

Art review: 'On Books!' is a smart, subtle take on the art of literature

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By Daniel Kany

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The book arts program of the University of Southern Maine is the center of a lively regional sub-community of the arts that has a way of pulling together strong and engaging shows. "On Books!" is another poignant chapter in this ongoing conversation. Curated by Lin Lisberger, one of the state's leading sculptors, as well as one of the most active artists in the area, this iteration of the group's ethic strikes a tone that not only celebrates book arts, but clarifies why such shows so often succeed on so many levels.

Lisberger is a woodcarver. Her sculpture in the show, while it engages the topic of the "essential thingness" of books with impressive conceptual precision, pulses with a personal energy that has long been the hallmark of her carving. In fact, this show brings her work from the past eight or so years into a beneficial focus. I had long been a fan of her carved wood knots. To be sure, this is an ancient subject for carving to the point of a historical trope. But in Lisberger's hands, the topic never veered from acknowledging its antecedents while playing with the idea of time and linear narrative. Her loose and unfussy handling of the material has always gestured

toward the viewer in a loose and unfussy way. Lisberger is brilliant and talented but what seems to matter most to her sense of cultural production is the big tent ethic. Lisberger has long presented a sense of excellence that is easily perceptible by anyone, experts and amateurs alike.

If you go

WHAT: "On Books!," curated by Lin Lisberger for University of Southern Maine Book Arts

WHERE: Lewis Gallery, Portland Public Library, 5 Monument Square, Portland

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday

WHEN: Through March 23

INFO: portlandlibrary.com

Lisberger's work in "On Books!" is no exception. "White Owl Flies into and out of the Field" is a seemingly quiet piece: a wood carved folio (a big flatish piece of paper) with the outline of an owl in flight across it. On top of the silhouette of the bird is a pile of carved wood bits that play the part of some small creature eaten by the owl. The set is simple enough for any child to understand: Here's the shape of the bird with the details geared toward recognition, so you'll know it if you see it. And here's a trace of the bird – like deer tracks or bear poop (my sister used to call them "blueberry piles") – which is proof that it was here.

"On Books!" is a big show with a large number of worthy works, but it's worth taking a moment to follow Lisberger's foray into reminding us how we get knowledge from books. The silhouette and the bone pile are what tell us what kind of bird it is. We'll see a bird in the wild, and we might know it's an owl, for example, but a white owl? A great horned owl?



"White Owl Flies into and out of the Field," by Lin Lisberger

Lisberger's work has long hinted at narrative strands, but underlying her approach has been a determinative chunk of knowledge: Her knots might just be "knots" to most of us, but it should be no surprise that so many of the more salty and seasoned types in our community can tell the difference between a Spanish bowline and a reef knot. I couldn't until I saw some of Lisberger's works. And a white owl? I didn't know there was a "white" snowy owl of the horned owl family until after seeing this work. Yet it's not the specifics of her work but the idea about how we share data. Books are a huge part in this, but in the philosophical realm, we call this epistemology: how we know what we know. Lisberger has in the past carved knots, hot dogs and bird silhouettes and what do we get? We get diamonds.

There are several artists whose work could be discussed at length with Lisberger's. Barbara Sullivan's shaped frescoes with their accompanying piles of hefty books present a snapshot of a brainy – but, for Maine, absurdly common – home life. Duncan Hewitt's "Swan" is another fascinating work, but he's been discussed in this column recently more than others. Rebecca Goodale is a book arts virtuoso and the way her work leaps up the wall from its ostensible box is stunning.

And here we are: Lisberger, Hewitt, Goodale and so many other artists in "On Books!" have

created things that are not books. They are installations, sculptures, dioramas, assemblages and so on. "On Books!" is a perfectly fine book arts show, but it's an excellent installation show, and it's one of the best sculpture exhibitions I have seen in the region in the past year.

Lissa Hunter's "Leaves of Grass" is gorgeous. But what is it? It's a set of porcelain elements on the wall. What matters most in the conversation is that, quite simply, seeing the work in the show only makes the show better. You don't question the work. It fits perfectly and it adds in spades. But to describe it? To explain it? Well, if you know Hunter's work (which I, fortunately, do: She's one of the most innovative and talented conceptual craft artists in America), it makes sense. It feels right. If you have to explain why it feels right? Well, this show might be about language vessels, but it's at its best when challenging what we can do with words.

In the end, that's what "On Books!" is all about. It's a show that takes on terms, boundaries, taxonomies and expectations. To list the artists whose works excel and shine would be to list practically every work in the show. The simple version is that "On Books!" is a handsome show loaded with as much smart fruit as any of us could possibly pluck from an over-ripe apple-for-the-teacher tree in any single session.

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