

Jane Kent and Richard Ford Go Skating

By Susan Tallman

The relationship of language to painting is an infinite relation,” wrote Michel Foucault.¹ significantly upping the ratiometric ante of the 1:1000 cliché. Foucault was exploring the fundamental unsuitability of language (linear, syntactic, modular) to the description of visual experience (a varied field of simultaneous stimulations). But the same difficulty arises going the other direction: matching image to language is an enterprise squeezed between the perils of redundancy on the one hand and irrelevance on the other. And yet it is a habitual human activity: we make pictures of stories, movies of novels, videos of bad pop songs. We seem to have an unending need to augment the fleshless voice of text with something to wrap our eyes around. Devout Christians find no irony in paintings of Moses condemning graven images; an iconic Islam indulges in elaborate calligraphic ornament. Hipsters have the Graphic Novel; connoisseurs have the *livre d'artiste*.

Despite the fusty aroma of pre-war Paris and poetry-for-pleasure (so different from the militant pragmatism of “the artist’s book”), the *livre d'artiste* is a surprisingly vital form, perhaps especially so now that text is both so ubiquitous and so insubstantial, a billion fields of transitory charged particles blooming behind plastic shields. At its best, the *livre d'artiste* is meticulous in its physical production, provocative in its structure, and profound in its content. The painter and printmaker Jane Kent has been making *livres d'artistes* for almost twenty years and she has just finished her third, which says something about the complexities inherent in the form. These are slow projects, in part because of the logistics (each involved multiple printers and multi-stage fabrication considerations) and in part because of the ‘infinite relationship’ described by Foucault.



Jane Kent and Richard Ford, *Skating*, 2011, screenprint, title page from the set of eleven prints.

As a student at Philadelphia College of Art (now The University of the Arts), Kent had spent time in Lessing J. Rosenwald’s Alverthorpe Gallery.² Rosen-

wald, the second-generation chairman of Sears Roebuck, had amassed one of the world’s great print collections, and he was particularly interested in illus-



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trated books. “It is hard to convey the atmosphere,” said Kent. “Sterling silver cigarette cases filled with Camel unfiltered next to sterling silver magnifying glasses for studying the prints. You were instructed to wash your hands because you were encouraged to handle the works.” These works included paradigmatic *livres d’artistes* such as Henri Matisse’s *Jazz* (1947), and Kent was smitten with “the idea that so much intensity, ambition and content could be made into a book-like format.”

In 1996 she began work on *Privacy* (1999),³ a set of aquatint etchings underlying a short story by Richard Ford. Kent and Ford met when both were teaching at Princeton, and they struck up a friendship around books—books read, but also books seen, held, unfolded. Ford and his wife were early collectors of Kent’s work, and he knew her work well. He did not ask to be involved with the visual production in any way. Kent says, “we never talked about the project beyond agreeing to do it.”⁴

The story is written in the voice of a frustrated writer who begins regularly watching, through the window of his apartment, an unidentifiable woman

undressing in nearby building. It’s a mild compulsion; he stops watching after a few days. “Undoubtedly I was thrilled by the secrecy of watching out of the darkness,” the narrator writes, though the next paragraph begins, “Nothing more happened.” He later discovers that the woman in question was—contrary to the way his mind had solved the optical ambiguities—old and Chinese. It is an odd and ambiguous fable about vision and frustration. Kent says, “I read it and read it and read it. And then I started to draw. Over and over and over. I drew for two years.”

She was searching for what she calls “the join”—the point where some essential quality of the text finds its parallel in the visual world. “I came to think about the private act of reading and the private act of seeing.” She drew repeated, searching eyes, and the mask-like faces of coin-operated binoculars. Most of the images reside on the edge of abstraction, where concentric circles as easily suggest an active eyeball as a passive breast. The text was designed by Leslie Miller of Grenfell Press after the images were completed, and was letterpress-printed over the aquatints. The reader is caught up in a kind of Droste-effect recursion: in order to read a text about the act of looking one must look at a page that is looking back at the reader reading a text about the act of looking.

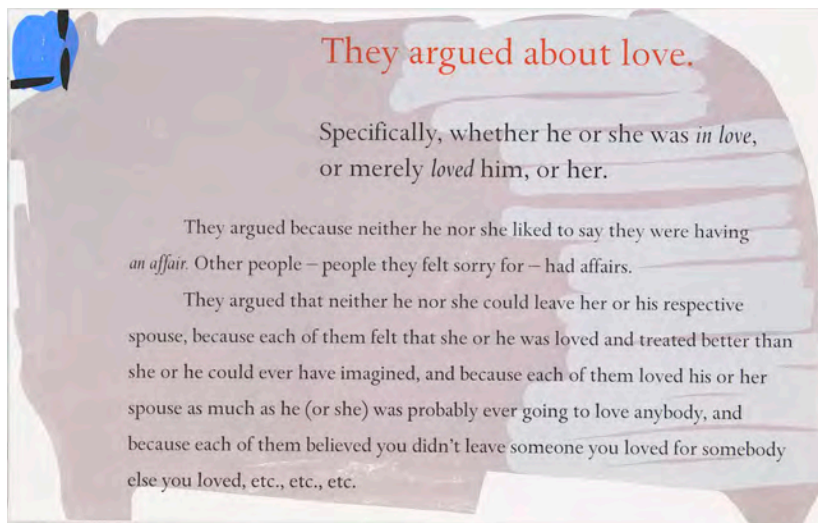
The second book relied on a very different source: nine paragraphs excerpted from Susan Orlean’s book *The Orchid Thief*, (which was also the jumping off point for the Spike Jonze movie *Adaptation*), reconfigured to have no beginning and no end. The prints of *Privacy* are unbound, but must be read in sequence to make sense; *The Orchid Thief Reimagined*⁵ is more like a deck of cards. The medium this time was screenprint: slap-flat swathes of color that form organic puddles, droopy labella and lithe vines and meander across the surfaces of the eight prints. In the box, the prints are separated by sheets of glassine interleaving that are printed with what looks

like an abstract pattern of dots and squiggles, but when the eight sheets are put together they resolve into a loosely hand-drawn copy of an 18th century engraving of orchid hunting.

Orlean’s original book tells the story of John Laroche, a real orchid poacher in pursuit of the elusive Ghost Orchid, but the sections used here are not narrative, they are floating meditations on obsession. One telling passage reads, “I was starting to believe that the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size.” A few weeks after Kent first met with Orlean she received an early morning phone call from a journalist friend in Rome asking if it was true that a plane had just struck the World Trade Center a few blocks away. Walking to the window, she saw the shadow of the second plane pass over the street. Exiled with her husband (painter David Storey) and their young son from their loft, and then returning to the dust-covered, empty-skied reality of post-9/11 lower Manhattan, Kent immersed herself in



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work. She bought an orchid plant and set it on the bed of the etching press in her studio. For the first time in her life, she drew from observation, month after month after month. The finished project reflects the ambivalent attraction of things in the world: everything comes together but everything also comes apart.

The newest “book” is *Skating*—again based on a story by Richard Ford—and is the most ambitious yet.⁶ The story is an argument, or rather a catalogue of arguments between a man and a woman caught up in the twitching tail end of an extra-marital affair. 43 paragraphs begin “They argued ...”. The first and the penultimate begin “They argued about love.”

Kent began her deliberations with customary thoroughness. She researched diagrams of compulsory figures—the patterns cut into ice by figure skaters in the original form of the sport. (Now called “moves in the field,” this element of competition fell out of favor when sports became televised because it is so boring to watch, but the discipline remains essential.) The most familiar compulsory figure—the one learned by every fledgling skater—is the “Figure Eight”, a controlled shift

of weight and momentum from inner edge to outer edge and back, which when done perfectly returns you to exactly where you started. It’s a demonstration of mastery by going nowhere. Kent skated for two winters in Bryant Park “just to get in the spirit of the piece... I pretended that this would be somehow helpful—lines on ice.”

The parallels between blades on ice and burins on metal did generate two engravings for the book, but playing with the title as metaphor was not enough to sustain the whole. Ford’s story is intriguingly non-visual: the actors don’t act, they say. We don’t know where they are or what they look like, or where they put their hands as they “argued over the Merritt Parkway and the Wilbur Cross, and whether they were two names for the same parkway.” *The Orchid Thief* is a story about things, *Privacy* was a story about looking, but *Skating* is a story about words. Visually, it is a desert, but structurally it is a clockwork: a complex device made up of simple parts, beautiful in its cleverness, profound in its accomplishment. That, for Kent, was the “join.”

Skating consists of eleven loose prints in a large green envelope. Most are screenprints, one is engraving and

drypoint, another is drypoint and mezzotint. Some are horizontal, some are vertical, each is a different size. Some are chockablock with text, two have none at all. Shuffling through them suggests an almost cavalier pursuit of variety. A large horizontal engraving of looping omega shapes—what might be described as obsessive-compulsive figures—is followed by a much smaller page of text backed by a shapeless blob of carton brown. Further on, a horizontal sheet sports a baby blue squiggle and a looming black keel that together frame two spare lines of text; the next page is vertical with words packed in a tight column. As almost always with Kent, the images are abstract but not abstract enough to be experienced simply for the optical kick. An off-kilter slab of bright blue, listing slightly to the right and punctured by two vertical slits, suggests a quizzical robot head when viewed on its own. But if instead of moving through the pages sequentially like a book, you lay them out simultaneously like a multi-part painting, the blue slab comes into focus as a cousin of those fold-it-yourself one-piece cartons, with their clever topological strategies for converting two dimensions into three.

Seen like this, the stacks of blobby rectangles and tab-like protrusions that form most of the images acquire a second identity as structural elements of some unidentifiable DIY container. Each contains a visual key to its position in the whole structure: the loopy engraving and the brown blob that seemed so unrelated are connected by the presence of squirrely blue rectangles in their upper corners. Seen one at a time, this connection would be easy to miss, but laid out on the wall it is obvious that those two blue rectangles are two quadrants of a single shape that is shared between the first four prints, like a picnic blanket spread out at Four Corners in the American Southwest, and that this shape is the bottom of a teetering stack of rectangles that occupies the title page. The title itself cascades



Left: Jane Kent and Richard Ford, *Skating*, 2011, eleven loose sheets plus colophon in an envelope folio: letterpress, drypoint, engraving, mezzotint and silkscreen; various sizes individually, altogether 92 x 62 inches, edition of 35, published by The Grenfell Press (New York).

Above: Jane Kent and Richard Ford, *Skating*, 2011, all eleven prints in envelope folio.

downward in single letters, almost but not quite bounded by the dashed outline of the uppermost box. Slowly it becomes apparent that the teetering stack is a map to the tower of pages on the wall; the box with the cascading letters is a proxy for the title page of cascading boxes, which is a proxy for the wall of cascading prints. The blue “four-corners” rectangle represents the final drypoint (“They argued about love. And again. And again.”) This is all very tiresome and unsatisfactory when explained in words but—illustrating Foucault’s point—intuitively obvious in actuality.

In this project in particular, Kent was interested in how pages can be

used to “confound, reveal or order meaning.” She acknowledges that the work’s eccentric structure owes a debt to Marcel Duchamp’s *Green Box* (1934), which similarly took the form of a collection of printed things. *The Green Box* contains 93 facsimile (lithograph and *pochoir*) notes about the creation of *Large Glass*.⁷ The replica notes, like the original notes, are different sizes and shapes, on different papers, the jottings in different inks. Duchamp considered *The Green Box* to be an essential part of the *Large Glass*—information without which his masterpiece was both incomplete and incomprehensible. She also thought back to a production of Edward Albee’s *Tiny Alice* she had seen

as a child. At 13 she understood nothing of the play, she admits, but she was struck by the moment when an actor came onstage to announce that there is a fire in library, and a small model of the house in which the drama was supposedly taking place burst into flames. It was a revelation, she says, to see “the relationship between the real thing and the representation of the real” laid out so plainly. She was interested in “the notion of a model as an index to the original.” In *Skating* everything self-consciously points to something else. This makes it clever, but it is also substantial—a material, engaging pleasure, that alters how we read.

The physical eccentricity makes the story, literally, hard to handle: you need a map to figure out the order of things, and here (unlike in *The Green Box*), the order of things matters. The challenge of aligning the tabs and overlaps prompts the viewer to piece the story together. And handling pages, moving them around, aligning the parts and solving the puzzle, engages the mind in quite a different way than stroking the plastic skin of your Kindle.

As it happens, our march toward



Jane Kent and Richard Ford, *Skating*, 2011, engraving, drypoint and screenprint, from the set of eleven prints.

ever more elaborate forms of the virtual—in information access, in financial instruments, in art—is being buffeted by an increasing assertion of the power of the actual, the concrete, the slow and repetitive. A number of recent books, including Matthew B. Crawford's *Shop Class as Soul Craft* and Sherry Turkle's *Evocative Objects: Things we Think With*, have argued cogently that there are forms of knowledge and insight that are attainable only through time-honored, time-consuming physical interactions with the material world.

This is not to deny that abstraction as a conceptual device is fundamental to human reason. Unpacking a general principle from its unique housing—recognizing that one dog's heart works much like another dog's heart—allows us to connect and categorize in important ways. But in the process we lose something: the intimate awareness of the specific, a mode of attention that

acknowledges each ventricle as an individual shape. The grief occasioned by the rise of the e-book arises from just this sense of loss—the demise of awareness of a particular typeface, particular paper, the dog-eared corner, the weight in the hand of *The Great Gatsby* versus *Anna Karenina*. Book people from Walter Benjamin to Richard Prince have gone quite gooey over this sort of thing, perhaps because books combine so powerfully the abstract plenitude of the text (your *Great Gatsby* has the same words as my *Great Gatsby*) and the concrete singularity of the object (mine has the cocktail and the crazy flying car on the cover and is torn on the penultimate page.)

The *livre d'artiste*, with its crazily inefficient squandering of skills and resources (ten years for 35 copies!), is a defiant assertion of the value of that combination. *Skating* demands two types of attention: the kind that allows

us to skate over a text, understanding words without consciously noticing what they look like, and the kind that makes us run our finger over the surface to understand its molecular character. The mind in motion leans one way and then the other, as if between inner and outer edge of a skate blade. Tilt your head and a figure eight going nowhere is an infinite relation. ∞

Notes:

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 9.
2. Rosenwald succeeded his father as Chairman so Sears, but he only kept the position for 6 years in the 1930s. He devoted the rest of his life to his collection. His books and manuscript collection is now at the Library of Congress, his art collection—more than 22,000 drawings and prints—is at the National Gallery.
3. Jane Kent and Richard Ford, *Privacy*, 1999. A limited edition book with seven etchings by Kent accompanying Ford's short story. Printed on Somerset in an edition of 35. Bound by hand. All copies signed by the author and artist. 32 pages. Published by Grenfell Press. <http://www.grenfellpress.com/books/jane-kent-richard-ford-privacy.html>.
4. All quotes from Jane Kent are from conversations and emails with the artist.
5. Jane Kent and Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief Re-Imagined*, 2003. 16 loose screenprints, with printed glassine interleaving, in tray case. 15 x 10 inches each. Edition of 35. When assembled the book becomes a 35 x 45 inch image with text. Co-published by The Grenfell Press (New York) and the Rhode Island School of Design (Providence). <http://www.grenfellpress.com/books/jane-kent-susan-orlean-the-orchid-thief.html>.
6. Jane Kent and Richard Ford, *Skating*, 2011. Eleven loose sheets plus colophon in an envelope folio: letterpress, drypoint, engraving, mezzotint and silkscreen. Various sizes individually, altogether 92 x 62 inches. Edition of 35. Published by The Grenfell Press (New York).
7. The contents of *The Green Box* are usually described as "facsimiles," a term that is vague in the extreme, but is the original description given by Duchamp, who also made the claim that they reproduced as accurately as possible each aspect of each member of this miscellany. For an intriguing evaluation of how accurate this claim is, see Rhonda Roland Shearer and Stephen Jay Gould, "The Bride Stripped Bare: Marcel Duchamp's 1934 'Facsimiles' Yield Surprises," *Tout Fait*, Vol. 1 Issue 1, December 1999. http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_1/News/Green-BoxNote.html.

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