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On the Cover: Kelley Walker, *Bug_156S* (2013-2014), four-color process screenprint on aluminum. ©Kelley Walker. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Steven Probert.

This Page: Andre Ribuoli, detail of *Melancholia* (after Durer) (2014), CNC engraved copper plate, steelfaced, 12 x 9 inches. Edition of 13. Published by Ribuoli Digital, New York.

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The Books of Others: Arturo Herrera in Berlin

By Christine Nippe



Arturo Herrera, *Books* (Set #1 in presentation box) (2012), screenprint and mixed media on paper (books) in linen-covered wooden box, 64.8 x 40.3 x 10.2 cm.

In Arturo Herrera's Berlin studio, a fresh breeze wafts through the rooms; the windows are gleaming and a fresh bouquet of yellow ranunculi sits on the desk. On a large wooden table lies a deep, gray-linen box. The artist lifts the lid to reveal two books, each elegantly housed; below these two lie eight more. The presentation suggests fragile and rare cargo, but these books are flea market finds the artist has remade as works of art with strategic overprinting. *Books* (2012) includes six such boxes, each holding ten different volumes, embellished and obscured with black ink.¹

Herrera is best known for ambitious, intricate collages of fragments cut from self-made and found images—comics, art history, pop culture, children's books. In works such as *For the First Time* (1999), *Night Before Last* (2003) and *Keep in Touch* (2004), cut elements are closely intertwined. *A Knock* (2002) is part of a series in which he used comics, cutting with the greatest delicacy to create lines that articulate the contours of a dwarf's hand, a kneeling prince or a candle.² While many artists use collage as an instrument of disorienting jump cuts, Herrera's sutures exhibit a fluidity

much more akin to drawing. This quality comes to the fore in skein-like works made of felt such as *All at Once* (1999). These pieces play with ambiguities of form, with transitions from figuration to abstraction, and with the recognition of subconscious images (the motifs of comics and children's books are rich examples). Familiar forms are made strange through omission and reconfiguration. The elimination of one picture clears the way for a new picture, as in *Say Seven* (2000). The resulting oscillation between recognizable motifs and abstract shapes defies any single interpretation. Herrera



sets up a dynamic exchange between destruction and construction that is so visually engaging that the works' subversiveness—the way they undermine the popular language of representation deployed by Disney and others—may go unnoticed initially, lurking in the background.

Herrera grew up in Venezuela, was educated in Oklahoma and Chicago, built an international reputation while liv-

ing in New York, and has been in Berlin since 2003. (Having come for a yearlong residency through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), he found he preferred the quieter atmosphere of Berlin and stayed.) The city's flea markets have been an ongoing source of fascination. In the abandoned artifacts laid out on tables, the dramatic history of Berlin—East and West, pre- and post-, war and reunification—is made manifest. The history of things and the underlying preferences of previous owners (as well as the universe of a family estate) drew him in, especially books: "There is a nostalgia to the books. We all have a specific relation to them."³

He acquired a wide variety of titles: a study of the German Romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich, a book about Yorkshire terriers, a string quartet from 1984 by Ralf Hoyer, a travel guide to Milan, an East German martial arts book—*Karate für alle*—promising mastery in easy steps demonstrated by combatants attired in the lurid shirts and handlebar mustaches of the 1970s.

Screenprint allowed Herrera "to make a collage book without cutting paper,



Above: Arturo Herrera, *All At Once* (1999), wool felt, 254 x 147.3 cm. Left: Arturo Herrera, *A Knock* (2002), collage on paper, 177.8 x 152.4 cm.

working directly with screen and color." Though he abjured scissors and left each book intact, the same formal concerns hold sway as in the collages—the disruption of representation, the tightrope



Arturo Herrera, from *Berlin Singers* (2010), suite of 10 print collages: collage, etching, digital print and screenprint, 30 x 21.3 cm each. Edition of 20. Printed and published by Lower East Side Printshop, New York.



Arturo Herrera, *Caspar David Friedrich, Von Johannes Beer und Karl Robert, 1940 Verlag der Eiserne Hammer, Langwiesche-Königstein im Taunus und Leipzig* from *Books* (inside view)(2012), screenprint and mixed media on paper, 18.7 x 13.5 x .4 cm.

dance between legibility and illegibility. Patterns have been screenprinted over the pages and covers by hand, with loose gestures and a generous acceptance of accident. Stripes, crosses or diamonds shimmer across the pages like the vibrating lines of Op Art or dazzle camouflage. They both reiterate and destabilize the quality of repetition that is inherent in book design and printing. Some overprintings used Herrera's own drawings, others were readymade optical and geometric patterns found in source books he had lying around the studio.⁴

Herrera had worked with screenprint before, but always in collaboration with master printers and professional workshops. The ten print collages of *Berlin Singers* (2010), produced at the Lower East Side Printshop in New York, employed screenprinted line drawings in an etiolated gray-black that looked, Herrera notes, "like very faint grease stains." In three enormous and ambitious works

done with Pace Prints in 2012, *Giuseppe, Richard and Johannes*, screenprinted marks embellish large cut-felt shapes that overlay elaborate collages. Though the dense, serrated visual activity and gestural arcs of pigment in these collages suggest spontaneous interaction with found material, each is a meticulously produced edition of interlocking etchings, linocuts, collagraphs and digital prints produced with a team of specialists.

Books, on the other hand, was defiantly homegrown: the entire project was made in Herrera's studio with a single 18 x 26 inch screen, one squeegee, paint, 60 books and a powerful hair drier. Screenprint was chosen for its quick-and-dirty adaptability—"the most direct way to translate and to transfer images very fast"—which allowed him to work with a loose spontaneity quite different from the precision cutting of collage. There was no registration, no attempt at a system. On some pages the screen is printed once, on others

it doubles up. "It felt like drawing," Herrera says. "It took some time to print every page, but the results were immediate and exciting as they appeared in front of my eyes."

In some places the patterns repeat with near exactness; in others they are interrupted by great messy blobs of ink or ellipses where the ink failed to push through the screen at all, allowing the original texts and images to emerge like the sun between the clouds. Often a spate of words can be deciphered between gaps in the pattern, prompting the viewer to imagine the invisible contents. Though the screening is done in an open and improvisatory way, the original pages and the addenda imposed on them abide in thoughtful concordance. In the Caspar David Friedrich volume, for example, a lightly broken line meanders elegantly across both text and images, while in *Karate für alle* the impact of martial arts kicks are evoked by a pattern as jagged as a cracked mirror.

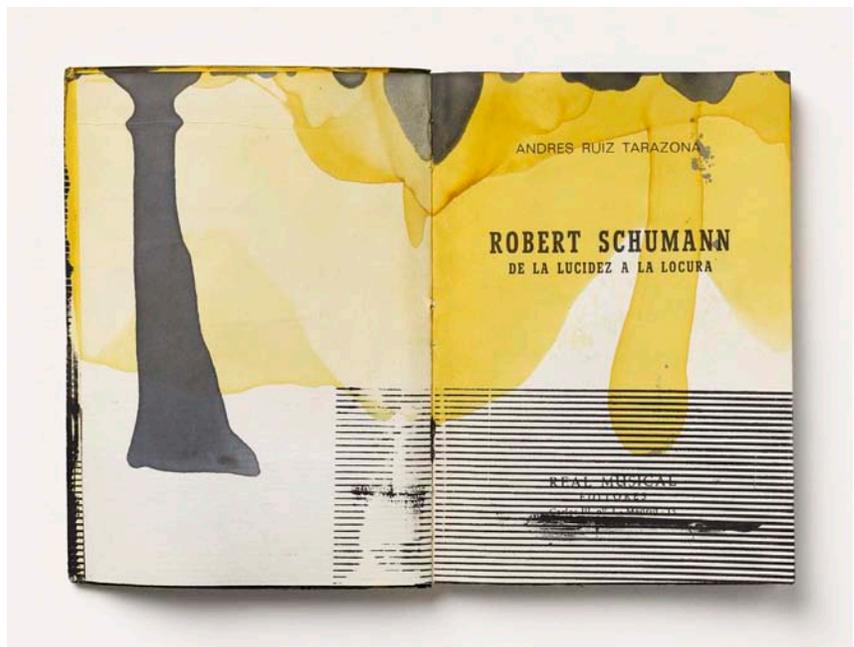
These books, which had fallen out of circulation and lost all use value, are endowed with a new vitality as aesthetic objects. The text, only legible in bits, becomes like poetry; representational pictures become abstract. Screenprint, Herrera says, has given the books “a second chapter. Now they have a different life and can go on.”

Neither denying nor romanticizing their past, Herrera breathes new life into these cast-offs. Their power lies in lacunae. They move between nostalgia and reinvention, deconstruction and construction, obsolescence and aesthetics: art and artifact—treasured, trashed and transformed. ■

Christine Nippe is a curator, writer and lecturer based in Berlin.

Notes:

1. Five sets have been acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago and a private collector. One remains in the artist's studio.
2. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
3. All quotes from the artist in conversation or email.
4. Abstract & Geometric Patterns, *North Light Clip Art Series* (New York: F & W Publications, 1993); *Craig Cassin, Visual Illusions in Motion with Moire Screens* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997).



Arturo Herrera, *Robert Schumann—De La Luzidez A La Locura, Von Andres Ruiz Tarazona, 1975, Real Musical, S.A., Madrid from Books* (inside view) (2012), screenprint and mixed media on paper, 16 x 11.4 x .7 cm.



Arturo Herrera, *Karate für alle, Albrecht Pflüger, 1985 Falken-Verlag, Wiesbaden from Books* (front & inside view) (2012), screenprint and mixed media on paper, 20.9 x 15 x 1.1 cm.