

The Artist's Books of Leah Oates

Leah Oates approaches the book as a series of interweaving photographs. Within this medium, she can utilize the numerous photographs she shoots in a variety of combinations beyond what an individual photograph can offer. She will also occasionally invade the pristine surface of the photograph by sewing through it. Structures for her are basic, the book is bound simply as a traditional codex, sewn or spiral hinged more than bound; the structures are merely to create the unit but hold no particular fascination for her. She wants us to focus on the photographs and text and the overlays of text and photographs as the images sequence left to right or top to bottom.

Oates enjoys playing back and forth with the notion of photography as recording a recognizable world, and one of the flattening and patterning of that world into a totally abstracted one. Color is used both sparingly in a black and white book laden with text or hyped up and graphic in another. The color becomes lush in a series of unique books that metamorphose into a gentle landscape. Visually seductive as the images build upon each other to create their own narrative, they seemingly capture a time and place that may or may not exist as a whole.

It is difficult to say that Oates is concerned mainly with a visual text or a written one as her emphasis on one or the other changes from one book idea to the next. Poetry is the overriding concern for Oates, the poetry of a moment sometimes expressed without the need for words. A written text that may appear too didactic standing on its own is softened by images, haunting eyes, faces full of longing appeal to us from the page. Another is composed mostly of writing that is harshly crossed out, meaning to cast emphasis on the remaining words. A cut-out figure looms over a textured ground or crouches on a white page that is juxtaposed with a texture inhabiting its own space and page. A building is reduced to its geometric form and then is "humanized" by becoming the essence of a figure.

Though coming from a feminist perspective, Oates is really concerned with uncovering the levels beneath the surface in many contexts. Themes of time, paradoxes, and secrecy recur in her work, as we discover from her perspective the complexities of the similarities and dichotomies of the male/female experience. The book form allows for Leah Oates the slow unfolding of these revelations of ideas that meld together through words and images.

Maddy Rosenberg, 2007