

Books

In "Books as Witness: The Artist's Response" Art Helps Find Meaning Amid Life's Losses

"Book as Witness: The Artist's Response," the current exhibit at the Center for Book Arts in New York City, is not for those looking for a bit of light-hearted diversion on a summer day. Organized by Maria G. Pisano, founder of the Plainsboro-based Memory Press, it includes work produced by nearly three-dozen artists in response to profound personal and global loss.

While noting that the stories begin in tragedy, however, Ms. Pisano is eager for viewers to see each work as a "powerful memento," that "commemorates life" even as it focuses on death.

"The works presented show how the artists connect and respond to events in their own lives and in the global community," writes Ms. Pisano in the exhibition's catalog. "They assemble objects, memories, and realities, and embody them in a tactile form that

resonates with their journal to find meaning in personal or communal losses."

Artists represented in the show, which runs through September 22, include individual artists, like the Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Art Spiegelman, as well as members of collectives like the Combat Papermakers, veterans who use the uniforms they wore in battle to create sheets of paper for new works of art.

The works are multimedia and span history as they respond to global conflicts, prejudice, terrorism, natural disasters, and individual losses. Claire Simon's photo-album-like collage, *In Memoriam*, reflects on several avenues for remembrance, including the death of the artist's son; the loss of her family in the Holocaust; and the *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, a hymn on the sorrow of Mary's loss of her son, Jesus.

Death Visits New Orleans expresses artist David Gothard's outrage at governments' failure to respond to the flooding of New Orleans. "The tunnel book format and the kinetic patterning of the water create a claustrophobic environment," observes Ms. Pisano, "with no escape from the floods, as the poorest citizens of New Orleans plead for their lives represented by Holbein-like skeletons."

Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima, a graphic novel by Keiji Nakazawa, recounts the horrific story of the dropping of the atom bomb and its aftermath on the artist's family and other survivors. Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* observes the unsettling aftermath of 9/11.

Founded in 1974, The Center for Book Arts is located in Manhattan at 28 West 27th Street, between Sixth Avenue and Broadway. It was the earliest organization of its kind, "committed to exploring and cultivating contemporary aesthetic interpretations of the book as an art object while invigorating traditional artistic practices of the art of the book." Executive Director Alexander Campos describes "Book as Witness" as "a testament to the center's commitment and interest to provide curators a forum/platform to investigate current affairs while challenging the viewer to question their own social/global responsibility."

"I believe," writes Ms. Pisano, "that art transforms, heals, questions, helps us find solace, gives us resilience, and the impetus to create and confront stories with complex issues."

Admission to the center is free. It is open to the public Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The center is closed on Sundays.

—Ellen Gilbert

On Tap Book Group To Meet at Nassau Inn

Librarian Kristin Friberg will lead a discussion of *Stone Arabia* by Dana Spiotta when the Books on Tap book group meets Tuesday, August 28 at 7 p.m. at the Nassau Inn's Yankee Doodle Tap Room. Participants who bring their library cards can get \$2-\$3 selected beer specials and a 10 percent discount on any appetizer from the menu.

Described as a "gritty, intelligent, mordant, and deeply sad novel" and "a work of visceral honesty and real beauty" in a New York Times review, *Stone Arabia*



COPING MECHANISMS: In the Center for Book Arts exhibit, "Book as Witness," Joydeb and Moyna Chitrakar's "Tsunami" memorializes the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 using an interpretive narrative Patua scroll book, depicting the tradition of a songwriter and artist going from home to home, recounting the story of this terrible event.

(Courtesy Maria Pisano)

was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award. According to the Times review, the central character, Nik, is an aging musician whose "prolific, varied, brilliant career, spanning from 1973 until his disappearance, exists solely as a series of meticulously self-produced CDs (with handmade covers) and as documented in his 'Chronicles,' a vast collection of notebooks containing self-generated reviews and interviews; the history of his bands, the De-

monics and the Fakes; and his solo albums, including 'The Ontology of Worth,' his 20-volume, unfinished magnum opus. Nik even invents, for verisimilitude, a critic who has it in for him and pans much of his work."

Dana Spiotta's previous novel, *Eat the Document*, (2006) was a National Book Award finalist. Her novel *Lightning Field* (2001) was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. She lives in Syracuse, N.Y.

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