Transforming Hate: An Artist’s Book (2016)

Perfect bound softcover. Four-color offset lithography. Illustrated paper wrappers with flaps. Housed in foldout die-cut box with gold foil origami crane inserted into cover slot. H203 x W204 mm, 104 unnumbered pages including inserts. Edition of 1000 numbered and signed, of which this is #18. Acquired from Vamp & Tramp, 13 August 2020. Photos: Books on Books Collection with the permission of the artist.

A forthright Franklin Gothic typeface announces the title, descriptive subtitle and author's name in brown, black, and brown on the warm golden yellow of the die-cut box. As it opens from its velcro fastener, it reveals a gold foil origami crane, inserted in the box's internal flap. As the flap turns, the straightforward Franklin Gothic re-announces the title, subtitle and author's name, this time on the book's white cover. So far, the work gives a sense of simplicity, elegance and warmth. Only the title hints at something uncomfortable to come. Finding a book's foreword on its cover flap is unusual, but that Franklin Gothic now matched with plain-spoken prose — “I am a black woman. I am an artist.” — reassures. By the foreword's last line though — “Do we have the courage to live differently?” — the reader/viewer may sense a need to keep the gold foil origami crane close like a guardian angel.
TRANSFORMING HATE | AN ARTIST’S BOOK

CLARISSA SLUGH
The crane also provides an organizing or, more accurately, guiding principle. Across the double-page spread of near-translucent golden endpapers just before the half-title, the truncated instructions — “cut fold crease flatten turn over cut fold crease” — start to articulate how to alter another book’s pages into origami cranes. On a startling full-page bleed of reddish brown ink, “The Proposal” in yellow and
its text in white names the book to be altered: The White Man’s Bible, a white supremacist screed. Wings extended against the reddish brown, the crane hovers over the text.

More startling is the following double-page spread with the artist’s acceptance of the challenge, yet doubt, on the left and a photo of the unopened box full of hate casting a shadow from light falling from the right. The photo on the right spills leftward over the gutter, encroaching on the artist, her acceptance and doubt. And yet, her diagram of a box pushes back, rightward against and into the encroaching shadow.
The guardian angel becomes a necessary angel over the next two double-page spreads. From the left page of the first spread —

My uncle was lynched in South Carolina before I was born. Rope around his neck, his broken body was tossed from a wagon to the yard in front of my mother.

— the text faces on the right a full-page bleed of black ink in which the transparent box diagram sits full of hate-red words. Turn the page.
What the double-page photo of hummocks of grass in the foreground and, in the far background, some fencing, a sandbox, houses behind a stand of brush and trees conveys, with its contrast to the preceding spread of text and image, sticks in the chest and throat.

WHAT IF SOMETHING HAPPENED

to me?

a black woman
living alone
on the edge of a ghetto
in West Philadelphia.
Pennsylvania.

My uncle was lynched in South Carolina before I was born.

ROPE AROUND HIS NECK

His broken body was tossed from a wagon
to the yard in front of my mother.
In the next double-page spread, the box sits, still closed, now on the left in a reversal of its first appearance. The light that casts the box's shadow shines across the gutter from the artist’s question on the right hand page — “Can it be transformed?” The artist seems to be drawing a deep, preparing breath, one that the next double-page spread implies is calming.
I LOOKED AT THAT BOX IN THE CORNER.

I was born in my grandmother's house, in Virginia, near the beginning of World War II. And in that house, with grandma, I felt loved and safe.

But now I sit here in my studio, with an unopened box. A container of fear and hope.

CAN IT BE TRANSFORMED?

My grandmother said hate hardens the heart and destroys those who carry it.

It also tells the innocent.
At the next turn, an organizing principle only implicit so far but now explicit in the words “When I was 3” joins the principle of the folding instructions “cut fold crease craft”. These instructions appear again on the same paper used for the endpapers, used here to mark the end of the book’s first section. The first section’s final words “A container to hold broken” fall between the instructions, leaving a warranted sense of foreboding. As the work proceeds akin to a growth chart — “when I was 5”, “when I was 11” and so on — can the necessary angel suffice?
In the four sections that follow, the artist’s life, fears and hopes intersect personally with painful local, national and international history. As she communicates her sense of living this history, she also charts her engagement with others’ history of subjection to hate. If any reader thinks that this somehow gives in to an “all lives matter” chorus, one corrective course is to lay hands and eyes on a copy of this artist’s book. If somehow that does not make plain the power of this artist’s voice, then a further corrective course is to listen to her read the text here. If that does not work, then follow the instructions on the back cover.
I am a white man. I write about book art. Encountering this work of art is to stumble, fall, get up — cut fold crease flatten fold out cut fold in flip over turn again open — and begin to do the work toward acknowledging and accepting this necessary angel. Reminder to self: "again open".

Further Reading


Sligh, Clarissa. Interview with Steve Miller, Book Arts Podcasts, School of Library Information and Sciences, University of Alabama, 1 July 2006.
