The Kinship Circle at the Gordon Parks Gallery: Celebrating Limits in an Ever-Expanding World

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It’s okay to touch the artwork. In fact, Regula Russelle practically insists. At the Nov. 12 opening of her exhibit “Kinship Circle: An Exploration in Book Arts” in the Gordon Parks Gallery at Metropolitan State University, the artist repeatedly encouraged visitors to touch and pick up her pieces of artwork, to embrace the embraceable in the here and now.

Accordning to Russelle, touching changes the way people experience art. Russelle’s works, which include short, hand-pressed books and bowls made primarily of cotton, are not as fragile and distressed as they first appear.

The books, printed on light card stock with chapters demarcated by folds, incorporate drawings, poetry and prose to tell a story. Russelle’s composition, “Every Morning is an Entrance to a City” takes the shape of a pamphlet and answers the question “How do we shape a day?” Images that complement the text includes hand-drawn musical staffs and a cello.

The inspiration for this piece was cellist Pablo Casals, who played music and then took a walk every morning, grounding his day in both culture and nature. A religious element is evident in the work, as “Every Morning” was inspired by the “Book of Hours,” a small devotional text from the Middle Ages consisting of prayers or psalms.

The subtle meaning within the seemingly straightforward pieces make Russelle’s work special.

“She’s just so thoughtful,” said Gordon Parks Gallery director Erica Rasmussen, who, like Russelle, teaches at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts. “I like the way she thinks.”

Book arts are a 20th-century invention from the world of visual arts. According to Rasmussen, the practice evolved from letterpress printing of chapbooks, a type of small-format book that originated in England. Chapbooks were inexpensive to produce and very popular. At a time when printed tomes were priced for the privileged, chapbooks became “the people’s form of art and literature.”

The democratic nature of this art form is not lost on Russelle. For the Kinship Circle project, she and several colleagues took 5,000 hand-pressed cards of poetry and drawings directly to the places people congregate in the city such as the Dorothy Day Center, transit stops and farmers’ markets. The small scale of the work involves little cost beyond “my labor and my thoughts.”

The cards, which brought the work of several poets including Ilze Klavina Mueller and Jim Moore to the public, were popular.

“People know when something took time,” said Russelle, who grew up in Switzerland and is a 1993 graduate of Metropolitan State. The cards also conveyed the importance of proximity.

Prior to her current career, Russelle was a successful graphic designer. She made the move to book arts in the 1990s, when most design work shifted to electronic forms. She missed the tactile aspect of art.

The prominence of bowls in the collection is not an accident. In order to read the text within, people are forced to pick them up. And while bowls are self-contained entities, they can also be part of a bigger picture.

Russelle’s “The Beauty of Limits: A Meditation on Rootedness, Hospitality, and a Commitment to Place,” is a collection of small bowls with related thematic messages inside. Some simply have keywords, such as “Compose & Form,” “Assemble” or “Mend” on separate bits of paper placed strategically within. Other bowls contain short poems written by others, but many hold Russelle’s own thoughts such as “Why is our cultural bias toward outward expansion, more than nurturing nearness and care of place?”

These messages reflect Russelle’s interest in promoting peace, social justice and environmental protection, all of which can be acted on at the local level. “I am a believer in civic engagement,” she said.

The theme of “a work in progress” is based on Kintsugi, a Japanese method of repairing broken bowls. Rather than hiding the cracks, the seams are connected with a lacquer resin that looks like solid gold and become an attractive way to tell the history of the bowl.

Likewise, her piece “Centering Outward, Inward Return,” features labyrinths and discusses journeys with limits. Instead of lamenting an insurmountable distance, Russelle notes that people of the Jewish faith who could not afford a trip to Jerusalem walked a labyrinth instead to symbolize the journey.

“There’s so much to learn in place,” Russelle said.

Regula Russelle’s exhibit at the Gordon Parks Gallery runs until Dec. 11.

Photos:

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Credit: Courtesy of Eric Rasmussen

Caption: Artist Regula Russelle poses with her work.

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Caption: Spectators in the Gordon Parks Gallery.