

In Parallel – three contemporary bookbinders

In Parallel
29 September –
27 October 2012

Ian Rastrick Fine Art
38 Holywell Hill
St. Albans AL1 1BU
01727 840043
www.ianrastrick.com

Art can slow down time. Not all art but some art, the kind of art that has links with aspects of last century modernism and with minimalism. This is art that comes in quietly and which might not be noticed or which appears to hold back because of its purity and, occasionally, its sheer strangeness. It could be described as outsider art, made by highly skilled, sophisticated individuals – Moondog, Howard Skempton, Michael Parsons and Cornelius Cardew in music, Hyphen Press and CB Editions in publishing, Edmund de Waal and Gwyn Hanssen Pigott in ceramics. In art – well, art is less easy because everything is now mainstream but let us try Kurt Schwitters, Anthony Hill or maybe John Stezaker. In architecture we have Le Corbusier's Le Petit Cabanon and his studio shed in the South of France.

Earlier this year, at the end of January, I was lucky enough to see a piece called Surface in the exhibition Formed thoughts curated by Clare Twomey at Jerwood Space in London. Despite the gallery setting I nearly missed Surface in all its shimmering quiet beauty. It was made of graphite densely drawn, layer upon layer, straight onto the gallery wall by Tracey Rowledge with a team of helpers. It took ten arduous days to complete. Something easy to miss, but absolutely engaging when noticed, sums up the kind of art that I have been trying to describe.

Does bookbinding have a place in this aesthetic? It seems promising on one level. Bookbinding is obscure. Less promisingly it is a luxury craft and more recently it has shadowed avant-garde strategies in fine art, while always remaining a step or two behind. But bookbinding is just as much about functional design as it is about art. The purpose of a binding is to protect and aid in the appreciation of another work of art – a text. If you style yourself an artist bookbinder, this can be inherently frustrating. So inevitably perhaps, the 'art' of modern bookbinding has sought to overturn its subsidiary role. Contemporary bookbinding has been prone to mannerist indulgence.

So how to be a functional designer and also an artist in the context of bookbinding? In Parallel shows the way. One of the exhibitors is Tracey Rowledge, who also shows non-bindings – two panels and an object, the unsettling Detour. The two other exhibitors are Jen Lindsay, author of *Fine Bookbinding: a technical guide*, a book of remarkable beauty, and Kathy Abbott, whose creativity flowered in the unlikely setting of the bindery she created at Bernard Quaritch Ltd. Abbott is deeply concerned with *matière* – using heavily grained skins in expressive way, poetically making material both her means and subject. Her use of Kintsugi – a transferred technology from Japanese tea-bowl repair – takes conservation to a new creative level. Lindsay's work, on the other hand, is characterised by quiet grandeur. Can a binding be recognisably 'scholarly', even to a non-specialist? Certainly Lindsay's work subtly communicates learning even if we don't pick up the exact references. All are founder members of Tomorrow's Past, an international group of binders who mend antiquarian books and give them calmly beautiful conservation bindings that are not period imitations. But aside from Tomorrow's Past as a trio they present a united front in that all their bindings are supremely sensitive to function as well as being undeniably modern, even minimalist. In Parallel is their first shared exhibition. As I write it has yet to be arranged in the gallery. But it belongs where this short essay began. It comes in quietly, slows down time and, in its purity, can best be appreciated as a species of outsider art, created by highly skilled and sophisticated insiders.

Tanya Harrod
September 2012