Shellie Jacobson: An Interpretative Case Study of Her Artists Books
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Foreword

Shellie Jacobson (b. 1944), a book and ceramic artist, intertwines her personal and political perspectives into unique works of art. First-hand experiences and individual relationships are the inspirational source of Jacobson’s work. An interview between the author and the artist conducted in summer 2012 and fall 2013 is the basis for the interpretative case study. The interpretative case study focuses on temporal and spatial entanglements endemic to diasporic cultural identity, construction of visual narratives that reflect a broad humanitarianism through the use of innovative malleable materials, and critical pedagogies that forward a rethinking of the structure of a book itself, the calligraphic line, and the multiple voices inherent in creating a global aesthetic awareness. Jacobson’s interdisciplinary artists books reflect her introspective yet proactive practice to advance global understanding. Social inquiry has left behind utopian enchantments for the instabilities of real-world circumstances—(Tavin, 2003) all underscoring Jacobson’s interactive professional and pedagogical practices.

Diasporic Cultural Identity

Figure 1. Symbols, 2008, 22”H x1”W, clay, hand built, glazes, stains.

Jacobson’s fourteen-year work history as a book artist, and thirty-year career as a ceramic artist merge in her most recent work. During the interview and on her website (www.shelliejacobson.com), Jacobson explains how her ceramic pieces are about the organic and plastic vocabulary of clay:
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“The pieces explore how clay can be torn, folded, pinched, scored, imprinted, pierced, and textured as it is transformed into vessels. I incorporate accidental marks during the building process. I develop this vocabulary with hand building processes, mainly slabs, with the additional support of pinching and coiling. I see these slabs as sheets of paper that I can transform into vessel forms. I also work on modular wall pieces as a canvas for monotype print making using ceramic materials. These prints become my journal, as places to record thoughts or reactions to the world outside my studio. The text on some of these pages reflects my interest in ancient written language. Inspiration for my vessels most often comes from nature. I like to study how nature unfolds, connects, and weathers objects both organic and man-made. There is a keen connection between the clay work and the artist’s books where paper, cloth and board can also be torn, folded, textured and layered. Each medium informs the other.”

Jacobson spends two months a year in Israel where she has many friends and the other ten months of the year in central New Jersey. As an artist, she relishes finding remnants of Hebrew script in ancient sites and ceramic shards in the layers of civilization that have existed in the country over the centuries. Her cultural attachment to Judaism and a diasporic aesthetic is demonstrated through her incorporation of ancient Hebrew script on various surfaces of her artists books. The Hebrew language is a temporal and spatial link for the artist between past and present, the modern state of Israel, and the Jewish diaspora.

During the initial stages of creating her own work, Jacobson says, “sometimes I get an idea of how I want the book to look and find the materials that will fill my vision.” Jacobson often abandons the mock-ups she makes of books and is not afraid to start anew. Although she has a great love for paper, she can easily include non-traditional book materials such as found objects, used tea bags or clay in her artists books. She enjoys exploring the limitless possibilities of flexible artistic media for visual problem solving. The malleable material of clay and handmade paper invites a palimpsest aesthetic to explore ancient and modern history, collapsing time and space while reflecting her diasporic cultural identity.
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Visual Narrative

Figure 2. Panoply, 2007, 19” H x 14” W x 1 ½”

Jacobson describes her artist’s book, Panoply, as a garment designed to be used like a protective shield. The garment is assembled with used, translucent tea bags that form the structure and support for the text of the artist’s book. Black and white prints of amulets and red paper colored squares create the pictorial language on the rectangular grid of tea bags. Jacobson thought of the numerous examples of graffiti of the evil eye, a type of amulet, of which she had taken photos in Tel Aviv, Israel. It was those random graffiti images that gave her the idea to use the images of the evil eye on the tea bags, reinforcing the garment’s protective powers. The bottom edge of Panoply is a flowered border made from triangles, a repeated motif on the garment. Red and gold threads dangle from the bottom and side edges like a tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl. A thin accordion spine book (2 3/4”W x 2 5/8” H x 3/8” D) rests on the right shoulder. Jacobson’s motivation for creating Panoply was a frightening event: “When I heard northern Israel was being shelled from Lebanon, and my friends might be in danger, I wanted to somehow protect them from harm.” K’name hora, a Yiddish phrase that the artist heard during childhood, is meant to prevent the evil eye from recognizing and endangering someone you love. K’name hora is Yiddish for the Hebrew expression “b’li ayin hara” meaning without the evil eye. The term originates from the 10th Commandment prohibition to covet someone else’s possessions. The 10th Commandment extends to question one’s heart or motivation to want what one does not have.

Tea and conversation were always a part of Jacobson’s visits to friends in Haifa in northern Israel. She saved used tea bags for future use as art materials imagining their potential symbolic significance. On Panoply, numerous tea bags are sewn together, on support paper, like pages in
an open book forming a protective vest. The pages of the book can be read then all at once with no page turning. On many of the tea bags, Jacobson attached images of different kinds of amulets, including the evil eye, triangles of silver, buttons, and red, silver, and gold threads. Embedding the Semitic abecedarian in the artist’s book was accomplished by using clay mono prints, which were previously scanned to be adapted into the tea bag vest. The translucent texture of the soaked tea bags imbues the garment with a materiality weighted with social connotations of shared conversation, friendship, and support.

Incidentally, the communal space of a café is the setting for the Israeli writer Etgar Keret’s short story “Joseph” (2010) where the characters are drinking espresso and water and perhaps other people in the café are drinking tea. Keret’s short story adroitly captures the loss of innocence where the characters become meaningless during a suicide bomb attack. Keret’s clever use of language employs the phrase, ‘it could be a hit’ that refers to an amalgam of future plans for a humanitarian program, a producer’s film project, or a suicide bomber’s plot. The allusion refers to the idea that the flow of time is often punctuated by the unexpected. The short three-page story swirls around haunting ideas of nothingness and possibilities hinted at through telltale words and phrases “change,” “malicious,” “surprise,” ”no escape,” “trap,” “unsuspectingly,” “frankness,” and “hit.” Keret ponders how “it’s all a matter of angle and distance,” of who gets to live and who gets to die. Jacobson understands that tragedies, not unlike Keret’s suicide bomber incident, car bombings, and cross-border shelling with their deaths and injuries are a fragmented locale for her artists books.

Jacobson and Keret’s aesthetics converges on the communal act of drinking tea or espresso as culturally emblematic of friendship and shared conversation in the Middle East. However, they both recognize the narrowness of their stage, where the lamination of the menu cannot protect Keret’s dancing waiter and Jacobson’s soaked tea bags cannot be a protective amulet against unforeseen danger. Jacobson and Keret, unbeknownst to each other, refer in artifact and word to their powerlessness against arbitrary deadly happenstances.

In Jacobson’s artists books, time and timing is a precarious yet precious backdrop. In Panoply (2007) and Street Angels (2011), there is a deeply empathetic and profound need to protect
victims from politically motivated terrorism where the victims have no culpability. The content of Jacobson’s artists books appears to evolve from a concern for individuals. The artists books move into a more political context with a heartfelt appeal to stop attacks on repositories of history and literature, and symbols of culture. The artist completed Panoply when the bombing of the Al-Mutanabbi bookstore in Baghdad took place in March 2007; this event redirected the artist’s book making from the personal to the more political.

**Figure 3. Street Angels, 2011,**
8 1/2” H x 5 1/4” W x 7/8” D

Jacobson’s *Street Angels* (2011), a concertina book, was created in response to the above-mentioned car bombing of a bookstore: “When opened fully, the red, off-white and black book reveals pamphlet signatures full of many papers with ancient writing on them, tucked under hand rubbed prints. These small prints are black on red paper and are held open at the edge by a single thread. Jacobson reveals that hand sewing is evident on every page, in red and grey threads.” The tragedy of the Baghdad Al-Mutanabbi bookstore bombing has contemporary and historical significance. During the Abbasid Empire, (9th -13th centuries), Baghdad was the home to the acclaimed Islamic House of Wisdom, an unrivalled center for the study of humanities and science. The House of Wisdom was a library, a translation institute, and a research center where Persian, Christian, and Arab scholars exchanged ideas. The city of Baghdad had an established reputation of cherishing learning and the transmission of classical wisdom in medicine, astronomy, literature, and other fields. The historical resonance and legacy of the House of Wisdom can be found in the cultural salience of the Al-Mutanabbi bookstore in Baghdad. The destruction of the revered bookstore is retold and re-imagined through many artists books in an
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international traveling exhibition. This can be accessed at www.al-mutanabbistreetstartshere.com with exhibits that began in 2012 and continue worldwide through 2016.

Jacobson describes Street Angels as her most politically driven book. When she first began to develop Street Angels she sought to connect a remote car bombing, death, and injury during the Iraqi war. At first, she felt the incident seemed too remote. As she thought about the tragedy of Al-Mutanabbi bookstore, she remembered Kristallnacht and the book burnings in pre-WWII Europe. She began to equate the attacks on the Jews in Germany with the more recent attack on Al-Mutanabbi Street of booksellers and intellects. After she made these initial connections, the incident became universal for her. The more she thought about the losses, the people, the futility of trying to destroy books, the more personal the connection became and then she was able to proceed with the creation of the book. The accordion book Street Angels folds in and out like walking through the aisles of a shop or window browsing on a meandering street; the blood of the victims from the bombing resonant through Jacobson’s use of red soaked hand-made paper pages.

The artist employs the historical memory of Kristallnacht as a method of collapsing time. Jacobson calls attention to the fact that the victims of the bookstore bombing are both people and books. The burned books and scattered book pages after the actual bombing were the impetus for the layered compositional structure of Street Angels. The background pages were constructed from an ancient map that was slightly altered with added ancient Semitic and Arabic text. The top overlapping pages in the accordion book Street Angels utilize black relief abstracted figurative forms of angels printed on red paper; these are symbolic of the victims of the bombing. Jacobson extends the nuanced aesthetic conversation to reference a 1926 Book of Kabbalah (writings of ancient Jewish mystical interpretations of the Bible) from Morocco and the superstition of the evil eye. An understanding of the Jewish diaspora in the twentieth century may evoke the public view on the global diaspora of many different cultural groups.
Critical Pedagogies

In the Bridging the Arts’ museum-based interdisciplinary art program at the Hunterdon Art Museum in Clinton, New Jersey (2001), Jacobson introduced middle school students to artist’s book making: the objective was to bring awareness to the issues of social, political or cultural inequity. The Hunterdon Art Museum’s exhibition of the African American artist Mel Edwards’ (b. 1937) etchings and relief sculptures from The Lynch Fragment series was the catalyst for this book-making project. Edwards’ studio in Plainfield, New Jersey, a former foundry, is overflowing with rusty artillery shells, tools, and welded-steel wall reliefs. Edwards’ reliefs are an assemblage, made with half-submerged objects like chains, hammer heads and spikes. According to the art critic Carol Kino (October 21, 2012), the objects seem to struggle against each other.

Jacobson’s artist book making project with the middle school students created ‘girdle books’ like the ones monks used to wear centuries ago. These highly transportable spiritually uplifting books let the monks pray in the fields as well as in their chambers. When the students returned to their schools, they were asked to develop texts for the girdle books on personal social justice issues. To envision the girdle books, Jacobson encouraged the students to conceptualize social or political ideas that were meaningful to them. The students’ quotidian experiences offered the opportunity to commingle issues of cultural identity and global politics. She encouraged the students to experiment with found materials to explore issues of justice and fairness such as child labor, human trafficking, hunger, climate change, pollution, food safety, and global health. Because Jacobson understands that inspiration arises from unexpected encounters and new places, her critical pedagogy looks to social metaphors or analogies as a way to expedite students’ thinking for their visual narrative.

Methodology

Jacobson begins her classes with guided questions, always with the conjectural stance of “what if?” It is an open-ended invitation, a part of social critical inquiry, for students to concurrently
explore content and materiality. The “what if” of the museum studio classroom created moments of uncertainty, the time to reject the obvious and open up to new ideas and a wide spectrum of perspectives inclusive of issues of social justice. According to Elizabeth Garber (2004), critical inquiry is related to Paolo Freire’s notion of praxis, meaning that students learn to reflect and act on the world to transform it. Students according to Freire need to be participants in their education to evoke necessary social change. Both social and critical inquiry pedagogies privilege content so that the social cultural context can be a strategy to work towards social justice. (Anderson, 1989). In the art classroom, to privilege content is to recognize that sculptural and graphic constructions and images have the same power to uncover and depict injustices as oral or written language.

In the classroom, storytelling is both personal and political. Storytelling, through the aesthetic reinventions of books, with or without words, fuels the readers’ desire to turn the page in anticipation of new visual experiences. Several of Jacobson’s books have no text, engendering conjecture, a necessary component of critical pedagogy. She asks readers to bring their own story to fill out what they envision to be in the book. Single page folded books, simple pop-ups, adding binding with a pamphlet stitch and moving on to making book covers is the instructional path Jacobson takes to introduce the multiple steps in various book constructions.

Jacobson’s love of paper, its global history and myriad forms, opens up a discussion on the essential structure of a book. During classroom dialogue, students are introduced to the diversity of the calligraphic line, at times, imbued with meaning in a language one understands and, at other times, a linear artistic element with varying directionality and dimensionality. In the making of visual narratives, separating out the construction of the format of the book from its calligraphic elements is a stimulating process enabling new aesthetic and linguistic perspectives.

For a Professional Development workshop for secondary school teachers on artists books, Jacobson showcases carousel, concertina, pamphlet, butterfly and/or Jacob’s ladder formatted hand-made books. “Using a concertina format” says Jacobson, “allows for infinite creative possibilities; it is one way to format dialogue for multiple voices.” Jacobson feels that “sewing additional pages into the fold can suggest numerous ideas, pages hinged and lifted from the top
can reveal hidden voices or windows cut into added pages can frame various points of view.” Jacobson notes that “multidirectional books have the potential to encourage conversations on such emotively difficult topics as school shootings and bullying opening up the unfolding pages to divergent voices of victims, perpetrators and bystanders.”

To best enable interpersonal interactions that engender social inquiry, Jacobson divides the class into small groups of three and four teachers. Jacobson asks each group of teachers to assign one person in each group to describe the artist’s book that is in front of them — one person to imagine the art making processes and one person to analyze the content based on a peer’s description of the artist book’s appearance and art making process. One member of each group reads the critique aloud in order to provoke dialogue and delve into the meaning of the visual narratives; teachers then listen, share, and debate the ideas presented by each group. The teachers are now ready to begin construction of their books. Jacobson usually suggests that the teachers select a topic meaningful to the whole class and individually choose the type of artist’s book format that best reflects its germane message. After Jacobson’s modeling of the technical processes to construct the selected formats of the artists books, the teachers then create personal narratives based on the newly learned spatial constructions.

Afterword

Arbitrary shootings and bombings have become personal and political visual platforms, reinforcing the dynamics of instability, requiring a re-conceptualizing of prior ideas of place in everyday life. The interpretative case study of Shellie Jacobson’s artists books centers on a) exploration of diasporic cultural identity, collapsing time and space through the use of ancient and modern Semitic script and unique artistic constructions, b) visual narratives reflecting a broad humanitarianism through the use of innovative malleable materials, and c) facilitation of critical pedagogies to engage students of all ages in the advocacy for the amelioration of human injustices. Jacobson’s professional artistic practice as a ceramicist and book artist informs her pedagogy. The artist’s facilitation of social inquiry and risk-taking in the classroom energizes
students to conceptualize content paired with unique artistic materials to invent transformative visual narratives.

References

Web Sources:
www.shelliejacobson.com
www.al-mutanabbistreetstartshere.com