

LIVING

Style

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BOOK

EXTRACTS

“But what is it? And how does he do that? And *why?*” We introduce an artist whose work almost defies description

The shock of the new has been used before as a catch-all description to define the reaction to modern art in general. While modern art can trace its roots back to the late 19th century, and is hardly so modern from today’s perspective, it’s somehow reassuring to know that today’s art (more often described as post-modern or contemporary art) retains the same power to shock. Not simply from an adolescent desire to shock for shock’s sake, but instead through originality of form, execution or thought. The startling creations of American artist Brian Dettmer do just that. ➤



Dettmer belongs to the small circle of respected book sculptors



Dettmer: "If I'm not in the studio for a day or two then I'm dying to get back to work. I've always had to make art."



"IF I MEET SOMEBODY THAT HASN'T SEEN MY WORK I JUST TELL THEM I'M A SCULPTOR"

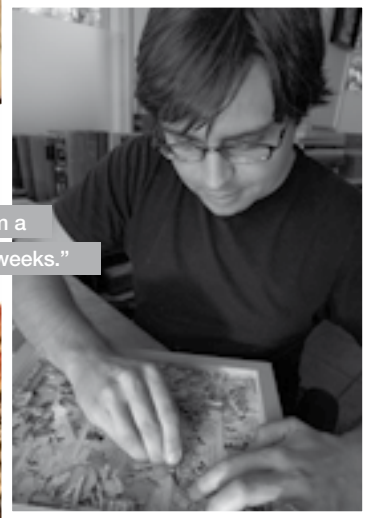
"Ahem, yes, I definitely consider my pieces sculptures," explains the softly-spoken Atlanta-based artist after a pause, offering a somewhat strange answer to a somewhat strange question. After all, one doesn't normally ask a painter if he considers his oil-bedecked canvases to be paintings or a photographer if his artfully shot images qualify as photographs. Brian Dettmer

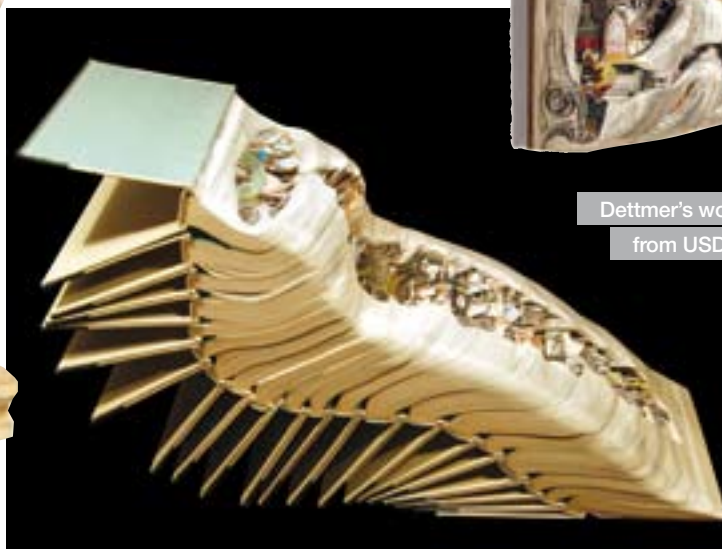
and his challenging book sculptures are different, though. "If I meet somebody who hasn't seen my work I just tell them I'm a sculptor. That's easier than trying to explain what I do without someone having seen my work."

Part of the confusion (or shock) for viewers is simply seeing such a universal object – a book – being bent, twisted or torn into such unfamiliar and unexpected forms. The impact is heightened further by the fact that Dettmer should be working with books at all. The sanctity of the written word still carries weight in today's information age, and whereas newspapers and magazines may be casually discarded, people are still more reticent to throw away a book... or even to damage it at all. Dettmer refuses to use rare or first-edition volumes and only makes use of mass-produced titles with a wide availability. "My intention isn't to destroy something or erase history. Although I'm suggesting that [in my work], I'm not actually trying to do that." Most of the books Dettmer works with date from between 1900 and 1970 and while some may be rarer than others, there are still copies in circulation. "Sometimes I'll find a book at the State Fair or in a vintage bookstore and I'll go on eBay to make sure that the book is readily available."

The very idea to sculpt books remains a surprising one. While there is a small, select circle of book sculptors working around the world, it is still far from a mainstream artistic pursuit and an unlikely avenue to wander into. For Dettmer, however, one senses

"Each work takes from a week to a few weeks."





Dettmer's works vary in price
from USD4,000 to USD20,000

PHOTOS FROM LEFT COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SALTWORKS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACKER SCHOPF GALLERY, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACKER SCHOPF GALLERY

that his was an inevitable calling: “When I was a kid we had a huge collection of books. We lived across the street from a school and they used to dump loads of books – every week almost. My brother and I would go ‘dumpster diving’ and find whatever books we thought were interesting and take them home. They were usually educational books that might have been out of date for whatever reason, but we thought they were just fantastic. I couldn’t believe that people would throw books away.”

While the discarded books – symbolising unwanted or forgotten knowledge – may not have immediately inspired his creative endeavours, something must have lodged in his mind. Later, at art school, he focused mainly on abstract painting. “It was very rigid, very structural, mainly black and white, but then I started getting more texture into my work and working with newspapers – ripping out pages and then applying them to the canvas for this great texture.” Reflecting on this departure now, he recognises a fascination with the discarded information and stories in the newspaper. The parallels with his earlier reaction to the dumpster ‘library’ are clear. “I loved the idea that information was actually there and it was even more universal in a way because it wasn’t functional [topical] any more.” Pausing, he adds with relish: “And it had *great* structure.”

Soon after, Dettmer moved on to books, tearing out pages to apply to his canvases and he began to consider the physical material of them ... and not without a sense of some disquietude. “I thought that this is mass-produced, so why do I feel so guilty about ripping this up?” Disquietude or not, Dettmer was on the verge of a breakthrough. Literally. “I started looking at the books more closely, feeling them and carving holes and geometric shapes into them. That led me to where I am now when I was cutting into a book and an image was suddenly revealed. That was the ‘Eureka!’ moment for me.”

“ONCE I BEGIN CARVING I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT IS COMING NEXT AND I CAN’T CONTROL WHAT IS COMING NEXT”

Fast-forward to today and Dettmer’s trademark style, cutting and shaping books to reveal small text or graphic elements, is one that he executes with apparent effortless and considerable panache, with the works growing in size, complexity and fluidity. The work behind it, though, as the viewer might imagine, is considerable: exacting, painstaking

and immensely time-consuming. “I always begin by sealing up the book or manipulating it in a certain way, but the inside pages are still free. Once I begin carving I have no idea what is coming next, and I can’t control what is coming next.” Each work implies hundreds and thousands of decisions with each layer, each page offering endless choices. “It becomes a very intuitive process, going one step at a time and making decisions along the way.”

Dettmer the artist is clearly just as much Dettmer the excavator or Dettmer the bibliographic archaeologist, stripping away page after page in search of buried treasures, revealing hidden meanings, surprising juxtapositions and suggesting connections between apparently disparate pieces of information. In this sense his work is very much a metaphor for the experience of reading itself. While Dettmer draws satisfaction from viewers’ simple wonderment at his technical virtuosity, he is most satisfied when people interpret his work in reference to media theory or even philosophy and the way we extract information in today’s world. “If you’re reading a book you remember fragments and put them back together. I like the idea that I’m breaking stories – or information – apart. The viewer (or myself as the artist) can then reconstruct that and create a new narrative. I’m trying to reflect the way we remember things now. We don’t really remember narratives, we construct those afterwards. We remember fragments. I am intent on creating *new* meanings and relationships.” Brian Dettmer the artist, the book sculptor? Add Brian Dettmer the storyteller. *James Lee-Tullis*