

Concrete Journals: Anne Hicks Siberell

Among many other projects parallel to book-making and writing, artist Anne Hicks Siberell has been a visual diarist since the 1970s. Her Concrete Journals series exists as a record of time, collaging elements of the artist's life and encasing them in concrete.

Throughout her life and career, Siberell has always kept diaries. After attending the University of California, Los Angeles and Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), Siberell began a career in design and illustration. She illustrated nine books from the 1960s to 1980s. From 1985 to 2009, she authored and illustrated an additional four children's books, two of which were translated into Arabic for international audiences. Her expansive practice includes handmade artists' books and printmaking, for which she has been awarded residencies at the American Academy in Rome in 2005, and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt in 2002. In the 1970s, she began a series of accordion books, pairing written narratives with collaged cuts of paper. These collaged journals

illustrate matters both personal and cultural.

Having explored the written word through contemporary books, Siberell drew inspiration from the past during a visit to the British Museum in London. There, she was intrigued by the earliest known form of writing: cuneiform. Cuneiform tablets were invented by the Sumerians in Ancient Mesopotamia and were used for more than three millennia, from the 31st century BCE to the second century CE. Letters were marked into clay tablets using a reed as a stylus. The reed's point created characteristic "wedge" shaped impressions in the clay, which was then left to harden in the sun. Once dry, the tablets became a permanent record. Small enough to be handheld, these record keepers survived for centuries where paper had not.

"No matter that I could not read the language; my wordless collaged diaries were readable only to me. I could substitute concrete for clay and record events that would later remind me that they did indeed happen. They have become illustrations of what is left of a memory."

Siberell considers the universal beauty of cuneiform and adopted it into her journaling. Instead of using sun-fired clay, Siberell commits her diaristic collages to concrete—a literal and figurative manner of preserving the past. Her use of concrete allows materials and objects to be embedded within it as it hardens. The material moves from an oozing liquid to an imposing solid, in the same way that our memories of events can shift from lucid clarity to opacity. The artist is also able to paint and carve the concrete “pages” after they have dried.

Over the last four decades of making, Siberell has created several hundred entries, each one serving as a mnemonic device for a specific experience. The tablets are embedded with collected objects: ticket stubs, hardware, game pieces, broken shards of pottery. Often, they are accompanied with poems or narratives written in Siberell’s distinctive cursive on vellum sheets. The Concrete Journals defy easy categorization, blurring the lines between painting and sculpture, figurative and abstract. Each “entry” can be read as a single page of a diary, or as a whole, like mosaic tiles depicting the accumulation of the artist’s life experiences.

Siberell often comments that her Concrete Journals should be digested in no particular order as “time in memory and in dreams does not always follow rules of the calendar.” In this exhibition the diaries and journals are arranged chronologically to show the breadth of the project, punctuated with the shared, recognizable moments of our collective memories. Hurricane Katrina is commemorated in a 2006 entry wherein Monopoly house game-pieces appear drowning in the flow of concrete, and a 2021 entry reflects on the murder of George Floyd. In one of her most recent tablets, the artist depicts a sunflower, the national flower of Ukraine and a symbol of resistance against the country’s invasion by Russian forces.

Siberell feels that her work on the Concrete Journals project marks a completed orbit from the beginnings of her career as an illustrator. Each entry in the series illustrates the essence of an experience or idea, boiled down to basic material elements or emotions. Serving as “memory jogs”, these diaristic records shift from the immensely personal to broader themes of travel, culture, current events, and social justice.

Separately, each piece serves as a chronicle of an event or a memory. Together, they paint an intimate portrait of the artist's life.

Curator, Ariel Zaccheo

MCD exhibitions and programs are generously supported by Anonymous, Windgate Foundation and Grants for the Arts.