

CHARLES BENEKE

ARTIST

The University of Akron
Myers School of Art
Folk Hall
150 E. Exchange Street
Akron, Ohio 44325-7801
330.972.2565 office
www.charlesbeneke.com
beneke@uakron.edu

Limitless Beginnings

MIMB 1: Monumental Ideas in Miniature Books

ed. Hui-Chu Ying

2009

Blurb.com

When considering the exhibition *Monumental Ideas in Miniature Books*, I repeatedly asked myself how it was even possible to discuss an exhibition of nearly 150 miniature artist's books. The Latin phrase *Multum in parvo*, or "much in little," that is often used to describe the value of small things, seems beyond the pale.

Opening the pages of a miniature artist's book, we venture into a foreign world and soon find ourselves lashed down like Gulliver in the land of Lilliput. Alone and shipwrecked on a distant, unfamiliar shore, the hero falls asleep only to wake the prisoner of a miniature people. Like Gulliver, we take the book, unexpectedly small, in hand and are suddenly its captive. Our movements are controlled by its structure and our imaginations are engaged by its form and content in surprising ways. Whether the narrative is one of words or images, whether its tone is loud or quiet, the physical world disappears in a vertigo-like rush as we retreat to a place within its pages and inside our minds.

Small things are captivating. And when a small thing carries meaning that transports us beyond the confines of our everyday world, we are utterly consumed. Our relationships with small things, however, are fraught with complexities. We cherish them and overlook them. We discard them and place high values upon them. We are taught not to sweat the small stuff, but we wish on stars, the tiniest points of possibility. We demean or belittle small things, but the little ones are often the archetypical heroes of our parables —David and Goliath, Hans Brinker's Dutch boy and the dike, ants moving a rubber tree plant.

The word small itself seems to be simply a descriptor of scale, but its definitions imply insignificance through the inclusion of words and phrases like "less than normal," "not great," "lacking," "modest," "low," and "inferior." A miniature is not just small, but refers specifically to something that has been copied and is reduced in scale or made small. It is an active reduction of a form's scale as a means of taking control of that form's function or meaning. The object is denuded of its value or power. It is debased.

In *On Longing* Susan Stewart discusses this idea in the context of micrographia pointing out, however, that "a reduction in dimensions does not produce a corresponding reduction in significance." It seems, in fact, to be the inverse; the reduction in scale that renders a book miniature infuses it with power. "The gemlike properties of the miniature book and the feats of micrographia make these forms especially suitable "containers" of aphoristic and didactic thought."¹

The reduction in scale of the book creates a necessary reconsideration of text and image. The pairing down of text in the miniature book places a high value on each word. Imagery is treated similarly. The resulting narrative becomes one laden with meaning instilling further significance in the completed work.

The culturally constructed value and magnitude of the artist/author's words and images within miniature books transports us to the intimate space of our imaginations. With our focus directed to the interior of the book our relationship with the exterior world narrows, but we can always see our hands holding the book and we are physically aware of how we must move to navigate its form as well as its narrative. Interacting with these objects activates all of our senses. When presented with a miniaturized object, we assume the pretense of control. But with the miniature artist's book, our physical movements are dictated by scale and structure. We handle delicately, we fumble awkwardly, we play happily. As readers of miniature books we become subservient despite our initial notion of superiority. We at once hold and possess the book and are possessed and held by it.

Reading miniature artist's books transforms space to place. And because that place is fostered by such personal interaction, it is not just place, but an intimate place. In his book *Space and Place* Yi-Fu Tuan describes intimate places as those that are not necessarily dependent upon space. Sometimes the most intimate places happen within the temporal space of a moment or an encounter. Tuan describes intimacy between persons as interaction that is not about the details of

life, but instead of “glow[ing] moments of awareness and exchange.”² He goes on to assert that there are as many possibilities for intimate places as there are potential interactions between individuals. The same could be said for miniature artist’s books. As readers we connect with their feel in our hands, the images and the words on their pages, the worlds within their covers. These connections become a part of who we are.

The works presented in *Monumental Ideas in Miniature Books* underscore these notions. In books that vary in scale from miniature to minuscule and narratives that range from glimpses to epic tales, we find works that carry us on journeys and lead us into the limitless worlds of our imaginations. We are aware of our bodies and lost in our heads. The places they take us do not end with the end of the book; they begin with the beginning of their reading. Susan Stewart states that “the closure of the book is an illusion largely created by its materiality, its cover. Once the book is considered on the plane of its significance, it threatens infinity.”³ The works in *Monumental Ideas in Miniature Books* present readers with limitless beginnings.

Charles Beneke
Associate Professor of Art
The University of Akron
Mary Schiller Myers School of Art

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993), p. 43.

² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 141.

³ Stewart, p. 38.