

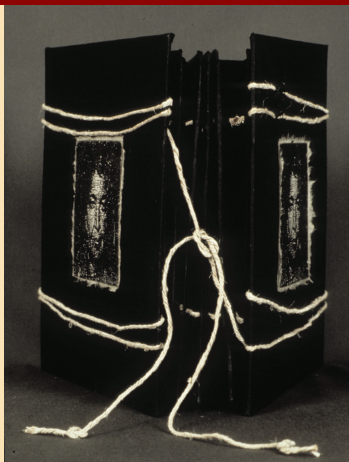
# EVERYDAY FICTIONS: ARTISTS BOOKS AND OTHER WORK BY SUSAN NEWMARK AND MIRIAM SCHAEER

Eliminate the done withs, replace the has beens, and clear out yesterday's no longer usefuls with the more efficient and fashionable technologies of today. These commands are indicative of our throw-away culture; nonetheless, this left over pile of stuff is providing creative inspiration for contemporary artists.

Miriam Schaer thrives on old book bindings, yellowed pages torn from dollar paperbacks, toddlers' pink and white dresses and left over kitchen aprons for her art practice. Susan Newmark selects two dimensional media such as sewing patterns with their graphic instructions, images of female icons from vintage coloring books, cartoons, maps, diagrams and her own mother's personal ephemera to make works of art.

They are not the first artists to find meaning in what others might discard. Picasso incorporated newspaper print in his early cubist collages, Kurt Schwitters tore magazine pages to make unusual abstractions, Robert Rauschenberg found old tires and broken clocks in the neighborhood of his downtown loft to make his combine paintings, and Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray together photographed dust on a piece of glass that had accumulated in Duchamp's studio. It seems that artists will find art no matter where they look; however, it's not only the readymade, or what Jasper Johns called "what the mind already knows" that inspires Newmark and Schaer. It is their desire to reinvent material by altering its original form and intended function.

Both artists favor the use of books as containers for ideas and feelings. Of course, bookmaking is a practice that artists have participated in since medieval times. In the 20th century, however, artists began to redefine the book as we know it with the



Newmark, *Portrait, My Mother*

creation of new types of bindings, the use of mixed media for both inside and out, and the inclusion of a vast array of both literary and visual messages.

Susan Newmark frequently uses accordion bindings for her books and often adds belts and ties which are symbolic of investigations as well as closure. Miriam Schaer, motivated by an historical structure called a girdle book used by medieval monks to hold prayers, has been making her own version of the girdle book that possesses the contemplations and stories of women, not to mention the girdle's more practical function as a means to alter a woman's anatomy.

The act of process is evident in the work of these two artists, including sewing, gluing, tearing, cutting, attaching, folding, bending, sanding, transferring, in addition to the more traditional drawing, painting, printmaking and writing, some of which suggest in particular the labor of women's handmade home crafts, such as needlepoint, scrapbooking and pattern making, not to mention the more ominous mechanical factory labor of garment industry sweat shops.

Much of their work focuses on feminist concerns. For example, Schaer has created a series that focuses on childless women. The art takes the form of actual babies' dresses with embroidered words in red (*The Scarlet Letter*) sewn by the artist.



Each dress contains a different message. The statements have been gathered through discussions she has had with women as well as online research regarding this controversial subject. *Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?*, the title of the series, purports that even today there is an expectation

Schaer, *Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?* Photo by Stephen DeSantis

that a woman will give birth and that if she doesn't, she will be admonished for it. The statements on the dresses imply that her life will be lacking and she'll be less of a woman.

Newmark's *Ailment Series* has as its subject everyday maladies

more commonly suffered by women, such as osteoporosis and carpal tunnel syndrome. Titles of these include *Wrist Wreak*, and *Wear & Tear: Mechanical Misfiring of the Bones and the Spine*, a series of four artist books. Each is delicately hewn and covered in a pretty pink or cherry red. Inside is text the artist has downloaded from the Internet that has been transferred to parchment paper. Words are sometimes smudged like a carbon copy of an old medical record. Drawings and appropriated images of body parts appear inside as well, like surrogates of all those who've suffered. However, instead of the precise, cool renderings of scientific journals, they gently deliver a more tender view on the human condition. The artist's *Portrait, My Mother* uses a concertina binding with envelope pages that contain pieces of ephemera from her mother's life such as dog tags from the family pet or ticket stubs from one event



Newmark, *The Ailments: The Spine & Bones*



Newmark, *Dental Anxiety*



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Schaer, *Of the Errors of My Heart Too Numerous to Count* (detail)

or another. Strings attach a social security card, a bank card and a few address books. On the black pages are photographs of the artist's mother, taken over time, that have been crudely photocopied in black and white. What might have been a box of stuff from the attic tossed to the trash becomes a material memoir that offers the viewer a glimpse into the life of one person.

*Of the Errors of My Heart Too Numerous to Count* is a girdle book by Miriam Schaer. A gold and teal blue painted corset and bra duo reveal cut-outs that hold objects of love and loss. A headless torso covered with straight pins has been placed in the central heart shaped niche, a whistle, bells and a bunch of hat pins appear in smaller circular cut-outs. The structure enfolds like an altarpiece. A booklet in the shape of a heart is attached by a cord. A contemporary poem appears on its pages, *That grief's dry tears erode what once was found more perfect than a rose need not erase the faint perfume time's consort carries as an amulet against fraying hours...*

The bells and whistles suggest the sounds of passionate love. On the other hand, the straight pins suggest one's suffering over the loss of that one fine love. Like reliquaries of medieval Europe where a remnant of a saint offers the faithful the hope of healing, this artwork evokes a shrine of comfort and loss.

In retrospect, these artists offer us the privilege of reflecting on our own lives as they make art out of their everyday truths.

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Newmark, *Wrist Wreak*

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All images courtesy of the artists.

Front: top, Schaer, *A Minor Flaw* (detail); bottom, Newmark, *Garments for Gold Mountain* (detail)



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