



Primal force

ARTISTS' BOOKS Sarah Bodman looks at the powerful, tactile use made of book arts by the Russian artist Dmitry Sayenko

Dmitry Sayenko, born in 1965 in Kiev, began to explore the possibilities of the artist's book in 1993, two years before he graduated from the Mukhina Art School in St. Petersburg. Sayenko works with woodcut and linocut to produce his books in small, hand-produced editions, which reflect his passion for creative printmaking and binding. He formally launched his Nikodim publishing imprint in 2000 and, since then, his works have been exhibited and collected worldwide, from London and Seoul to Hamburg and California. His books can be found in the collections of the Russian National Library, St. Petersburg; Eoun-ho Kim Collection, South Korea; Birmingham Museum of Art, UK; and Duke University, Durham, USA, amongst others. They are also widely collected by German institutions including: Bischöflichen Dom – und Diözesanmuseum and Stadtbibliothek, Trier; Staatsbibliothek und Staatliche Museen Berlin; Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats – und Universitätsbibliothek (SLUB) Dresden; and Gutenberg Museum, Mainz.

Sayenko describes his artist's books as 'primeval' because they communicate and express a deep regard for the history and tradition of concentrated fine craft, despite being products of the 20th and 21st centuries. Certainly his imagery has a raw, honest quality. His prints

are hand-worked from his original drawings and, while intricate in production, they are robust in their finish and follow a distinguished European tradition of woodcut. He sometimes prints directly onto newspapers, pushing the graphics to the very edge of each sheet. Such an approach only adds to the rude vigour of his work.

Sayenko is passionate about managing all the aspects of production for his books and will often make his own paper if nothing else fits the finished piece he envisages. Nothing is more important to him than the relationship between idea, image, text, paper and binding. Sayenko's books need to be picked up and handled to be properly appreciated. The sensory experience of the textures of covers and papers, the wonderful indentations and smell of ink on the page and his mastery of expressionist graphics printed in intense blocks of colour, produce a powerful effect on the viewer.

In his early books Sayenko selected texts by authors including Alexander Pushkin, Daniel Harms and Marina Tzvetava to work with. His admiration for and understanding of these texts flows through his woodcuts, etchings and typography. His texts and images are alive with the depictions of the characters' daily struggles in life: they sing from the pages as the characters wrestle with a range of emotions and experiences.

Dream writing

In the past two years, Sayenko has taken what he regards as a important step, having begun to write his own texts for his books. These began as short, descriptive pieces for his 'bestiaries' and have now progressed to longer stories from his imagination such as *The Tobacco Novels*, which he produced in winter 2008. As he says: 'For me this book is unusual because I took a risk in publishing my own texts. Before, I had tried to write but never dared to show the texts to anyone. In practice, almost all the written stories were dreamt by me and, having woken up in the morning, I needed to capture them in written form.'

Sayenko published *The Tobacco Novels* in Russian and English versions, each in an edition of eight copies. Writing his own text allowed him to play with the semantics of both Russian and English languages as he invented fictional deeds by well-known characters relating to their personalities and historical actions. The book is imbued with a sense of authentic nostalgia – even the paper he made is the amber colour of tobacco. He is now content that, in also producing his own texts, he can be the master of all the elements of his books' production.

Sayenko also incorporates relevant existing materials in his books. *The Drawing Pin* (2004) includes pages from old Soviet magazines; and books such as *Readers of Newspapers* (2009) feature newspapers layered into his handmade papers. He has re-used old banknotes to convey his pity for those who worship money to such extremes (*Moneyria*, 2004). Every component of his book plays its part; paper, ink, wood, leather and rope combine to reflect Sayenko's passion for both his message and medium.

Dmitry Sayenko will be exhibiting his artist's books at the upcoming London Art Book Fair Whitechapel Gallery, 25-27 Sep, and the Fine Press Book Fair, Oxford Brookes University Oxford, UK, 7-8 Nov. View his books on his website at: www.artist-sayenko.com

Images, from top

From *Readers of Newspapers* 2009. 16 pages with woodcuts on paper handmade by the artist incorporating old newspapers. Book: 400 x 250 mm

From *The Tobacco Novels* 2008. 32 pages with woodcut, linocut & letterpress. 300 x 215 mm

Printmaking Today published by Cello Press Ltd. www.printmakingtoday.co.uk © 2009