

Literary Arts | Visual Arts

Combining the Visual and the Verbal: The Art(s) of Teresa Jordan

BY SUE MARTIN ON FEBRUARY 8, 2015 • (2 COMMENTS)



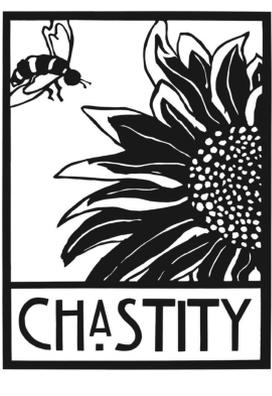
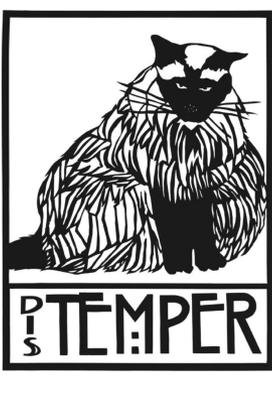
Teresa Jordan's newest book, *The Year of Living Virtuously (Weekends Off)*, is, first of all, a collection of essays, beautifully woven together by a theme inspired by Benjamin Franklin. Just as Franklin sought to live a life according to those virtues he deemed important to living well, Jordan explores, with well-documented research and personal stories, what mindful attention to both virtues and vices may mean in one's life. Rave reviews from local and national media, as well as 15 Bytes, might be enough to recommend the book (in fact, the first edition sold out). But for artists, I'd like to suggest another reason to pick up this book, as well as others in Jordan's list of published works.

You see, Jordan not only tells stories with words, but uses her own visual art to enrich the reader's experience. In her *Field Notes from the Grand Canyon*, published in 2000, watercolor sketches and her handwritten notes fill some pages, balanced by typeset essays on other pages. In *Field Notes from Yosemite*, published in 2002, watercolor studies sprinkle the pages. The most recent book, *The Year of Living Virtuously (Weekends Off)*, includes Jordan's monotype on the cover and a series of "bestiary" cut paper designs at the beginning of certain chapters.

How does a writer shift gears to create visually? How does an artist know what medium will best support the thematic content of the book?

And what are the challenges of working with editors on content and illustration? These were some of the questions I explored with Teresa Jordan by phone as she and her husband were driving to Elko, Nev., for the Cowboy Poetry Festival at the end of January.

Jordan was first a writer and a teacher. This was after majoring in history and earning a bachelor's degree from Yale. While teaching through the Northwest Writing Institute, part of Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Ore., she taught writing to art students at an art school. The students challenged her – "If we must learn how to write, you should learn how to draw." And so she did, taking a drawing course here and there. When she set out with friends to raft and camp in the Grand Canyon in 1997, she self-consciously took along her sketchbook and some watercolors her husband had given her for Christmas. In the evenings, after setting up camp, she would find time alone to draw and make notes. And why not? For a writer who can express in words – "I found myself drunk with visual excitement, engaged in a gluttony of looking." (*Field Notes from the Grand Canyon*) – drawing and painting is the perfect expressive complement.



"Visual concentration seemed like a rest for my mind," explains Jordan. She wanted more art training, which eventually led her to take classes at the University of Utah. She was not after a degree, but she did want the depth of learning and the foundation that are part of the degree program. So she enrolled and completed a B.F.A. degree in 2002. While at the U, Jordan took some required printmaking classes. But it was when she went to Helper, to take workshops with Dave Dornan, that she was introduced to monotypes – a painterly printing process that produces just one print edition.

After graduating from the U, it seemed monotype printing was the best direction for Jordan's art, partly because her basement studio accommodated a press better than an easel. Her monotypes of chickens and landscapes have been exhibited at Phillips Gallery in solo and group shows.

Unlike the loose, painterly watercolor sketches in her illustrated field journals, Jordan's newest book contains carefully designed, black and white graphic images of animals framed by a neat black rectangle with a word underneath. Like a medieval bestiary that associated animals – real or imagined – with moral values, Jordan's creatures (or trees in one case) shed light on the virtues and vices in her book. Carefully cut from black paper with a mat knife, the 20" x 15" images are part of a series Jordan calls "From the Garden of Darkness and Light." Once the entire 25-piece series is done, Jordan hopes to display them, perhaps in a traveling exhibit, at galleries, libraries, and other venues related to the humanities.

Jordan could have used monotypes for this project, but there were several reasons she chose cut paper. "I thought it would be interesting to work with imagery that is starkly black and white," she explains. It relates to the stark difference some would see between a virtue and a vice, though Jordan takes a more Buddhist view of the middle way. "Any virtue taken to an extreme can become a vice," she says.

"I love the tradition of paper cuts and the graphic quality you can get. On a metaphoric basis, paper is very fragile; a lovely metaphor for life," she notes.

The idea for her creating art for the book came up in a meeting with the editor. Jordan doesn't recall whose idea it was exactly, but once they agreed, the editor gave her free rein. The only surprise was the choice of artwork for the cover. "I had thought it would be a cut-paper tree of life image, but they chose one of my chicken monotypes – a chicken with an apple." Though surprised, Jordan thought it a perfect choice because of its whimsy. Perhaps it suggests to the reader that this is far from a "preachy" book about morality. "It's not the righteous preacher talking about virtue," she says.

The book evolved from a series of blog posts Jordan wrote weekly over a year's time. Though much of the writing was done by the time she began to turn it into a book, it was not an easy process. Some blog posts were shortened, rewritten, supplemented, or left out altogether. Other material was researched and added to create coherence through the book. It was during this process that Jordan the cut-paper images, which was a respite from the work of writing.

She started with small sketches, blew them up on the computer, and printed them to size on black paper. Then the careful work of cutting the paper with a mat knife was meditative. "It took hours to cut one of the images, but the work was precise, rhythmic, and satisfying," says Jordan.

Just as the art students Jordan taught how to write found that writing opened up their art, Jordan finds "beauty and pleasure in visual communication without language." Perhaps this whole-brain approach to creative expression is something all of us should try.

Teresa Jordan and her husband/folklorist Hal Cannon will present "An Evening of Songs and Stories" on Friday, Feb. 13, 7-9 p.m. at **Ken Sanders Rare Books**, 268 S. 200 East, in Salt Lake City. The event is free and Jordan's book will be available for sale.

Sue Martin

Sue Martin holds an M.A. in Theatre and has worked in public relations. As an artist, she works in watercolor, oil, and acrylic to capture Utah landscapes or the beauty of everyday objects in still life.

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Having It Both Ways: Billy Schenck at Modern West Fine Art David Maestas

2 replies

Ehren E. Clark

March 2, 2015 at 11:54 pm

REPLY

Sue, I think you have tapped into something more than meets the whimsical appearance of this book, but the brevity of a discourse yet to be written, and you are the ideal artist to initiate its being engaged. The discourse of language and its myriad contexts for human understanding and truth, and the discourse of the visual and its myriad contexts for human understanding and truth, are as old as ancient Greece. But the phenomenon of a discourse between language and its relationship to the visual for the effort of human understanding and truth, at least on an academic level, when considering a synthesis for this dialectic, is something new to me. Of course the synthesis will always be meaning, but what kind? And how did the image synthesize with text to form this meaning? Of course we have a history of artists who have used language AS the visual medium, but a writer who uses language as a tool, not to, as with illustration, visually manifest what has been written, but as another element to the equation; one idea plus one idea equals another completely new idea. And I speak of an understanding of this critically. And when you are using one idea in the form of language and the other in the form of visual signifier, you are using two different vocabularies, just as one would extract lemon juice from a lemon and lime juice from a lime, just as one would extract meaning from language and meaning from the image, you end up with something completely new, like lemon-limeade, or, as you have so deductively found through your reasoning, Sue, These magnetically appealing, visually attractive, and cognitively stirring monotypes of a very talented writer and artist Teresa Jordan. This article makes me a bit sad, though, because it reads on so many levels, and one of those levels is autobiographical of you, Sue, and as this very article demonstrates, what a cogent, honest, inquisitive, and keenly intelligent writer and art critic you are, And what makes me sad is to think of the colleague I might have had if you would have devoted your full energies to writing. But, as it is, you are being the most altruistic, as being the most generous with your gifts, with the most people. This was an excellent piece of writing, I enjoyed the questions you asked and the truths you discovered, and you are brilliantly gifted in a multiplicity of ways, and I will simply have to get over my own feeling of loss and be grateful for the abundance that you are, to myself and so many in this community, Ehren

Ann Poore

August 3, 2023 at 10:03 am

REPLY

Sue, I was going to write something effusive about how perfectly you captured the brilliant Teresa Jordan and her work in your fine article (that bears reading over a second time just for the way you put words together) but discovered that our much-missed Ehren has done that beautifully. It truly IS an excellent piece of writing and you are "brilliantly gifted in a multiplicity of ways" and we haven't heard enough from you recently or else I have been a lazy reader of 15 Bytes. This is possible, but I do try to keep up. Thank you for this and for all the stories you contribute that I so enjoy reading.

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