

Title:

The Da Vinci Code, John Cage And Magical Secrets About Thinking Creatively

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Summary:

In a culture where art and life are often inextricable, Magical Secrets about Thinking Creatively: The Art of Etching and the Truth of Life (Prestel Publishing, ISBN 3-7913-3654-1, \$35) comes as the latest in a series of books, sites and magazines that keep them entwined.

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Article Body:

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In the last few years, the number of magazines and websites devoted to art criticism, art projects and found art, has ballooned, a sign of rising enthusiasm about art among people from all walks of life. There is an abundance of new books, on one hand (the hand of cultural criticism), Michael Kimmelman's The Accidental Masterpiece: On the Art of Life and Vice Versa, John Updike's Still Looking: Essays on American Art; on the other hand (the hand of pure pop culture) an insurgence of immensely successful novels based as much on art as on life: Girl with a Pearl Earring, Jonathan Harr's The Lost Painting, last but not least, The Da Vinci Code.

And then there are plenty of examples of pop cultural criticism, such as Hal Niedzvieki's Hello, I'm Special: How Individuality Became the New Conformity, along with countless books and products on the market designed to help everyone from businessmen to babies to bus drivers embrace their own creative genius.

Magical Secrets, which is at once a book, a DVD, and a website

(<http://www.magical-secrets.com>), is one of the smartest of these forays into exploring creativity. The book is formulaic without being predictable: Author Kathan Brown has organized it into thirteen chapters, one for each "magical secret," (my favorites are chapters five and six, "Don't Know What You Want" and "Know What You Don't Want," a very Zen-like juxtaposition). *Magical Secrets* manages to pack a lot in, from stories about artists to musings on the creative thought process. Yet Brown spends no more than a handful of pages on any one Secret, and addresses her reader clearly and concisely, not as an entertainer or an academic but as a confidant, pupil and friend. She guides her audience confidently on a path that leads inward, but still somehow ends up outside the self.

It is a feat in itself simply that *Magical Secrets* conveys a lot of information. Etching, one finds, is a centuries-old technique of incising an image into metal with acid. The artist begins by covering the surface of a copper plate with a hard, waxy ground. He cuts the image he wants into the ground with an etching needle or other sharp tool, then submerges the plate in acid. The acid bites into the grooves and crevices, the waxy ground is rubbed off, and the image is left engrained in the smooth surface of the plate. The resulting incisions are filled with ink, a piece of paper is placed on the plate, and the whole thing is run through the printing press. Scraping and burnishing the copper, rubbing the ink into the grooves, and pulling the plate through the press are highly physical, labor-intensive processes that involve a lot of painstaking, detailed work, yet the resulting lines an artist can get are often the most delicate you've ever seen, and the textures the most subtle. Though etching is appreciated by many art lovers, the number of master etchers in the United States might be comparable to the number of virtuoso organists or rare orchid cultivators. It is not the first thing most people think of when faced with something as huge as Life.

But etching has been Kathan Brown's life. Despite the beauty of etching, it was not taken seriously in the United States contemporary art market until Brown made it her mission to revive it. Since Crown Point Press's inception in 1962, artists from all over the world who work in different mediums—from San Francisco conceptual sculptor Tom Marioni to New York composer John Cage; from Australian Aboriginal artist Dorothy Napangardi to Pakistani-born miniature painter Shahzia Sikander—have been drawn there for a unique experience in art making. *Magical Secrets about Thinking Creatively* marks the forty-fourth year in Brown's highly energetic and passionate career.

The variety of art represented at Crown Point speaks to the depth of Brown's understanding of it; while her technique is narrow, her scope is broad, and that is what makes *Magical Secrets* a compelling read. Brown offers a broad

understanding of the etching process, and ultimately steps back to examine creativity itself. "Many artists have told me that after working with etching they have a new awareness of what they are doing in their painting or sculpture," she writes in the preface. "You can share their awareness through this book, which is for artists and people who have - or would like to have - the spirit of an artist." Indeed, Brown's style makes it difficult not to share this awareness: like good art, her writing makes her subject seem both obvious and somehow profound.