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10th Anniversary Issue



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March/April 2016

Free or \$5.99 mailed copy

GAIL SMUDA

DON'T JUDGE A BOOK...



With paper and fabric, stitches, ribbon, lace, embroidery and reclaimed antique objects, Gail Smuda uses the contemporary art form of the artist's book to reach into the past, creating intriguing objects that convey stories of another time.

Artist's books can be a challenging medium to understand. Most people expect to view art at a distance, eyes only, perhaps from behind a rope or a painted line on the floor that reminds them not to get too close. Smuda's books require a more intimate engagement. They are small, with multiple pages that must be turned or unfurled to find the treasures within.

Some stand alone, like "The Burning of the Convent," hand-stitched fabric pages with "Love" on one cover and "Hate" on the other. Others have containers: "Cats of Nine Tales" has nine tiny paper books, each tucked within its own box, within one larger box. "Memoirs of a Victorian House" includes an open-fronted dollhouse that serves as a bookshelf for the stitched and embroidered paper books within.

"What amazes me is that even artists don't know what an artist's book is," Smuda said. "It's a self-defining medium as we get farther and farther away from a traditional book. Sometimes it has no pages, or no words, or it doesn't open. It's a created, unique object

Traveling Man (photograph by Charley Freiberg).



rather than a published book." And sometimes artist's books are published: Smuda has created editions as well as individual works. "Storytelling plays a big part, but not necessarily a written story. My work has always been very conceptual, so it may be very obscure. Everybody brings their own story to the artwork. There are things you're not conscious of, but they're there."

Many of Smuda's books address the lives of 19th and early 20th century women in America. She explains that while she doesn't necessarily decide to make work about that era, it so fascinates her that she keeps returning to it. "There were opportunities opening for women but there was also a struggle. I also think about how things were going to get better. Americans tend to deny or ignore or forget our history." Smuda is clear that this is her own 21st century idea of what life was like from the 1880s through World War II, not necessarily how it actually was. Her most recent piece relates to her great aunt, who was a telephone operator. It will be included in "The Art of Conversation" at the New Hampshire Telephone Museum in Warner, New Hampshire, running May through October.

Smuda's small studio is on the second floor of her 19th-century home in Concord, New Hampshire. It is crammed floor to ceiling with shelves of curiosities she's picked up – the ultimate grandmother's attic. "I buy things because they appeal to me, not because I know what I'm going to do with them," Smuda explained. "This is why my studio is so packed with stuff! When I go to make something, 90 percent of what I need is already in the studio."

Smuda also creates collaboratively with other artists. She works with fellow fiber artist Laura Morrison under the name Loosely Knit Alliance, has teamed with four other women artists to create a playable miniature golf course as art, and is currently participating in "Well Used, Well Loved," a project created by York, Maine, fiber artist Sarah Haskell. Said Smuda, "I have been very, very, very lucky in working with people whose judgment I totally respect and whose aesthetic is so much like mine that I can just trust what they're doing."

Smuda's artwork can be found online at gailsmuda.com and on Facebook at Gail Smuda Artist.

Collage of Gail Smuda's bookmaking process (photograph by Charley Freiberg).

THE ART OF CONVERSATION
NEW HAMPSHIRE TELEPHONE MUSEUM
1 DEPOT STREET
WARNER, NEW HAMPSHIRE
THROUGH OCTOBER
GAILSMUDA.COM

| Marcia Santore