

REVIEW

Debtor's Prison

Lewis Warsh and Julie Harrison

Granary Books, 2001

\$24.95

ISBN: 1-887123-58-X

Perficio: to bring to an end, to accomplish, to finish.

Debtor's Prison (Granary Books, 2001), a collaboration between poet/novelist Lewis Warsh and video/visual artist Julie Harrison is in many ways a perfect book and, like all perfect books, its narrative eventually evolves to deal with its own restrictions and artifice.

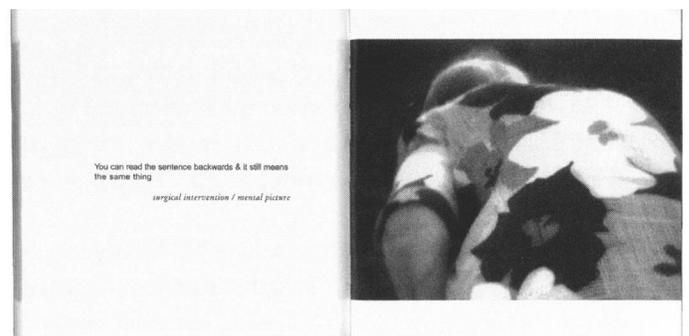
Physically, the book is a model of consistency. It's square, a shape that underscores the contained sentences and cropped images it houses. The book as box or cell or coffin rather than door or highway or horn of plenty. The spirit of sameness informs the layout as well. Each image is the same size and uniformly located in the same place on the right-hand page. All of the photographs have the same sepia tone and almost all are close-ups or tightly cropped partial images with varied quality of reproduction and often slightly blurred. It's as if the rawness of the images, their spontaneous in-your-faceness, has been cooked and served in identical prison portions. Or better yet, the book looks like one of those page-a-day desk calendars, only inside "the house" each day is the same.

The presentation of the text is also highly formalized. Centered on each left hand page (excepting the chapter dividers) is a single sentence, usually declarative, of about the same length and always broken into two lines; the first one longer, the second shorter. Below and slightly right of each of these sentences, and in italics, is a word or phrase separated from another word or phrase by a slash.

This verbal grouping serves as a kind of caption for the preceding sentence (bringing to mind Clark Coolidge's and Ron Padgett's *Supernatural Overtones*), and creating a way around the flat polarity of sentence/image. This visual triangulation creates space for the mind to wander around in and remain undecided. These italicized asides are ways the book thinks outside the box and, thereby, comments on itself.

In the dark I couldn't tell whether it was her body or his
suspicious unwarranted/endless embrace

[Fig 1]

Figure 2

The box here is the habitual ambiguity and suggestiveness almost all short poetries trade on. You leave stuff out and the thing begins to float. The trouble here is that after a few pages of repetition, cropping words or images loses its suggestive powers. Thus, as a solution, like an act of legerdemain—a third item, sometimes related, sometimes from left field—is introduced to keep the attention away from the magic, and the image and sentence keep their strange freshness.

Although the reader is convinced, the writer always knows he's performing tricks. His way out is his prison. It's circular. Thus:

continued on next page...

You can read the sentence backwards & it still means
the same thing

surgical intervention/mental picture

[Fig 2]

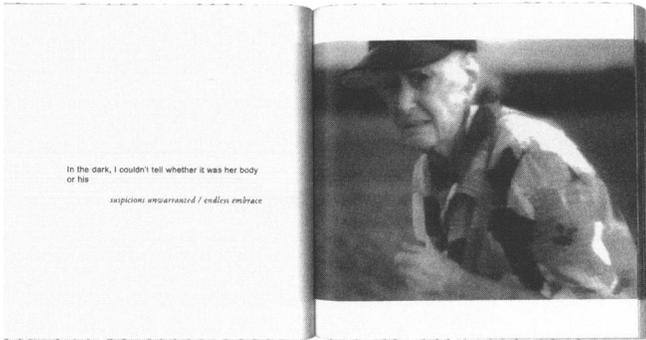


Figure 1

and

There's only one way this void can be filled
and that's by putting words on paper

footsteps on the ceiling/swollen gland

[Fig 3]

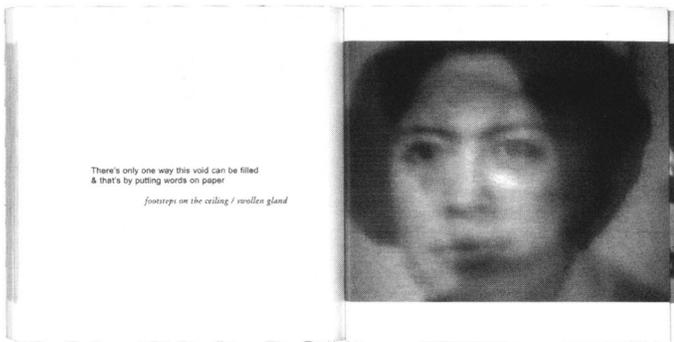


Figure 3

and

In control of nothing but writing & even writing
I'm out of control

protective custody/screams in the night

[Fig 4]

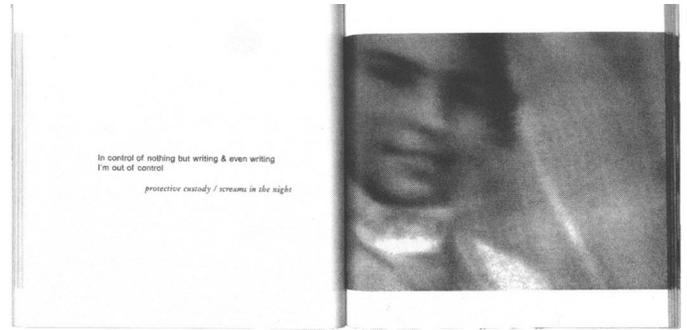


Figure 4

The sentence is a machine the author has been sentenced to write and the writing of which prolongs his sentence. The control gained and beauty visited in creating this haiku-like NOW is a pyrrhic pleasure. Although no declarative sentence is more declarative than a declarative sentence by itself and although no image is more focused than the close-up, both tend to tire of the limelight and recede into the undifferentiated sea of context from which they were singled-out.

The images too seem to be pushing against their containers and seeking each other. Clearly, the young woman, the artist herself, is the connection between the old woman and the child. In contrast with the sterile hospital tubes (the image of the IV carousel is particularly disturbing and brilliant) that await the old woman, the artist/Houdini figure has her own life-giving tubes/umbilical cords she's using in an underwater performance or stunt. Yet, as the book progresses, and the old woman becomes more identified with close-ups of the floral pattern on her dress, the artist becomes more entangled in her own tubing. Her tools of cropping and focusing and framing are too confining and begin to strangle her. As the book turns into the sepia picture album that on some level it was meant to be, it turns the old woman into an iconic flower, something non-personal (in contrast to the lined and expressive profile earlier in the sequence), something able to be memorialized and put into a book or box, something susceptible to nostalgia. In short, as the book succeeds and the artistry works, a price is exacted from the artist. This is her debtor's prison.

—Joe Elliot