



Confounded structure

ARTISTS' BOOKS Sarah Bodman on *Excavating Babel*, an astonishing installation by Tina Hill, which explores the biblical story and ideas about the loss of language

For Tina Hill, whose enthusiasms include an interest in how museum artefacts are displayed and catalogued, *Excavating Babel* is a monument to books and language, and to the importance of books in her own life. In addition, it offers a commentary on the book as a solid, physical container of information and inspiration.

This piece specifically refers to the passage in Genesis (11, 1-9) in which God punishes humanity's temerity in building the tower – 'whose top may reach unto heaven' by 'confounding their language'. Unable to comprehend one another, the people scatter and building stops. *Excavating Babel* explores the damage and loss that occur when we cannot engage or empathize with one other. Inside the structure, the viewer is isolated, surrounded by a coiled wall of forbidding, unyielding (paper) bricks. Their titles and contents cannot be identified; the added text is unintelligible.

Hill created the structure by buying unwanted books from an Oxfam bookshop in Bristol (once deemed unfit for sale, such books are usually sold in bulk for pulping). A fortuitous 'open call' to clear the floors of a large abandoned book warehouse in the city supplied another 800, bringing the total used in the completed work to 2,282. The coiled structure – designed to reflect Bruegel's famous 16th century painting – was built on a metal base with poles holding each section in place. It took more than six months to

reach full size: a tower three metres high and 2.5 metres wide.

You see how these books work as an 'excavated' structure as you approach the piece; all the covers have been removed, partly to obscure the content. As Hill explains, 'Once divested of its cover we can no longer "judge the book by its cover"... or tell in what language it was written, whether it contains words of wisdom, law, medicine or is pulp fiction.' The removal of the covers allowed her to show the inners of each book: the exposed spines that create the subtly coloured layers of the tower's exterior, bricks bound together only by string and glue. The inner layer flashes an occasional glimpse of gold or ruby red from a decorative page edge, like precious metals embedded within rock strata. The viewer is thrown into further confusion by the snippets of text overlaid on parts of the structure: the biblical passage from Genesis has been 'translated' with Yahoo's notorious, free translator Babel Fish, which more often than not renders text from one language into complete nonsense in another.

Hill meticulously recorded her excavation of each book: titles, dates, authors, publishers and editions were all noted and filed for future cataloguing. For her, these books were:

Scattered from the printing presses on which they were printed in exactly the same way as each of the other thousands

of copies in that edition, just like Nebuchadnezzar's mass-produced bricks with their printed signatures (used to build the tower in ancient Babylon but later spread across Iraq as recycled building material, whilst others became valuable museum artefacts encased in vitrines, such as those in the British Museum) – mass-produced, abandoned books containing hand-written names, signatures, dedications, dates, ex libris plates and library stamps.'

Each became as unique as a historical artefact.

Additional finds inside the books: postcards, shopping lists, dedications and clippings were also recorded. Nothing was wasted; even the drilled-out centres of the books were collected. Hill refers to it as 'a debris of letters and words, which I began to call 'word dust'... full of symbolism and which became an important part of the overall meaning of *Excavating Babel*'. The dust is scattered around the base of each stack, alluding to the crumbling of Babel, the disappearance of language and a loss of communication. Yet, as the artist feels, not without hope: the dust 'also offers the potential for re-combination into an infinite number of new sentences, new books and new, hopefully deeper, levels of communication'.

Excavating Babel won the Agassi Book Arts Prize during the MA Multi-disciplinary Printmaking exhibition, UWV Bristol – School of Creative Arts Degree Show 2009. It will be shown in *Celebrating Paper* at the Royal West of England Academy (RWVA) Bristol, from 17 Jan-21 Feb (www.rwa.org.uk), and *The Secret Library of Solihull – a showcase of work stretching the boundaries of book arts*, The Gallery at Central Library & Arts Complex, Solihull (www.solihull.gov.uk/gallery) from 8 Mar-8 May 2010. www.adhoc-art.com/artists/tina-hill

Contact

Tina Hill, e: art@tinahill.me.uk

Image

Excavating Babel (detail) 2009 by Tina Hill
Installation of over 2,000 books, 3 x 2.5 m