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Grand Arts: Visions that Provoke and Disrupt

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Rosemarie Fiore, process photo, *The Good-Time Mix Machine: Scrambler Drawings*, 2004.

Acrylic paint on vinyl, 60 x 60 ft. (Photograph courtesy E.G. Schempf)

Art creation takes more than time and money: it takes research, focus, and many kinds of support/teamwork. That's one main message in *Grand Arts 1995 – 2015 Problems and Provocations*. When Glenn Harper assigned me to cover the Grand Arts opening of Pattie Cronin's Memorial to a Marriage – a Carrara marble, Hosmer-inspired mortuary sculpture in Kansas City, Missouri around 2002, I had heard of Margaret Hall Silva's arts foundation from artist Jeff Aeling (1996 awardee), but I didn't realize until I read this book how messy and blindly optimistic Grand Arts was to commission work as revolutionary as Cronin's Memorial and Sanford Biggers' Blossom – a piano "born" from a tree, which, on its own, plays a soulful version of Billie Holiday's Strange Fruit.

Grants Arts Sculpture



Problems and Provocations. Edited by Stacy Switzer and Annie Fischer. 2016: Grand Arts: Kansas City, MO. 448 pages. ISBN: 978-0-692-62553-8. \$49.95. Publication: November, 2016.

Angeles, California. Stacy Switzer, formerly artistic director at Grand Arts, and now executive director of Fathomers, calls it “a philanthropic research institute born of Grand Arts.”

The book cover, Florence Coyote, 2006 by Filip Noterdaeme, shows a coyote staring into a microphone as it paws an unsolved puzzle – a picture of Velázquez’s Las Meninas, which displays the dwarf’s head but not the dog beside her in the foreground. The inside covers illustrate green blueprints of the site plan, and a few Grand Arts projects by Anthony Baab, William Pope.L, John Salvest, and The Propeller Group (AK-47 fragments).

This huge book is jammed with illustrations, memos, and photos that take us behind the scenes for 31 of the 92 art projects listed from 1995-2015. It also has five essays and a Questions section probing risks and next steps for artists and arts organizations. It offers a free-thinking model for artists and arts foundations – one far beyond support money and/or space. Also, like Sissel Tolaas’ SmellScape project, 2012, some projects don’t “look like art” and even pictures can’t deliver all sensations. The Grand Arts vision begun in Kansas City, Missouri has been transferred to a new group, Fathomers, which is based in Los

As Ian Kerr points out on page 373, “The way of operating Grand Arts began to shift around the time Stacy Switzer joined as the new artistic director, in 2004. The most important and relevant shift for this discussion was the reframing of what Grand Arts did – from supporting artistic practices to supporting research creation.” Kerr points out that Grand Arts was already moving in this direction. Cronin’s Memorial, 2002, and Biggers’ Blossom, 2007, are good early examples of research creation.

Patricia Cronin’s Memorial to a Marriage was a two year project starting in 2000. The idea was to celebrate her union with Deb Kass at a time when gay marriage was not legal in New York by creating a larger-than-lifesized marble mortuary sculpture in the neoclassical style of Harriet Hosmer showing two sleeping women in a post-coital embrace.

Cronin’s research & execution included travel to famed French cemeteries and to Carrara, Italy to select the marble, fabrication at Johnson Atelier in New Jersey, and hand-finishing the marble. The eight pages on Cronin pack in over 22 images, photos, correspondence, maps, etc. including an installation photo at Woodlawn Cemetery and the news that Cronin and Kass officially married in 2011.

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Patricia Cronin, installation view, Memorial to a Marriage, 2002. Carrara marble, 83 x 40 x 27 in.



Sanford Biggers, Lotus, 2007. Steel armature and etched glass, 84 x 3/4 in. 1 AP.

Part of what stuns me about Sanford Biggers' Blossom, 2007, is that I'm still awed by seeing and hearing it. How did this piano grow out of a tree? What does that mean? Strange Fruit reminds me that black people/cultures are still oppressed and still sing. Just as the aesthetics and significances of Blossom—including its unexpected title – continue to resonate, the process views show a few of the hundreds of decisions that went into its making.

The 31 projects featured start with The Propeller Group's A Universe of Collisions, 2015, a project that includes "capturing" and documenting collisions of M16 and AK 47 bullets and other weapons in mid-air. The project ends by having the guns destroy each other.

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The Propeller Group, process detail, The AK-47 vs. the M16, 2015.
Fragments of AK-47 and M16 projectiles encased in ballistic gelatin.

All listed projects are complex and seem impressive, and the artists named whose projects are not featured, such as Teresita Fernández, seem equally provocative. I called one of these artists to ask about his experience. Jeff Aeling, whose project *The Layman's Guide to the Passage of the Millennium*, was funded in 1996, told me: "Margaret Silva and Sean Kelly came into the discussion one and a half years into my project. Grand Arts gave me the shop space and the money to execute large three-dimensional pieces. Margaret made it possible for me to complete something I'd wanted to do. That show got national advertising and made it possible for me to get into galleries. This, in turn, helped me to become a full time professional artist. It was a total dream situation." [i] The Grand Arts dream book has closed, but visionaries are encouraged to write to yes@fathomers.com and to hop aboard the new organization moving the vision to its next outpost.

By Jan Garden Castro

[i] Phone conversation with Jeff Aeling on 10.30.16.