a thirteen-letter word. Groups of thirteen Tainos are exterminated ‘in memory of our Redeemer and His twelve Apostles.’ Leonardo’s *Last Supper* depicts the same thirteen.” Or another: “It is 1492. Leonardo, using one of his corpses as a model, sketches the carpals, metacarpals, and phalanges of the hand. Many people oppose dissection of the human body for fear of the consequences on resurrection. In a de Bry engraving, a Taino sits on the ground, her arms mutilated stumps, her mouth gaping. Another Taino, forearms upon the chopping block, look directly at us. Hands too numerous to count surround him as he kneels before the conquistador.” The effects of the “discovery” in 1492 do not stop with the indigenous peoples. The brutal introduction of slaves from Africa is another. Again, language is the tool of perpetuating the myths, which continue into contemporary times. Quotes from dictionaries for children expose the rampant prejudices that lie beneath the deceptively emotionless text: “sav-age-ness 1. wildness: *the savageness of a jungle scene*. 2. Savage or uncivilized condition: *the savageness of some African tribes*.” It is this kind of definition which enables the conquerors to take slaves. The book takes the limits off the definitions so that we can more readily see the conquerors as the real savages. Throughout the book, the crisp analysis of language is always in relationship to its Cartesian other- the body. The explorers, their European financial backers and the nobility they served all used language to effectively ask the exploitation and mutilation of

the body of the land and its people. In an emotionally charged section of the book, women, the west, and land are equated as virgins. Rape becomes the final metaphor. Using the writings of the perpetrators, Small and Jaffe let the abusers damn themselves. The soldiers attempt to justify their actions by portraying the victims as willing participants, thereby meting out a double punishment.

Jaffe's poems are pointed compilations of each section. They act as another kind of telling of the same story. They are contemporary, using slogans- "burn, baby, burn"- to heighten the intensity of our multi-cultural and cross-historical reading. As with the rest of the book, they say "then as now."

The ending of the book is marred by a glib tone that exaggerates the point that has already been made. However, this is a book whose message does stay. It is a visually inviting, well-designed and hard-hitting paper-bound artists' book that has made the commercial leap into regular, independent bookstores. That the crossover happened with a book this edgy says much for the quality of this book, the changed status and acceptance of visual books, and the importance of independent booksellers who are not tied down by corporate buying decisions.

*The thirteenth day
moistened the earth
and kneaded the mud
into a body
like ours.*

In stories and myths, our bodies come from mud and stones. But the issue at stake in all of these books is blood and bones and the color of the skin that covers them. In a Macintosh computer Hypercard stack entitled **easily remembered/conveniently forgotten**, St. Paul artist **Colette Gaiter** leads us through the structures of power relationships based on race and gender.^v The initial screen image of the table of contents is designed as a tree. It is a metaphor that works on all levels for this piece: the family tree, the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, the tree of good and evil. Hanging from the branches are icons to select and open. One selection reproduces another table of contents from a history textbook: "The first white men arrive; Columbus discovers America; Women brought to Jamestown; The first slave ships." A ship sails over politically charged texts, accompanied by the sound of waves. The ramifications of these historical events are examined in this piece; the listing reads as an outline.

By selecting another icon, we hear and read the story of the eagle and cat. Like an allegory in a children's book, the anthropomorphic animals relate their tales simply and purposefully. This is the story of two individuals who overcame many hardships in order to work within the system to gain power. Gaiter makes it clear that the eagle represents Clarence Thomas and the cat represents Anita Hill. This telling brings up all the issues of body and text/truth and lies that were at stake not only during the Supreme Court confirmation hearings but are at the heart of all power relationships.

The struggle is laid out most succinctly in another section where we try on someone else's skin. By choosing various combinations of race, gender, educational and financial backgrounds, we can have our fortunes told. Covering health, money, work and personal

possibilities, the fortunes spell out our chances of “making it.” As one card tells us, “You are often losing the game before you even begin. In a 1990 national poll of chief executives at Fortune 1000 companies, 80% acknowledged that discrimination impedes female employee’s progress.”

In a Hypercard stack the reader is allowed to make many choices. Each choice opens up another path, but the endings are always predetermined. It is an intriguing medium to explore race and gender relationships, because in fact we are not able to choose our race, and very few change their gender. But the predetermined endings do not have to be accepted, and we are determined to change them. This work allows us to see what it would be like living in another’s body. Understanding can be the beginning of change.

Ultimately, change is what this anniversary encouraged. A rash of biographies, textbooks and novels sought to revise our one-sided notions of history. Museums and galleries sought to educate with culturally inclusive art exhibitions. But the trouble with anniversaries is that they only come around once every five hundred years. The title of Colette Gaiter’s work reminds us that all too readily these concerns are *easily remembered/conveniently forgotten*. The work of these artists, and others before them, will not let us forget. The last line of the Mayan creation story is:

*Thus
it is remembered
in Yucatan.*

Telling the ancient story makes history a part of our present. It is in the present that we can act, effect change, and write the history of the next 500 years.

ⁱ Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire: I. Genesis*, translated by Cedric Belfrage. Pantheon Books, NY, 1985. Originally published in Spain in 1982 as *memoria del fuego, I. Los nacimientos*. The two other titles in the trilogy are *Memory of Fire: II. Faces and Masks* and *Memory of Fire III. Century of the Wind*.

ⁱⁱ Cheri Gaulke, *The Los Angeles: River Inside a River*, in collaboration with high school teacher Susan Boyle and students Susan Barron, Jose Esquivel, Leonardo Martinz and Manuel Ortega. Published in 1991 by Cheri Gaulke, 1336 North Occidental Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90026.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mel Watkin, *Black & Blue: Hearts and Minds*, Pyramid Atlantic, 6001 66th Ave., Riverdale, MD 20737. 1991.

^{iv} Deborah Small with Maggie Jaffe, *1492: What Is It Like to Be Discovered?*, Monthly Review Press, 122 West 27th St., New York, NY 10001. 1991.

^v Colette Gaiter, *easily remembered/conveniently forgotten*, available from Colette Gaiter, M.C.A.D., 2501 Stevens Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55408. 1992.