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Eloquence Between the Covers

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Daniel Essig's newer works feature an element of carving, including "Centipede Book".

Could there be a more apt art form for an introvert than a wordless book? Not that Daniel Essig's books have nothing to say—they are really quite eloquent. It is just that, like him, they use words sparingly, if at all.

Essig was studying at Southern Illinois University Carbondale when he discovered artists' books, thanks to his photography professor, Charles Swedlund. They were like nothing he had ever seen. "There

was one about a loaf of bread, and as you paged through it you saw the air bubble. That triggered the realization that you could make your own book, plus," says Essig, "that a book didn't have to have words in it."

Essig wanted a book whose pages opened flat, without the pinch that causes the leaves to undulate from the center out. Books made by fourth-century Coptic monks in Egypt were just the ticket: because their folios are sewn together in a chain stitch, they move independently of their wood covers.

It took Essig two years to master the necessary sewing and woodworking techniques. He then went to the Penland School of Crafts on a work/study scholarship in 1991, where he saw "detritus—bits of paper, little graphited wooden pieces" left behind by sculptor Dolph Smith. Upon Smith's return to Penland, Essig signed up for his three-day Paper Book Intensive in 1995. Again, that was that.

The way Essig tells it, one might assume that from that first encounter with the Coptic book, he never looked back. But wandering through his house in Asheville, N.C., it is clear that looking back is precisely what fuels his march forward. The downstairs is the key—this is where Essig communes with his hoard of treasures while nearby his wife, fiber artist Vicki Essig, works on her loom.

Essig's workspace is like a walk-in curio cabinet: bowls overflowing with stones, an old camera, fossils and arrowheads aligned in trays, a shadow box with shells. Perched on Essig's desk, a typesetter's cabinet offers drawer upon drawer crammed with yet more: fossils, shells, minerals, cicada husks, coins, bones, nails, dead bugs. "Vicki finds things," Essig says, chuckling, "and she doesn't know whether it happened to die or I put it there."

A hoarder since childhood—"I picked up anything, truly"—it is little wonder that Essig was later drawn to photography: what he could not tuck in his pocket, he could collect on film. Today, although he does not use his photographs in his art, photography's galvanizing mixture of fact and fiction permeates his work. In photography, the light that touches the subject bounces into the camera and reproduces it on film. You cannot get more factual. Or

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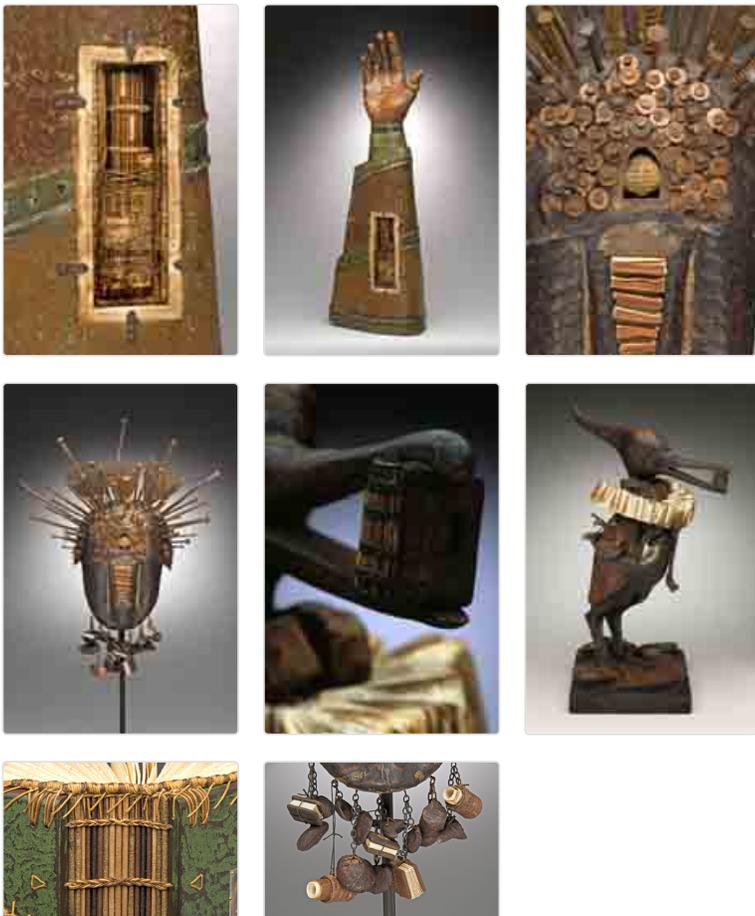
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can you? Photographers, after all, frame reality to suit themselves and manipulate the viewer.

The same dynamic enlivens Essig's bridge books and sculptures. The patina on the exterior looks like old leather, but is actually paper that Essig has painted, sanded and burnished until it gives the illusion of being what it is not. The found objects he places in the various niches, on the other hand, are real. Tucked behind windows of transparent mica, each of these random objects encapsulates a day, an event, a memory, sometimes a life. And don't forget the fact—illusion?— that a photograph freezes a moment in time ... which brings us back to Essig's childhood love of fossils.

Essig's wordless books, as a result, speak volumes. Bound with flexible Egyptian stitching, each of Essig's folios creates a swaying bridge connecting two sculptures—then, with a twist, the bridge morphs into a heart-shaped ruffle, recalling in shape and texture forms as different as Elizabethan collars and African masks. One book sports a shelf on which sits a smaller book, while another hangs by a chain, the way medieval tomes were secured within the monastery walls. Yet another book, this one a miniature, sits in the center of a sculpture bristling with handmade nails—a nod to protective talismans from the Congo.

When they are saying so much, why, indeed, would Essig's books require words?



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