

2006

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Scheinman, Pamela, "Suellen Glashausser: Books as Revelation" (2006). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 319.
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Suellen Glashausser: Books as Revelation

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Suellen Glashausser insisted she was a professional artist because she wasn't suited for anything else. Just as she assigned herself a weekly day to see art in New York, packing a sandwich and apple so as not to waste precious time, Glashausser pushed her own work into new territory with each annual exhibit at Amos Eno Gallery, the cooperative she joined in 1976. Her titles were terse and descriptive: *Mounds* (1977), *Stacks* (1978), *Fences* (1979), *Trestles* (1980), *Paper Shadows* (1982), *Columns/Wedges* (1984), *Gardens* (1985), etc. They reflected her interest in structure, repetition and infinite variation. These concerns also appear in her books, which rather than being laboratories of ideas, became distillations of larger pieces. Despite its changeability, Glashausser's work always was immediately identifiable. The person and work appeared one.

Trained as a painter at Manhattanville College, in Purchase, New York, Glashausser earned an M.F.A. at the University of California, Berkeley, under Ed Rossbach—a pioneer in the contemporary reinterpretation of textile structures. Two other Berkeley mentors--Joanne Segal Brandford, who taught textile history, and Lillian Elliot on off-loom techniques—based their innovative nets and baskets on ethnographic research. In 1976 Glashausser published a book on plaiting with Carol Westfall, head of the fibers program at Montclair State, where we three were colleagues. Before taking over the papermaking area, she offered a range of textile classes, along with occasional stints in drawing, and two-dimensional design.

Plaiting, rather than Minimalism probably accounts for the primacy of the grid in her books. As writers on feminism in the 1970s and 80s noted, many women artists, wrestling with fragmented time and limited space, used the grid as an organizing principle. For example, grids and serial imagery figure prominently in the process-driven sculpture of Jackie Winsor and Eva Hesse, as well as in plaited paper pieces by Neda al-Hilali. Glashausser also admired the subtle, all-white paintings of Robert Reiman, which deal with surface texture and mark-making. Her pages—layered, pricked and sewn—reward touch. However, the books show equal affinity to *Pattern & Decoration*. Painters like Kim Mac Connell and Miriam Shapiro recycled anonymous domestic linens, revaluing bright color and kitsch sensibility. Undeniably, a love of folk art, especially what the French call *bricolage*, was added to this mix.

Glashausser began making books when she traveled, in hotel rooms and rented sabbatical apartments. She organized easily-portable materials on a tray, small table or desk, then assembled and stitched them together. Casual in appearance, the books were fabricated with deliberate care. Stitching was her glue. Like Robert Rauschenberg, she made collage an adventure, searching city streets for “the commonplace, the castoff, worn-out and forgotten” (Tompkins 1980:136). In Paris she frequented flea markets and stationery stores; in New York City, Canal Street; and at home in suburban New Jersey, thrift stores and rummage sales. A short list of found materials she used in books includes: paper cups, candy wrappers, labels printed in English, French and Chinese, glassine, old postcards, cheesecloth, brown bags, tulle, rickrack,

aluminum mesh and flashing, sheet copper, metal fasteners, balsa veneer, German stickers and plastic fruit.

What she found and the way she shaped it are clues to the artist's whereabouts and "obsessions," a narrative of her personal history. She celebrated things domestic, without over-sentimentalizing or subverting tradition. Although Glashausser's books have no connection to Surrealism, they share with that artistic movement a quest for the *marvelous*, or what the posthumous retro-spective exhibit held at Rutgers University's John Cotton Dana Library, in Newark, subtitled "Enduring Delight." Subsequently, the collection of some seventy artist's books and her archives were donated to Special Collections at Alexander Library in New Brunswick, N.J. My thanks go to Michael Joseph and Fernanda Perrone for access to 18 boxes of material and the loan of slides.

In the 2002 exhibit catalog co-curator Barbara Valenta underlined Glashausser's innovative edge treatments and methods of holding pages together. This skill was honed in bookbinding classes at the Sorbonne. Basted bindings frequently bordered each page for decorative effect. In *Metal Book with Leaves* (1987), pages end in serrated peaks and scallops. Tiny, navy balls dot the perimeter of *Best & Co.* (c.1980-82), reminiscent of buttons on preppy cable-knit sweaters or the crocheted trim applied to Turkish women's kerchiefs that Glashausser purchased on a trip to research feltmaking. Even with the woven cloth labels applied backwards, the ladylike image of the now-defunct Fifth Avenue store comes across. Her book sends up label snobbery, while it simultaneously celebrates the hidden beauty of threads on the flip side.

Many of Glashausser's books rely on visual logic instead of words. For example, *Closed Book* (s.a.), haphazardly bound with black wire and sparkling with magenta mylar stitching, is a fixed object, unreadable. It stands for the magical promise held in books, rather than bristling at censorship. *AEIOU* (1987) looks like a children's primer. Its texture and geometry seem to mimic Christo's wrapping of the Pont Neuf in Paris, which Glashausser enthusiastically witnessed during a sabbatical leave. (That same year she bound tree branches, into large vowels for an installation in Belgium.)

Codes, made-up symbols and scientific notation all turn up in her books, complete with cross-outs and erasures that play with legibility. *Woosh Gat Deasomly* (1983) suggests her love of spoken language and proud Irish heritage. Here she rubber stamped archaic or nonsense words to make a sound poem. In *Linen Book* (1996) Glashausser also painstakingly embroidered a treatise with copper wire in her own cursive handwriting. However, the real tour de force is the line printed on disposable coffee cups, then common to New York area diners. *It's Our Pleasure to Serve You* (1997), embellished with embroidery and a ruffle, like a monogrammed waitress's apron, simultaneously echoes and mocks a familiar motto—conflating courtesy and servility.

Glashausser altered orthodox book categories to her own purpose. Valenta listed spiral notebooks, travel books, shaped books, pop-ups and flexagons (intricately folded from a single sheet); to which I would add albums, alphabet books, scrap-books, holiday books, receipt and ticket books, diaries and inventories. Paris repeatedly lured her back. In *Fontainebleau II, III* (1987) thread and colored pencil applied to old souvenir books evoke the faded glory of Glashausser's favorite chateau. Stacks of identical postcards, like those found free in advertising dispensers, showed off her virtuosity. Promotional pieces from a fashion salon were cut out, assembled and boxed, coffin-like, in the camp *Gautier Fan* (1991). Another fan shape was made

of copper mesh in leaf shapes. And Afghani knit gloves and Christmas angels presented fresh silhouettes.

In conclusion, Glashausser made books that embrace accumulation and contradiction. Meanings, like materials, are juxtaposed and layered, suggestive rather than literal. She wanted the viewer to participate and react: to see books in a new way. Her predilection for found materials shows that she also was conscious of memory, of treasures passed down from one generation to the next and of the capriciousness with which we retain or discard things, remember or forget. As an intimate medium, bookmaking complemented her sculptural work and stressed her textile roots.

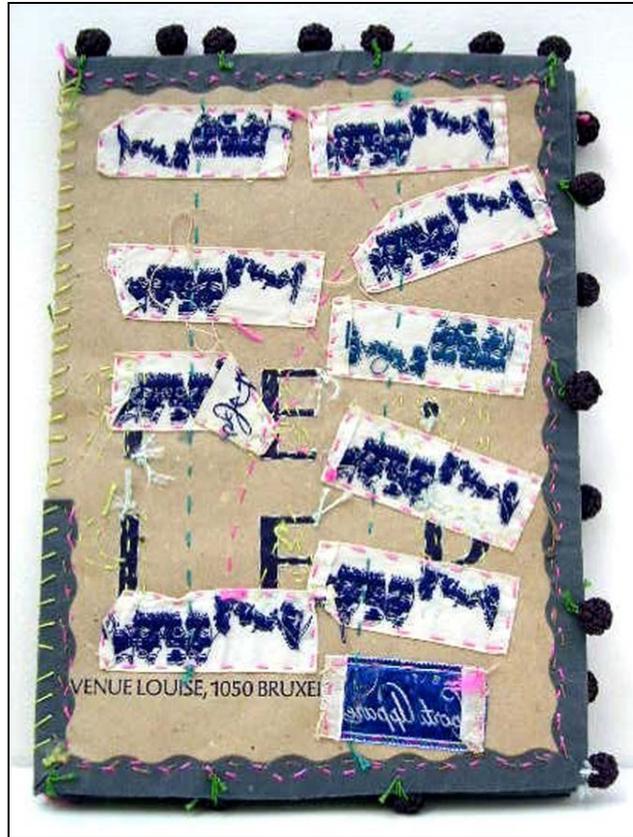
Today these books remain remarkably playful and relevant.



Vielle Fine. 1987. Belgian liquor labels, thread, mull.



Digital Hankie. 2000. Paper, ribbon, thread, cloth, scanned images.



Best & Co. c. 1981-82. Brown paper bags, labels, seam binding, thread.



Fast Food. 1995. Paper, labels, pencil, seam binding, thread, empty French fry wrappers.



It's Our Pleasure to Serve You. 1997. Paper cups, thread, pencil, cloth.



Gautier Fan (left). 1991. Tin, copper, paper, tape, cardboard.



Leaf Fan Book (right). 1991. Metal, cloth, thread copper.

References

- Tomkins, Calvin. *Off the Wall: the Art World of our Time*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980.
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