

A Cork exhibition shows artists struggling to rewrite the story of books and art, writes GERRY McCARTHY

The most famous piece of conceptual book art in Ireland, possibly in the world, is housed in Trinity College Dublin. It is, of course, the Book of Kells. While some may claim it as a distant ancestor of the work featured in *Bookish*, a survey of contemporary book-related art at the Glucksman gallery in Cork, it is also a remote ancestor of modern books themselves. That family relationship between books and art can be enriching for both — but it also means that an exhibition like this faces unique problems.

The trouble with books, considered either as source material or as works of art in their own right, is that the space available for interaction is both too large and too small. It is too large in the sense that the universe of books is vast. Jorge Luis Borges wrote of an infinite library containing all possible texts: we have created only a tiny fraction of these, but the number of actual books — manuscript and printed, illustrated or not, dealing with an inconceivable variety of topics — is enormous. It is absurd to think that art — itself just a single section under the classification systems used by libraries — could ever deal with such profusion.

Yet it can also be said the topic of books, more precisely, the interface between books and art, is too narrow. The ways in which art can deal with the subject of books are limited in number. Art can reproduce books in another medium like painting or photography, it can deform or manipulate them conceptually, or it can utilise them as sculptural material. By straining at the conceptual bounds, it is possible for artists to come up with some new twists on these basic ideas but the possibilities remain limited.

In fact, most of the things you can do artistically with books have been done. In the 1960s, RB Kitaj produced *In Our Time*, a set of 50 screen-printed reproductions of book covers. Marcel Duchamp published a small endgame manual for chess players, which had little practical use and is now listed with his artistic works. A Humument, by the British artist Tom Phillips, is a 19th-century novel with large portions of text erased, blacked-out or painted over. Here, in a series of meticulous paintings, *Fragments sur les Institutions Republicaines*, Shane Cullen has used paint to recreate the appearance and texture of print.

All of these works are concerned in some way with the content or meaning of books. Another approach, purely sculptural, was employed by the Scottish artist David Mach for his 1980s installations using a vast number of printed magazines. These massive pieces gave the impression of printed matter as an overwhelming force. In a related vein, Jonathan Callan — one of whose pieces, *Library of Past Choices*, is

featured in *Bookish* — uses books as raw material for abstract sculptures, sticking and stapling them into unlikely forms.

But books, so rich in terms of content, prove rather intractable when used as formal raw materials. No matter how Callan deforms them, the fact that the piece is made out of tortured books is what strikes the eyes, and any consideration of the new form created lags behind.

Neither the fact that the basic templates were mapped out in other works nor the difficulty of doing anything truly original with books should be held as a black mark against this show. As a survey of contemporary practices it is broad and deep, with arresting pieces from established names. Hans-Peter Feldmann, the veteran German conceptualist who once described himself as an “anti-photo artist”, offers a gigantic photographic reproduction of his own bookshelves in a life-size aluminium print.

Goshka Macuga, shortlisted for the 2008 Turner prize, has a piece called *The Way Beyond Art*, a set of book covers reproduced in homage to Kitaj. But where Kitaj’s work alludes to art, film, politics and contemporary culture, Macuga declares her selections were motivated by her “initial captivation” with the cover. This suggests a sort of aesthetic casualness at odds both with the formality of her work and the spirit behind Kitaj’s original prints.

Any art works which deal with the cover images from books will inevitably stray into the area of pastiche. Some of the artists here use the change of medium — from printing

inks to painting or drawing — to comment on familiar book covers. Katharina Jahnke uses different editions of the HG Wells sci-fi classic *The War of the Worlds*, redrawing them in Indian ink and graphite. Taken together, these images — from bug-eyed monsters to sinister machines — constitute a reflection on the nature of fear in different societies.

There is humour too in *Bookish*, notably in a piece Niall de Buitlear. He spent time in the Boole Library in University College Cork, meticulously trawling the volumes for found objects. The result is the *Found Bookmarks Project*, a collection of things which people have used as bookmarks and which have little in common apart from being flat.

After so much sombre reworking of meaningful cover images and miscellaneous pieces of careful conceptualism, De Buitlear’s piece is a reminder of the real life of books. It points us back to readers, without whom they are just lifeless assemblies of ink and paper. It offers us an intriguing glance into the lives of these anonymous people, with their shopping lists, holy pictures, scribbled phone numbers and letters of complaint.

By embracing the human aspect, De Buitlear enlarges the interface between books and art. The rest of the show maps the territory with careful attention to detail but the *Found Bookmarks Project* offers us a new port of entry into it.

Bookish, Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork, until Oct 24