

Cheryl Gage

The specimen box

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The idea of a message in the bottle, or a genii in a jar, has the same imaginative resonance as the anticipation of the magic in an artist's book. The encapsulation of the essence of an idea is the inherent power of the medium of the artist's book. For example, the book titled *re-GENERation*, by the artist Cheryl Gage, becomes a "specimen box" capturing the character of an African Monarch Butterfly.

The book's subject is the life-cycle of this creature and is presented as a visual metaphor of the idea of regeneration, of adaptation, or intelligent survival. The structure of this wooden box/book is reminiscent of the specimen drawers found in museum collections, where hundreds of pinned specimens are housed. The book form then becomes a mini museum, housing the artist's research of the African Monarch Butterfly as a symbol of transformation.

The symbolic narrative of this art object is encoded in the eight square tablets that make up the pages of the book. Their design transgresses the tradition of the codex book form by being loose-leafed and isometric in axis. The rotation of the

tablet, as well as the recto and verso reading of the pages is part of the dynamics of unpacking the content of the book. The artist has also designed the dimensions and arrangement of the pages within the numerical sequence of the Fibonacci mathematical code, which is purported to detail the growth dynamics of organic matter. As used by the artist, the numbers $1+1=2$ determine the singular and paired reading of some of the pages. The next sequence of numbers, $2+1=3$, is reflected in the repetition of the fractal-like pattern of the milkweed bush, which is the host plant of the creature's larval stage. The sequence of $2+3=5$, has determined the 5 centimetre square in the centre of eight of the pages. The next sequence, $5+3=8$, determines the number of tablets, but also numbers the parallel visual narratives of the four stages of the butterfly's metamorphosis. The next numerical sequence, $8+5=13$, determines the size of the square tablets that represent the pages of this book.

The four phases of the metamorphic development of the butterfly are represented in two sets of imagery. In one sequence of imagery, a detail of the bodily encasement of the creature at each particular stage of

its life-cycle is figuratively illustrated: the outer texture of the pupa, the caterpillar skin markings, the chrysalis encasement, and the characteristic wing pattern of the adult African Monarch Butterfly. These four stages are then re-iterated conceptually: firstly, as a tightly stitched square within a square on the page that suggests the protective casing of the egg; then, a nibbled surface that suggests the footprint of the caterpillar as it feeds on the foliage of its host plant, and thirdly, the transparent knotted twine around a Perspex "window" in the page suggesting the attachment and spinning of the chrysalis, and finally, the tablet with a square void in the centre of the page suggesting the flight, or escape, of the butterfly. These sets of four tablets can be viewed separately or interfaced with each other to evoke alternative interpretations of the subject matter. It is this interactive handling of the pages, shuffling and rotating the "page" manually, that unpacks the message of the book. The reader's engagement with the book then becomes an act of transformation, a bit like breaking the bottle to read the message, or rubbing the jar to jettison the genii.

Colette Lotz

Ons 'Queen'

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The book entitled *Ons 'Queen'* was inspired by the arrival of my first-born, Danielle, on 10 March 2009. The word 'Queen' is a joke-name that my husband and I use for her because she has assumed such an important position in our lives: she rules!

The book is not meant to be a record of her "first things" in terms of development and the like; it is rather a narrative and subjective take on my personal experiences: it was difficult to become pregnant; a miscarriage, the death of my father and eventually my pregnancy and the birth of Danielle.

Tangible textures that surround me and to which I attach emotional value inspired me when I put together this book. Before Danielle's birth I began to collect items such as monthly temperature charts when trying to get pregnant, sonar pictures after finding out that I was indeed pregnant, and gynecologist's reports during the pregnancy. After she was born I kept the name tags she wore in hospital, together with all her plasters with their blood stains after injections, and incorporated these into the book.

In the book one sees picture frames that focus one's attention to the importance of family life, love and the feeling of belonging. These ideas are reflected in the book's introductory pages where I see my life as pieces of a broken picture frame that become whole until the frame is filled by moments from my wedding day and later my child. From this moment the symbol of the tree emerges and refers to both a family tree and the development of new life, and these are juxtaposed with images of my late father.

Throughout the book juxtapositions can be found: life and death, joy and sorrow, and happy and sad experiences. The latter can especially be seen in the transparent page showing my father where he was photographed in a contemplative mood, against the image of a folded sheet and stork that is visible through the transparent page. The joy that my father shared with me when he heard of my first pregnancy is clouded in the page that follows where the page is divided into two contrasting sections. In this image I refer to Michelangelo's *Pietà* that can be seen through the positive shape of the tree; this and comments on the shock reaction

of pain and death. The process whereby the tree is built up takes place in the pages that follow where I reflect on the idea of family life and the feeling of belonging. After the shock of the death of my father I find out, one month later, that I am pregnant again. A clean white background with a light picture frame and a stork on a branch announce the news. The calm feeling created by the subsequent white backgrounds of the sonar pictures reflects the calm I felt in the knowledge that this pregnancy was meant to be.

The experience of her birth and motherhood unfold in the remainder of the book. Contrasting experiences are placed next to each other to suggest that life and death cannot be separated and that the one depends on the other. The book ends with a colourful look at Danielle's development as a person – physically and emotionally.

The format of the book is small in order to reflect the intimate experience of life and death together with the experience of motherhood. The personal nature of the content may be inaccessible to some, but a viewer who has had similar experiences may indeed identify with its essence.