

The Book as Art by Karen Ward

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Viridian 2012

Chris Bond, Viridian, 2012, oil, canvas, card and MDF on linen. Courtesy: the artist and Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne

image source: www.artcollector.net.au/ChrisBondwinsArthurGuyMemorialPaintingPrize

My sister-in-law rang me just before leaving for a summer holiday in Europe to explain that she and her husband had booked into a five hour private tour at the Uffizi in Florence. This would be fantastic ... but! These elite experiences, generally spoon feed a conservative cultural seeking audience, who need things explained in detail in order for them to understand. There is little time for a pure aesthetic 'gut' response to the works. Yes, there certainly is WOW factor in the breadth and depth of the Uffizi's wonderful collection, but the explanations of iconography, historic setting, patronage and a little bit of gossip (to lighten the experience) all add up to a formulaic, shorthanded understanding and experiencing of art. And it must be stressed that, particularly at the Uffizi, it is the masterworks of the past that are viewed and appreciated, not contemporary art. Contemporary art is still perceived by many to be not the 'real' thing - it is often problematic, impenetrable and it does not reflect

life. Whereas the ‘masters’ are known, revered and for many, set the benchmark for all art to follow - in realism and technique.

Interestingly, realism and technique have returned to contemporary art over the recent past and the winning painting of the Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prize 2013 at the Bendigo Art Gallery, is a ‘realist’ constructed book by Chris Bond titled **Viridian**. It also happens to be the smallest work in this exhibition and begs personal, quite intense inspection.

There is something familiar and comfortable about this small troupe-l’oeil work. The painting’s image of Jackson Pollock splaying paint over a canvas on the floor, is known to us all, it is a quintessential Pollock image. I also vaguely recognized the book’s format, despite the lack of text. Bond’s visual reference is one of the ‘Poligrafa Essentials’. A rigidly formatted reference book series on influential 20th. century artists. These books all have the same text style, per se *Jackson Pollock: Works, Writings, Interviews by Nancy Jachec and Jackson Pollock*. And the same graphic format. The text is placed in the upper half of the front cover and in the bottom half is an iconic photograph of the artist, in this case Pollock. Yet, this book on Pollock was only published in 2011. So obviously, modernism still remains a potent artistic, historic and philosophic proposition.

The artist John Baldassari once wrote in regard to Gordon Matta-Clark’s work that “Gordon’s work spotlights and pinpoints one of the crucial ideas of modern art ... actually doing and redoing an absurd idea”.

This resonates with Bond’s work. **Viridian** was exhibited as part of his 2012 exhibition at Nellie Castan Gallery entitled **Skeleton Field**. This exhibition consisted of nine recreated books about Jackson Pollock, the disengaged titles of each work being the colour of the painting. Hence the titles were Viridian, Crimson and Olive *et cetera*.

But why this obsession with Pollock?

I am reminded of Rauchenberg’s 1953 **Erased de Kooning Drawing**. Rauchenberg had wanted to make art out of art, to investigate where drawing could or could not go, to push the boundaries of what art might be. He discussed his ideas with de Kooning who eventually agreed to give Rauchenberg one of his drawings. At that time de Kooning was one of the masters of American abstract expressionism, while Rauchenberg was part of the new-wave of younger up-and-coming artists. It took Rauchenberg some time to carefully erase the de Kooning drawing, with only the faintest of the embedded de Kooning marks remaining. But this was a more symbolically act, than just the erasing of a valuable drawing, it was Rauchenberg’s attempt to erase the hegemonic hold that de Kooning and his coterie had on American and thereby Western contemporary art. Rauchenberg wanted to make way for a new generation of artists with new ideas and new ways of seeing the world, post Greenbergian formalism.

Clement Greenberg was the most influential American art critic of the 1940s and 1950s and he championed Pollock. Greenberg, espoused the importance of aesthetics through abstraction, believing in the formal qualities of composition while he advocated a dissolution of the subject in painting. Hence, Pollock became the perfect artist to illustrate Greenberg's early theories, as his physical painting process using non-traditional paints, on large unframed canvases on the floor, 'his arena of action', created a revolutionary new era in American art. Pollock was also the epitome of the outsider, the archetypal romantic individualist pitted against an uncaring and uninformed world. Thus, he was the perfect person to carry the new American artistic mantle during the post war years; the free American artist, painting large artistically free painting, in the land of the free.

In a similar manner to Rauchenberg, Bond's 'absurd idea', of faithfully creating reproductions of books on Pollock, minus any external or internal text, is a means of silencing the past. However, Bond illusionistically made *Viridian* and his other books appear worn and torn as if they had been much loved and much read. This is an intriguing dichotomy of a wordless book that carries such cultural baggage. This may be an artistic conceit, but the presence of the book as object remains, as does the subject of painting and painting's history remain, in this beautifully crafted work.

On re-viewing this exhibition, the following morning after the award was announced, I was sad to see an 'explanation' board of the painter's intent next to the work. This was unnecessary and confounds my belief that art needs to be discovered initially, aesthetically. This small work needs to be visually and physically experienced. Art requires this 'one to one' physical and emotional investment in its viewing, not relying on the facts and figures to facilitate a response. They can come later. They can inform the experience, they are not the experience.