

Reclamation Exhibition Catalog:
Excerpt of Juror's Essay by Mark Dimunation

In a similar way, Casey Jay Gardner seeks to fabricate our relationship with the environment, to place us in a specific time and place of interaction with nature in her gloriously elaborate book, *Avalanche Safety: Rocky Mountains and Chamonix Alps, 1934-1937* (Set in Motion Press, 2020). Earlier works produced by Gardner at her Berkeley-based Set in Motion Press have been characterized by a sharp sense of design with strong mid-century influences. "Making books gives form to my curiosity," she has noted. "I am particularly interested in the intersection of scientific understanding and human meaning." Over the past decade, she has produced a series of books uniquely her own in style, design and content. Each in its own way is a beguiling mix of hard scientific fact and wild imaginings. This is certainly the case with *Avalanche Safety*.

The setting of this fictionalized tale is the "precarious time" of the 1930's. At the heart of the book is the story of a relationship, of a couple, Stella Rose Wilder and Felix Bloomquist – "living on the brink of human-triggered catastrophe, two young people explore their relationship with nature amid hidden and prevalent instabilities." We follow Stella and Felix as they share their lives and their love of skiing. "They "don't know yet that their lives are suspended between two world wars, nor that their valley is on the brink of change. They live in fables of rising and falling in forces of nature."

The book, a tall oblong accordion fold, takes on the appearance of an enlarged safety pamphlet, with the legend *Avalanche Safety* underscored by the Red Cross, boldly announcing the book's purported content on a cover of white and red and blue. As we enter we are reminded by the first two page-spreads, lightly embossed with individual snowflakes, that "In this moment our stars turn." We are also introduced to the first use of a flap, a device Gardner employs throughout to conceal text, hide inner thoughts, and mask warnings of pending danger. In this case the flap depicts a mountain scene, accompanied by the phrase "Everything depends." What becomes evident is that this is not a guide to safe conduct on the slopes, but rather the story of two skiers, a chronicle of their love of skiing and each other. We follow them from slope to slope, memorable runs are recorded, the ecstasy of the moment captured in their memories: "Jaws clenched, bony knees clamped in plows of desperation, they skew and surrender to gravity. At the bottom, they throw their skis sideways, skidding to a halt, crashing in a heap, tangled in each other, giddy and invincible."

As the text progresses, we are presented with a narrative of their adventures from the Rockies to the Alps, 1934-1937. We are introduced to Stella and Felix, their backgrounds and their interests. A four-color pamphlet, printed in the style of a nineteenth-century geological chart, presents us with an "Atlas Biographica," ostensibly a topographical atlas which in fact arranges comments and quotes about the two to correspond to the progression of geological layers of the earth. A narrow pamphlet, stitched in to the flap at the edge of a page, introduces us to their rock climbing excursions, including a geological graph of "Rock Cycles in Geologic Time." As she does throughout the work, Gardner weaves into this text a more distant, foreboding

commentary about nature and the need for awareness of how we interact with it. The chart closes with the observation that “Earth perpetually destroys and creates itself.”

The story carries us to a moment when an invitation is extended for them to come to the Alps for a “proper mountaineering education.” It is followed by a dramatic page-spread – a stunning image of Stella -- all blonde hair and sunglasses -- gazing up to a mountain peak. Her figure is in fact another flap, this one serving as an envelope holding a postcard of their destination in the Alps and a passport-sized pamphlet which includes additional quotations and comments. Back home to the Rockies, time on the slopes is reported by a dramatically shaped text, recreating the curves of the slopes. The skiers are reminded, “Remember my fearless friends, the avalanche does not know you are an expert.”

Prior to the last entry, a graph is set in the corner of the recto. It is in essence a timeline of the layering of snow. Layer upon layer is demarcated. Building up to the edge of this graph is a slope of heavily embossed and lightly inked phrases, meant to reference geological layers but also carrying the meaning of a deeply tumultuous emotional build up – “a slender insecurity,” “a melting response,” “facets of profundity,” “release,” “absorb,” “chronicles of transformation,” and “perpetual metamorphosis responding to pressure, gravity, and time.” The work closes with a final page-spread, a vast white opening framed by the deep impression of the mountaintop, biting through the paper. A final entry for Wednesday, December 22, 1937 records the moment of confrontation – the avalanche, helplessness. “Her whole world is in this moment.”

In introducing the work, Gardner reminds us that “Everything is interconnected — knowing this is our only salvation.” Though the human story here is fictional, the avalanche is an apt metaphor for our times and the environmental crisis we face. As snow scientists are now saying that climate change has severely heightened avalanche risk, we are facing possibly the worst year for avalanches in history. As we have seen in other books in this exhibition, Gardner is responding to this moment, giving the landscape its own story, reminding us that if we are to survive we need to acknowledge nature and hold ourselves responsible for our behavior. “In *Avalanche Safety*,” she observed, “I was trying to express the wonder of being in nature while also conveying its ferocious precarity. Nature has its own agenda, yet we think we can reduce it to a playground or resource.”

Gardner’s penchant for providing a scientific overlay creates a rich imagery that parallels our own sense of responsibility. An avalanche begins with individual crystalline snowflakes (all of the snowflakes depicted in the book are drawn from actual examples captured by the photographic microscope of W.A. Bentley in the early 20th century). Each of these delicate flakes alters and creates layers. The interrelationship of these layers determines the stability of the slopes, it “depends on the cohesion between one particle to another and one layer to another. If the force of gravity outweighs cohesion, a slide is inevitable.”

Gardner dedicates the book to the memory of her friend, Kirsten Mahler, who died in a climbing accident in 1987. As she began the process of creating *Avalanche Safety*, Gardner

wrote a touching recollection to Mahler. In it she frames the familiar litany of recognition, acknowledgement, and atonement. “Finally I realized the heart of the book was our relationship with nature. The connection of our bodies and earth is unequivocal; yet, our motivations in life, as in climbing, can be complicated. And then there’s our looming climate crisis which lays bare our species’ relationship with our planet... Avalanches represent the balance of interdependent elements and how they can be triggered to devastating effect. And so I began with a snowflake.”

The message of *Avalanche Safety*, as well as many other works selected for this exhibition, is a straightforward indictment. Our belief that we can control nature is merely an illusion. All of the artists’ books described here have urged us to take stock of our interrelatedness with nature, to become accountable to ourselves, our actions, and the world we live in. It begins with a simple moment—an awareness, a meditation, an acknowledgment of the weight of a single snowflake.

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