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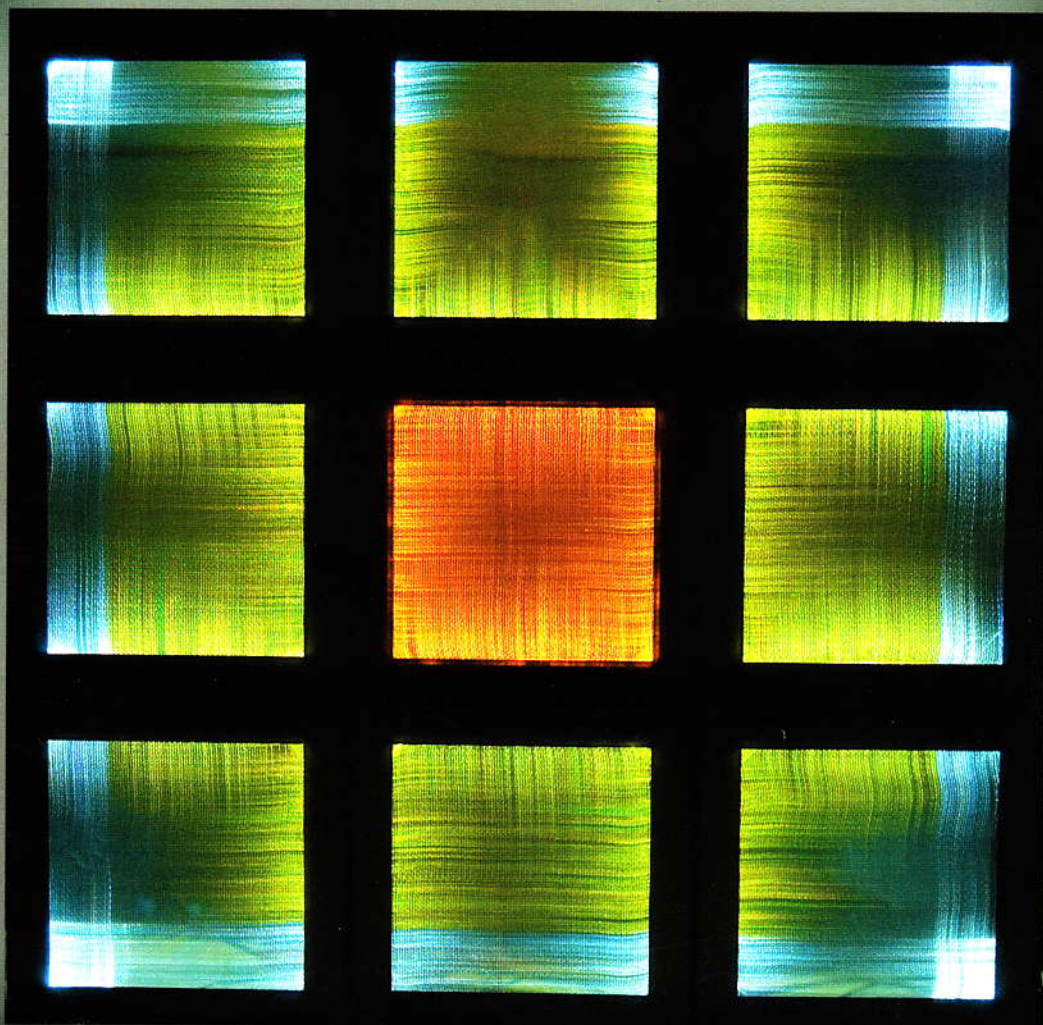
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Brian Dettmer: New Worlds to Conquer



BRIAN DETTMER HAUNTS

vintage bookstores, searching for books that have a palpable energy. “When I pick up a book, I can feel the energy of it, whether it had history or not,” he says. His intuition is aided by subtle clues such as breaks in a spine and handwriting scrawled in margins. The Atlanta-based artist finds old encyclopedias, social histories, and weighty tomes, then carves them into intricate sculptures.

In a process he compares to reading, Dettmer moves from the front of a book to the back, dissecting images and text with an X-Acto knife. In eighteen new sculptures shown at Saltworks gallery in Atlanta (November 20, 2010–January 15, 2011), he uses early twentieth-century texts to explore concepts of travel and conquest and the blurry line between the two.

One wall sculpture, *Organized Knowledge in Story and Picture*, is a grouping of ten antique volumes of *The World Book* shaped like an airplane. Cut through globes that are printed on the covers, circular openings reveal a preponderance of images of Western civilization that reflect the worldview of a white empowered society.

In *A Loose Leaf and Self Revising Reference Work*, encyclopedias stacked in a vertical wall construction suggest a ladder sawn in half, a metaphor for disruption. Each volume offers a window into a surrealistic cacophony of drawings. For example, the head of a man in a Cossack hat is sliced open to reveal a map and a staircase. The randomness of the images displaces the alphabetical ordering that defines encyclopedias, subverting the system. Dettmer also almost completely eliminates text, privileging the visuals over written words as a way of understanding the world.

The March of Democracy has political overtones with

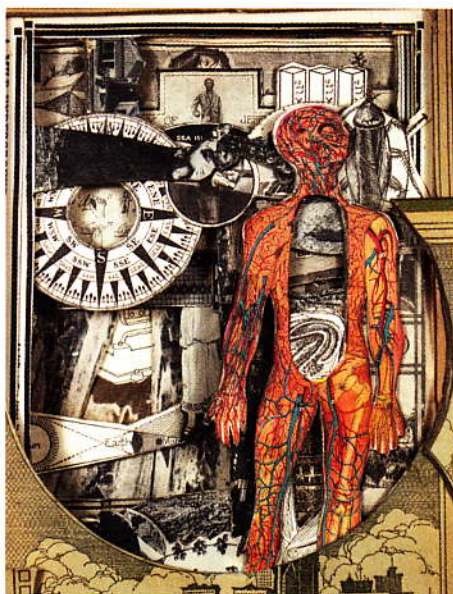
five history books arranged in the shape of the Pentagon. The books converge in a central hollow that mimics the Department of Defense’s central plaza known as Ground Zero. Fragments of text such as “been seriously interfering” and “stakes of self-interest” suggest the artist’s intent.

The freestanding *Encyclopedias of World Travel* also depicts a fortress mentality. Created by fusing two books, the sculpture resembles a medieval tower with a crenellated top. The exterior is a labyrinth of Western architectural fragments and maps, a thicket of institutions against which one lone costumed “native” holds a spear.

Dettmer’s deconstructed books are as interesting for what they omit as for what they include. Notably missing in this exhibit, titled *New Worlds to Conquer*, are the perspectives of those who have been conquered. We find indigenous people largely segregated and presented as objects of spectacle in his piece *The Secret Museum of Mankind*.

In a gallery talk, Dettmer explained that the show borrows its title from a 1929 adventure travel book by Richard Halliburton. Discovering that Halliburton was kin to the owners of the Halliburton oil field services firm, Dettmer began considering how exploration can turn into exploitation.

Regarding his own process, he adds, “Am I exploiting other books? I don’t think so, any more than a sculptor is exploiting the beauty of marble.”



The gallery website is www.saltworksgallery.com. The artist’s website is www.briandettmer.com. Dettmer’s work is included in *The Book: A Contemporary View* at the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington (through April 17), www.thedcca.org.

ABOVE: *Organized Knowledge in Story and Picture* (with detail), 2010; vintage encyclopedias; handcut and altered; 22¼" x 53" x 2½". Shown courtesy of Saltworks gallery, Atlanta, Georgia.