

Karen Trask
Touch Wood—Touchez du bois

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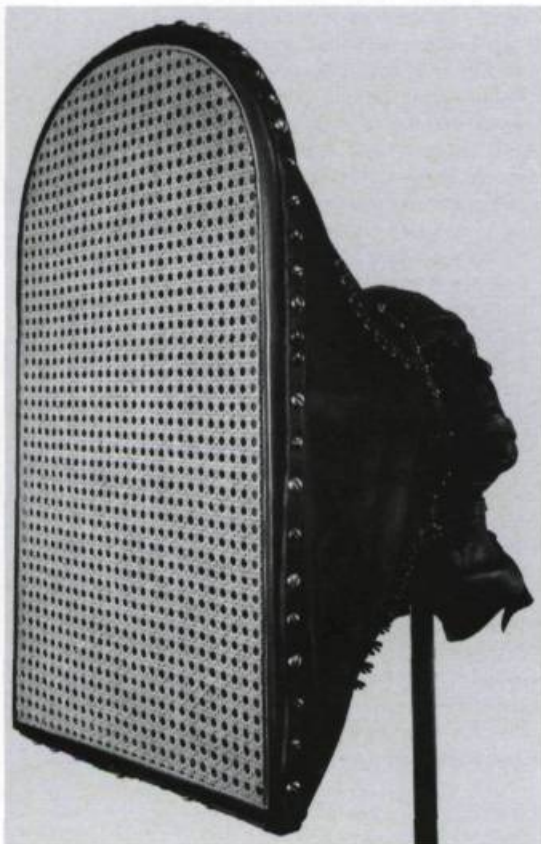
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Karen Trask: Touch Wood—Touchez du bois

JULIA BLUSHAK



ANGUS BUNGAY,
Confessional, 1997.
Plaster, leather, found
objects. 50.8 x 63.5
x 40.6 cm. Photo:
Courtesy of the artist.

tective restraint which keeps him focused on his objective, or is it really armor which conceals a latent violence?

Some works in this series allude to the senses. A head completely covered in leather sports a giant "ear" in *Confessional* (1997). With the megaphone-like contrivance strapped to the head, it is as if all the other senses were covered and deadened to support this primitive but effective device for the amplification of hearing. But the question remains — who is doing the confessing? *Discipline* (1997) presents a painted head balancing a heavy medical dictionary. The closed eyes betray a steadfastness and a tangible sense of the control needed to accomplish this task.

Cross (from the 1999 series *At Arm's Length*) incorporates an eight-foot life-size aluminum cross with leather forearm and calve bindings. At first, this piece looks like a piece of quasi-religious bondage apparatus, but the viewer soon sees that there are castings of the exposed hands and feet in the leather bonds, you can't use this apparatus because someone,

for the most part invisible, is already there.

Bungay's approach changed in 2001. Although he still uses life-sized plaster casts of the head (he has also done an ongoing series of smaller maquettes as well), the character of the clown entered his work. *Leathered Clown* (from the 2001 series *Head Games*) uses the leather to define the oversized down-turned mouth, red nose, and exaggerated face painting of a clown. It is as if the dichotomy between inward and outward, happy and sad, tortured and placid has become more overt. And for the first time, colour has appeared in his work.

Up to this point, Bungay had used found objects as part of the stimulus for the development of a specific work. The object would suggest an idea, its nature and its range of associations would play an important role in the direction of the work. With the *Head Games* series, Bungay began to make drawings of a potential work and then seek out or fabricate the objects that had appeared in the drawing. A yellow duck, for instance, a found object, ended up in several drawings, but the sculptor realized that he had to make the multiple ducks the drawing called for. *Shooting Ducks* (2001) is a good example. The initial idea surfaced in a small working sketch derived from an exploration of the carnival theme or midway games. The idea was further developed in a large three-foot by four-foot drawing. Bungay then created a whole shooting gallery of ducks, fabricated an aluminum mask, and found an appropriate gun to complete the work.

These later works, because they depend more on artist-fabricated apparatus (rather than found objects), seem slicker and more finely crafted than some of his earlier works. The net result, however, is equally compelling. Bungay's sculptural works are unique, direct, and powerful — yet at the same time psychologically ambiguous and mysterious —, demonstrating a rare and original fusion of idea and execution. ←

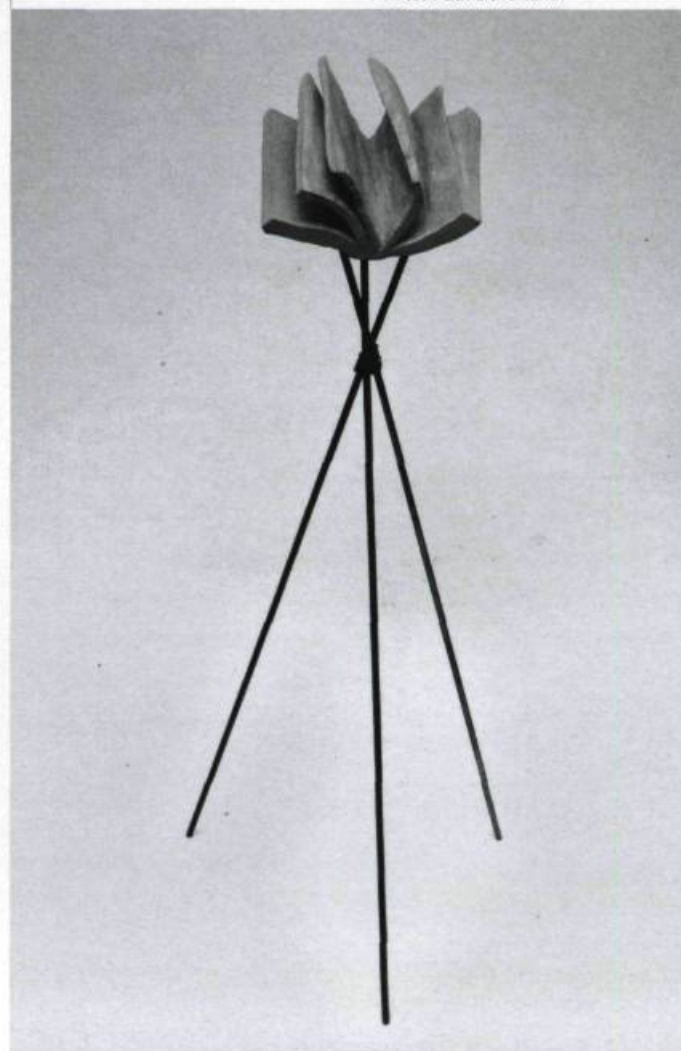
<http://angusbungay.tripod.com>

It's a late summer afternoon and you are driving between meetings, from one community to another. Perhaps a small break is in order. Instead of pulling into a local coffee shop for a jolt of caffeine, you turn off road to lie in a meadow and quiet your agenda-riddled mind. When you open your eyes again, you are aware of a large elm tree shimmering just yards away. There are only the two of you, caught together in the afternoon light. The light flashing off each leaf is accentuated by a gentle rustling sound that carries across to you. It is a dry, soothing sound, like thin paper fluttering. For now, any thoughts that form move slowly to the surface of your mind and hang gently — for to bear witness to this fleeting moment to anyone other than yourself would require so much more. And for now there is only you, and the tree.¹

Now transport yourself into an art exhibition by Karen Trask, entitled *Touch Wood—Touchez du bois*. Although you find yourself inside an artificially lit room surrounded by carefully arranged art pieces, you may eventually enter a sizable space within yourself — the space that nurtures dreams, memories, and yearning palpable.

For over ten years, Trask has been giving sculptural treatment, often through artist books, to the relationship between the abstractions of spoken and written language and their visceral roots. The works exhibited here are part of an ongoing exploration inspired by the venerable tree and its sublime offspring, word and book. Like a cultural anthropologist determined to put our current day's digital preoccupation in its proper place, Trask draws together a narrative on how tree, bark, leaves and branches connect with our own human legacy of sounds, signs, words, and pages. You now shed the world of contem-

KAREN TRASK, *Livre ouvert*, 2000.
Wood (elm), steel. 41 x 104 x 39 cm.
Photo: Paul Litherland.



porary virtual imaging and remote devices that bloat senses and assault attention for a quieter place — dotted with intricate objects that are portable and personal in size, often evoking a “touchableness.”

It seems that the real story of where our thoughts come to live for us is between the covers — book covers. If you accept the artist’s invitation to be seated at the library table and gently handle one of the hand-made books (using the cloth gloves provided, of course) you discover layers of meaning and intent. Pick up the charming palm-sized book entitled *Petit message*. Its handwoven paper cover opens to reveal two facing pages, each embedded with an actual sprig of branch tip, including leaf buds. There is no written text, per se. The twig message is sunk snugly into the pages of cast paper so that the two elements, message and matrix, are part of a whole. This wordless little book evokes our earliest messaging techniques — that is, inscribing, impressing, and carving into a firm

surface. Written history, as we know it, first spoke this way, through marks on bone, clay, leaves, and stone. They are our first attempts to commute information over time and space. But messaging humanity’s thoughts into concrete and transferable code needed the invention of paper in 105 AD. by the Chinese to truly evolve. In fact, humankind’s memory is literally impressed into and onto cotton and linen rags, trees and numerous other vegetable and animal ingredients that are the chief components of every paper page in every book in every library in the world. The noble arts of printing and paper-making grew from these very organic beginnings. Draw your hand across a page set and printed by a hand-letter press today to rediscover the sculptural presence and weight of each letter balanced on and actually into the page.

In some of these book creations, Trask has literally pierced text through pages, leaving the letters to be read as negative spaces. Books are vulnerable. What writings

persist over time may be damaged by moisture and mould or vandalized by hungry worms. Books exhibited like these are alive and participate in our own heroic effort to survive the ravages of time. Photographic and digital technologies of recent years may carry information, but they present messages as illusion and representation. By bringing together art and nature, technology and the real physicalness required to pass along an elegant “petit message” across centuries, the unique works in this small library truly refresh our sense of wonder for books as messengers.

There is no doubt that the tree is at the centre of Trask’s explorations throughout this show. Visual motifs with seedlings, leaves, growth rings and objects of actual wood construction predominate. Then there is the text — titles, poems, and stories that play with a rich glossary of terms and idioms filled with tree references. As the artist herself explains, “When I began to unravel the history of the word ‘book,’ I was surprised to discover the tree.” The inclusion of a digital art piece entitled *PowerBook* is clever and indicative of the artist’s ability to embrace new “messaging” technology for its own merits, and as part of our futuristic efforts in proliferating and transferring messages. By clicking the mouse the visitor directs a dialogue of one-liners and animates a concrete poem on the computer screen. Phrases like “turn a new leaf,” “knock on wood,” “can’t see the forest for the trees,” tumble onto each other as the screen displays its own giddy alphabetized version of a “T” tree. Etymological sources are important throughout the show, but they are revealed rather than cited. Trask sculpts with language and form, twisting her word games between English and French to reveal the common roots in words, such as “livre” and “library” from the Latin “liber,” meaning inner bark of the tree.

At some point, while moving through the exhibit, you may notice a soft rustling sound. Look up and around to view a display that appears almost monumental in this room of small wonders. There on the wall, suspended and ghostlike, is a 12-by-10-foot elm tree. It is actually a composite image, comprising page- or leaf-size pieces of ink-jet

printed Japanese washi paper that have been pinned to float gently from the wall. Your body movements and perhaps the room’s quiet air conditioning set these pages to float and flutter as if on an invisible breeze. Here again is the elegant and elegiac elm tree you may have noticed solitary and stoic in a nearby meadow or urban park. Something about its long slender trunk and fan of branches pulls you up out of your mind and into its grand space. Mirage-like in this room, its existence is mere perception on your part, though you feel you are breathing the same air and sharing the same ground. After a while you notice your own sense of comfort in its presence, not unlike the way you can feel when alone and inward-focused while engaged in reading or writing. These may seem like far-fetched impressions for some. But perhaps this is simply instinct responding and affinities connecting, as when orphan animals are raised by unlikely surrogate parents. At the very least, we should agree to claim trees as friends. It is good to recognize the intimacy we’ve developed with words and books and trees as companions and to understand the weaving of our shared histories. Throughout this exhibit, Trask manages to entertain with wit and educate by example, playing with textures, form, and text manipulation to celebrate structures and techniques still alive after thousands of years. Here is homage to the ingenuity, craft and patience invested in the evolution of our most human activities — creating and sharing our world through words. I guarantee the lowly paperback will never feel the same. ←

NOTE

1. *Touch Wood/Toucher du bois* has been exhibited in several venues in Quebec and Ontario over the past two years, commencing in Gallery B312, Montreal, in the autumn of 2002, Centre national d’exposition, in Jonquière, Quebec, in 2001, Burlington Art Centre, Burlington, and Latcham Gallery, Stouffville, Ontario, in 2002, and will be presented at The Vieux-Palais in Saint-Jérôme, Quebec, in 2003.

KAREN TRASK,
The Elm Tree, 2001.
Digital print on
handmade washi.
327 x 275 cm.
Photo: K. Trask.

