

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Brooklyn Art Library's 'Sketchbook Project'

Margaret Friedman · Wednesday, February 26th, 2014

Few graphical compositions offer more delight than thousands of colorfully bound sketchbook spines mooning the viewer from walls of library shelves. Not only are the complex patterns formed by their decorated backsides beautiful to look at, but at Brooklyn's Art Library, the Sketchbook Project promises infinitudes of individual expression in seductively uniform-sized 32-page sketchbooks.

Visiting from the West Coast, I ducked inside the glass door one frigid day this winter to escape a gale, and emerged hours later dazed and euphoric, having pored through a dozen sketchbooks so distinct and personal it was as though I had been a tourist in other people's brains all afternoon. In some of the books, the art was consistently masterful and spoke confidently for itself: expert draftsmanship, elaborate crosshatching, watercolors, pastels, acrylics. Some were experimental, including collage with unconventional materials. Many reflected familiar visual tropes of fantasy. In others, the images seemed primitive and urgent—aesthetics secondary to the creator's raw desire to connect. In one memorable sketchbook, a young man annotated his childlike drawings with captions about his family of origin, his desperate loneliness and thoughts of suicide. It made for thrilling reading—a bit like scanning a modern-day Van Gogh's mental thrashings, without the foregone conclusions (spoiler: by the end of his book the man wrote that he felt better having shared his thoughts with interested strangers, and even included his email address for people to write to him).



Brooklyn Art Library's Sketchbook Project. Photo by Margaret Friedman

In 2009, the Library's sponsor, Art House, moved from Georgia to Brooklyn, issuing the blank books to anyone who requested one (the current fee is \$25), with the proviso that the requesters must fill the pages, decorate the cover however they choose (drawings, paintings, collage, etc.), and return the artifact to the library where it can be bar coded, displayed, and viewed by anyone. The collection contains over 30,000 sketchbooks from people in over 130 countries as of February 2014. The peaceful Williamsburg storefront offers a huge communal table where you can peruse in congenial solitude. The Library also has a touring component: subsets of the collection circulate around the country in a stylish trailer, bringing the resource to communities that do not resemble uber-chic Williamsburg. For those not near the tour route, there is a digital library.

Unlike the highly curated and un-private experience of viewing works in an art gallery, where your reactions and attention to the works on the wall might be influenced by others' smiles, smirks or scowls, poring through a sketchbook feels completely personal and intimate. There's also a sense

of kismet with each sketchbook. Each one you pick up seems to whisper, (or purr, or giggle, or scream), “*Of all the thousands of sketchbooks on the walls, you picked me.*”



Sketchbooks on parade. Photo by Chris Heuberger

The Brooklyn Art Library, 103 N 3rd St, Brooklyn, NY 11249, (718) 388-7941.

<http://www.sketchbookproject.com/brooklynartlibrary>

Top image: Image from one of the sketchbooks: ‘Numbered, Weighed, Divided’ by Greg Kletsel Brooklyn, NY, United States

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