



# Art *of the* BOOK



BY TIMM BOYLE

Photos by Brian Passino

— *Mysteries of the past lie dormant, fading from view for all but the one who has come to discover, to claim as her own and to transform.*

**M**argaret Suchland may be the ultimate recycler. Not only does she rescue seemingly mundane objects discarded by others, she also transforms them into completely new entities, bringing them back to life in other forms.

But as a creator of artist books, Suchland's work goes far beyond the reuse of raw material. There is a mystery to her craft underlying the physical. Her uncanny ability to blend the old with the new, the ancient with the modern, lends a timeless quality to her art. ►



“Artist books allow me a means of expression as a printmaker, writer and craftsman,” said Suchland, 55. “They can challenge viewers to rethink the fundamental idea of the meaning of a book. Many times they are just reminiscent of what we traditionally think of as a book, having no beginning, middle or end.”

**N**on-traditional is also a way to describe Suchland as a student. Her bachelor's degree in art from UW-Parkside came in 1992, 30 years following her graduation from high school.

“Parkside is an incredible place for the non-traditional student,” Suchland said. “I’m still very much involved there and several of my close artist friends are alumni. I still use the print studio and I’m on the Board of the Friends of the UW-Parkside Library.”

Suchland, a Racine resident, was born and raised in the St. Louis area and moved to Beirut, Lebanon, in the mid-1960s when her husband, Jay, was transferred there by International Harvester. She began her training as an artist by auditing several classes at the American University of Beirut.

After six years in Lebanon, she and her husband moved back to Chicago, then to Caracas, Venezuela, where they lived for three years. In 1977, Suchland began classwork toward her degree in fine arts in Miami. The family, which now included daughters Mary and Jennifer, moved to the Chicago area in 1982 and finally to Racine in 1985.

Just as Suchland's life has been a continual flow, so too are her hand-made artist books.



“Artist books are usually not as static as a piece of sculpture or a painting or print,” Suchland said. “They enable an artist to create a sort of rhythm in the way in which the work is perceived by the viewer. By incorporating text, even if just one word, the book can increase the viewer's understanding of the work.”

“Artist books can also be intimate and personal when held in the hand. For me, artist books offer infinite

possibilities and have become an important and integral part of my work.”

Originating early in this century as a result of collaborations between avant-garde painters and poets in Europe and later in New York, artist books made a resurgence in the 1960s and early 1970s

in a climate of social and political activism.

In the preface to *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Dick Higgins describes an artist book as “a book done for its own sake and not for the information it contains....It is a work. Its design and format reflect its content — they intermerge and interpenetrate...The experience of reading it, viewing it, framing it — that is what the artist stresses in making it.”

*Every object has a creator, the one who formed and nurtured it. Many years later, an object may reveal the presence of an absence, crying out for its creator's long-ago touch.*

How does Suchland decide which discarded items are worthy of inclusion in her creations? The key for this

visionary artist, as she reveals in her artist's statement, is a sense of time, place and memory, and the emotional connections within them.

Some of her books are filled with remnants of old postcards, correspondences long forgotten by those who wrote and received them but brought back to life by Suchland. By using layering in her work, many of these postcards and other correspondences become partially obscured, just as memories are often incomplete and foggy.

“My books are non-traditional, small in scale and often incorporate the ‘found’ object,” Suchland said. “In choosing an object, I search for something that feels old, something that I personally find mysterious.

“Many of my books are collaborations, in a sense, with the unknown. After this collaboration, a sort of metamorphosis occurs. I may go beyond the reality of the object or even reclassify it as something else. Everything has a story, a memory and was once owned by someone.

“These ‘found objects’ have a presence of an absence,” she continued. “You could say that I am an optimist, for I salvage something, perhaps meant for the trash, and transform it, giving it a new life, a new reality. A lot of my books are based on sentiment and memory.”

One of Suchland's more interesting, one-of-a-kind books is a collection of photographic plates called glass positives. She uses glassine, folded paper to connect the edges so that it pulls out into a foot-long object which one can view from a variety of positions. Another, titled “To Draw From Memory,” is a small-edition letterpress book that includes her hand-colored etchings.

**O**f the approximately 50 artist books Suchland has created, her favorite is a tiny art-metals book she made as a UW-Parkside senior. It features pages of cast, sterling silver and pewter, and etched copper and tin, all reminiscent of Assyrian and Egyptian periods of history.

Several of her recent books combine distant memories with her burgeoning computer skills.

“It's high-tech meets memories,” Suchland said. “I'm so drawn to old things, but I love my computer. To me, it's important for an artist to keep up with the technology of the time.”

Suchland lists as her top influences renowned book artist and associate curator of the Wustum Museum, Caren Heft, and UW-Parkside art professors Doug DeVinny and John Murphy. Suchland's first artist book was produced in Heft's home in 1989.

“Margaret started as a printmaker and she's always done really great art work, but the book arts is a logical continuation of her development as an





artist,” Heft said. “I think she was born to be a bookmaker.

“Lately she’s done some beautiful things with bright colors, which is somewhat of a departure for her. She really has a good color sense and I like to see her expressing that. She’s also doing some compelling computer-generated books. She’s come a long way.”

*The creator’s eyes see potential in everything they view. The transformations of discarded objects into works of art are deeply personal, yet they can be appreciated by others who share a similar taste.*

“Shows are not my main priority. However, I have entered a number of them to help market my work,” Suchland said. “I really do this for

myself, and I’ve been very blessed that I can pursue this.”

Suchland’s work can often be seen in a variety of juried and invitational shows in the greater Milwaukee and Chicago areas. Her exhibits have been part of more than 40 shows over the past few years, and she’s received awards at events such as the 1995 and 1996 Racine Area Arts Show at the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, the 1995 Midwest Print Show at Loyola University in Chicago and the 1994 Membership Exhibition Wisconsin Painters and Sculptors at UW-Madison.

Among Suchland’s books that incorporate her printmaking skills are those once displayed at the Seebeck Gallery in Kenosha. Blank books with print covers are accompanied by works

such as “Postcards: Address Unknown,” an artist book with a concertina binding, plus “Notes” and “Symbols,” which fold out like accordions. Also on display were her “ABC Upper Case” and “abc lower case” books, which also incorporate the accordion effect.

Suchland’s passion for artist books is a shared one. She belongs to a number of artist book clubs, including the Badwater Book Club of Milwaukee and the Chicago Hand Bookbinders.

Margaret Suchland will continue to keep a watchful eye out for mysteries of the past. And as the ultimate recycler, she’ll continue to transform ordinary objects into extraordinary works of art. ■