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Review | 'Pages' worth turning at Paragraph Gallery

By Theresa Bembnister

Special to the Star

Kansas City-based painter Lee Piechocki got the title for his contribution to the exhibit "Pages: Book as Medium, Catalyst, Venue" from a conversation he overheard while riding the El in Chicago.

"I've been crazy this week," a woman on the train said into her cell phone, referring to the "craziness" of her schedule.

"I've Been Crazy This Week" is Piechocki's attempt to change his work habits. He bought several sketchbooks and forced himself to draw every day. His paintings, he says, involve more researching than sketching, but this drawing exercise introduced more spontaneous mark-making into his art.

The work also functions as a critique of our on-the-go culture.

"Maybe being so busy all the time isn't so sane," Piechocki says.

Installed at Paragraph Gallery, a high-traffic location next to a busy bus stop and around the corner from the bustling Power & Light District, "Pages" necessitates viewers' investment of time. Those who bother to sit down, put on white cotton gloves, open and look at the books on display will be richly rewarded.

To encourage visitors to browse, curator Amy Kligman created what she calls a "reading room" area resembling a bookshelf-lined nook in a home or library.

A dense installation of two-dimensional artworks and sculptures made of, or inspired by, books fills the remainder of the gallery. As the exhibition's title suggests, some of the

works use books as a medium, such as Brian Dettmer's "World Books," where 20 encyclopedias are arranged to create a slinky, centipede-like form.

Sketchbooks, 'zines and notebooks, most of the objects on display in "Pages," seem anachronistic nowadays, when people use blogs and Facebook to broadcast their thoughts to wide, anonymous audiences.

Corinna West's paper-collaged journals dating from the late 1990s detail her search for employment after graduating from college with a chemistry degree. This is the banal kind of stuff circulating online nonstop, but West's handwritten notes and personal musings, combined with tactile and delicate employment-page clippings, reveal how another person processes information with an almost embarrassingly voyeuristic level of insight.

Many works in this exhibition offer glimpses into the way artists create systems to organize their visual and language-based ideas, or how they make sense of personal experiences.

In "Reliquary 1-21," Tanya Hartman incorporates typewritten text describing how she encountered beauty each day of her life.

"Bibliography," a joint project by members of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's graduate program in visual and critical studies, presents the fruits of the students' mental labor in the form of printed-out e-mail correspondence, class evaluations and scanned PDFs of scholarly articles.

Judith G. Levy's installation, "Synergy," re-creates her daily ritual of news consumption. As she reads the newspaper, Levy clips headlines and sentences that catch her eye, later pasting them on old library catalog cards for books with titles or authors related to the words on the clippings.

Levy's corner of the gallery resembles her working space at home; she set up a kitchen table and chairs, a bookshelf, cabinet and coffeemaker. Scattered on the tabletop are pairs of scissors and glue, newspapers and drawers of old-school library card catalog cards. She invites gallery-goers to create and display their own cards. With its combination of headlines and catalog cards, "Synergy" represents the conjunction of books and newspapers in the artist's life.

Other artists in this exhibition filter newsworthy events through the idiosyncratic medium of artist-made books.

Shea Gordon uses personal images and language to document the 1974 Brush Creek flood. Interspersed between photos from water-damaged slide film, Gordon narrates her own distinctive experience of an event that affected many Kansas Citians.

In his 'zine "KC Crime 2005 — A Study in Violence," Luke Rocha presents crime-story clippings side-by-side with his own Polaroid photographs of Kansas City sites.

When better often equals quicker, "Pages: Book as Medium, Catalyst, Venue" serves as a reminder that books are an easily portable, effective method of transmitting ideas and experiences.

For a local art scene gaining more and more national attention for collaborative, group-produced experiential art, this focus on one-on-one, artist-to-reader communication is important. "Pages" demonstrates that valuable artistic exchanges occur on an intimate scale.

