

An Open Book: The generous narrative spaces in artists' books by Katerina Kyselica

Katerina Kyselica emigrated to the USA from the Czech Republic in 2001 and currently lives and works in New York City. I met with her when she visited Bristol for an exhibition earlier this year. Kyselica has written extensively about the history of Eastern European contemporary printmaking, critically exploring the region's important contribution to printmaking, illustration and book arts from the Czech Republic and Slovakia in particular. She was the managing editor of *Celebrating Print* magazine (2015-2018) which focused on expanding appreciation, understanding and critique of printmaking in collaboration with art historians and curators from the region, out to a Western audience.

Her own practice with artists' books and printmaking is in creating works that consider the experience of the recipient rather than working towards presenting pieces in a gallery environment. She has, since childhood, dreamt of a retirement spent "in a huge library smelling books." Kyselica's love of books informs her practice as an artist living in such an expensive city as New York, so that she can work without being tied to a physical studio space. Books and smaller printed pieces can be carried around to be worked on wherever she may be, and also constructed into larger pieces. The artist's book as a place for problem solving and to explore architectural elements of space both intrigues and attracts her. Her day job as a graphic designer revolves around printed matter produced in volume; in her personal practice, unique drawings, prints and one-off books offer a different pace of working. This allows space for her to take time and play without knowing the results of her creative experiments. Her book works have responded to historical events such as the execution of the Russian Imperial Romanov family *Code Red (Nicholas and Alexandra)*, 2016. These works respond to the themes of homeland and exile, interweaving her own individual interpretations through the tactile considerations of paper, collage, typewritten texts, relief prints and drawings. Her bookworks emerge organically through her reimagining such historical narratives or Czech fairytales to create objects that she would want to keep herself. *Field Notes* (2018) "is made of the tiny lines and the blanks (pauses as I make the field) that get filled with 'notes' that can become poems in some works." Her work considers its interaction with the viewer/reader, allowing them a freedom of movement throughout the work in turning, arranging, touching and discovering at their own whim and pace. *For Me, For You, For Me and You* (2020) for example, is an unbound book within a box where she explains "you can create your own version or idea within the framework of my idea. I want you to get involved in finding and making your own story in it. You bring your own psychology to it. It's a playground for you and me, I put the game on the table and you find it and play your own game through arranging and unfolding."

Drawing is fundamental to Kyselica, she can spend 6-7 hours a day on an unplanned piece which she finds "meditative, like automatic drawing; I can do it anywhere, at home, in a café, etc." *Halo* (2018) is a beautiful, ongoing piece which she constantly works on during her travels - so called not only because "I feel I deserve a halo after drawing, but for the light emanating from the blanks in the drawing designated for textual narratives that are centred on a woman." The drawn element of thousands of intricately hatched ink lines on Japanese Sekishu paper serves as a background, the collaged text then coming in to reveal the work as a place for women to inhabit. The sound of the paper as it is folded/unfolded played a part in considering the elements of touch, aural and visual reading. "'She' enters the space and halo + 'she' become connected. You can make sense of it when you enter the book at any point and reflect on your own experiences. You can hang it on the wall, or fold it like a tablecloth. I think about the recipient and give them a choice for how they might display it." The concept of *Halo* is currently being incorporated into a new work in progress. Here it will become a repetitive element within a composition where print forms an underpainting for Kyselica to react and respond to. As she explains, "I love the idea of a shared narrative, of making something out of nothing, from an imagined space. I want to share that experience with the viewer - to construct an open, tactile, interactive narrative is very important to me. All books are meant to be read and explored. I want you to hug the book." <https://www.katerinakyselica.com/>