

# TERRY BRAUNSTEIN: perceptive bookmaker

## An Interview with George Myers Jr.

Just for the record, your *Windows* is a hardbound, black and white and color portfolio of photomontages, each suitable for framing, though I'd hate to tear them out of the book for that purpose. If you were to describe *Windows* in 50 words or less, say for a catalog, how would you do so?

I prefer to see *Windows* as a "sequence of photomontages" instead of a portfolio, since I feel that the progression of pages in time is an important part of how the individual photomontage is perceived. Of course, each page is a carefully constructed collage with its own meanings, so I do appreciate the fact that each of them stands on its own as well.

*Windows* is a book which deals visually with what perception truly is—what we see and do not see, because of what we know and do not know. Although there is no "narrative" per se, the images that exist throughout the book recur many times in different contexts, rousing different meanings and emotions in every viewer according to his or her own perceptions. As an artist who is deeply concerned with social issues, I have selected popular magazine material which could be used to express these concerns. But I don't think of the book as being about how "the world seems merrily headed toward its own destruction," as one critic stated, or "about the last war" as suggested by another. It seems to me that the book is equally valid to the person who was deeply involved with male/female roles who saw the book as being about relationship; and to another involved with religion, who said it was about spirituality.

Looking through *Windows*, to me, is like looking through a crystal ball and camera obscura all at once: the world seems fractured, hard and its end seems foreshadowed in the last two photomontages in which clowns line up to watch the Big Bang—the first strike in a nuclear war. Of course, this is just my perception of the two pages. Tell me, does the viewer see what he looks at, or merely what he *expects* to see?

Most popular magazine photography is extremely developed in terms of what people's responses to it will be. Part of the challenge for me is to cut out the image that provides the essence of that response and to use that as raw material in a new setting to communicate much more by its extension. of the challenge for me is to cut out the image that provides

Your analogy of the crystal ball and camera obscura is perfect. Our perception—containing what we know and see at once—is sometimes "hard and fractured," as you suggest. When it is successful, art is a kind of complex mirror for the viewer, in which he or she can better understand aspects of him or herself. In *Windows* I am attempting to deal with the nature of that vision, to make the very edges of that mirror more clear.

Your pieces really made me think about the role, or the nature, of perception. The images you've selected for *Windows*—Howdy Doody, giant apes, troops in war—do they not say enough by themselves? Do they say more now that they're altered by the artist? Why?

I use the meanings inherent in my magazine images such as Howdy Doody, for instance, and extend this meaning



through Howdy's juxtaposition with other images. Howdy Doody evokes the earliest of TV memories; he is black and white, a "typical" child (though, unlike the little lookalike Howdy in *Windows*, he didn't really look like any of us), a dutiful boy who behaved as his Buffalo-Bob dad would want. Our initial thoughts about him might be limited to the recollections of our early childhood. In *Windows*, however, Howdy exists in combination with more evocative and mature images. These are "string" images—marionettes of Einstein held by the scientist himself, dancers attempting to move within a string web, soldiers moving across a Vietnamese rope bridge; "doll" images—Clarabelle clowns, sophisticated mannequin dolls, Toussaud's wax doll heads; and "control" images—actors controlling facial expressions, news controlling the lives of people, religion controlling the masses. These connections expand and connect childhood notions of freedom with what we know about it as adults.

Is the purpose of art to reveal its subject, or the artist?

Art, at its best, reveals the viewer to him or herself. It begins with an idea or "subject" that compels the artist. I like to think of this idea as a question that is posed by the artist whose answer can only be found in the making of the work. In order to arrive at this "answer," the artist uses his/her own experience—anything and everything he/she has available. This is why there usually appears to be so much of the artist present in the work. If the completed work truly succeeds, however, it will express something so universal that every viewer can relate it to his/her own experience;

and then, more than the subject or the artist, it will reveal the *viewer* to himself.

**I see what you mean. To me, your sequence of images looks catastrophic; to another it might look clownish. I'd like to get away from the aesthetic side of the book for a minute, and ask about the technical part. How do you actually make these images? Can you make one velox or photograph of the images or do you have to make several images to get the right one?**

My photomontages are made from magazine images taken directly from their sources, cut out, and pasted together. I begin with a collection of these images which is a highly intuitive and uncensored process. Large "backgrounds", settings, or environments are cut out in some cases, while objects and figures, sometimes gesturing, others immobile, are cut out as well. These are roughly cut at first and saved in my own ever-changing "filing" system. At some point I begin to see connections between these images—sometimes based on an idea that exists apart from the collected images which has caused me to search and combine to express that concern; other times, the collected images themselves suggest their own idea which I feel echoes one of my own. I do not change the scale of these images, or their color or appearance in any way. They are simply cut, combined and rephotographed. Part of the real excitement for me comes from the fact that these images exist, exactly as they are, in a totally commercial framework and then become something else once I have recombined them.

**And what role has the venerable Visual Studies Workshop had in production?**

The Visual Studies Workshop worked with me (and the William Blake Press, a small Washington, D.C.-based publisher) to produce *Windows*, which was my first offset book. *Windows* existed as a one-of-a-kind photomontage notebook prior to its publication, June 1982. Joan Lyons, who directs the VSW Press, worked closely with me in making the many production decisions necessary for such a book.

**I've been reading some news clips about your work and wondering if you'd like to respond to some critical remarks. Often, one is left to the mercy of a reviewer.**

**The Los Angeles Times wrote, for example, that some of your work was in "satirical response to the obscurity of conceptualism." Would you say that's correct?**

My earliest notebooks, which were produced between 1973 and 1977, were very definitely connected to the "obscure" conceptual pieces of the early 1970's. They were satirical in that they worked with "non serious" themes, such as motherhood, housewifery, beauty and marriage, yet dealt with them in an extremely straight, documentary manner. There were intricate manual-like diagrams for diaper-folding and carpool arranging; charts showing patterns for making beds and applying make-up; and detailed questionnaires dealing with childbirth and wedding receptions.

**The Times also mentions your notebooks. What are these exactly? I'm afraid I'm not familiar with them. Is this what *Monday Miracle* and *Waves* are?**

The format for my original one-of-a-kind book is a three-ring notebook covered with fabric relating to the content of the book. The materials of the work, which have always

been some form of collage, are contained in vinyl envelopes within each notebook. In this manner, I have been able to display these notebooks before large audiences without fear of their destruction. I decided to reproduce these books in small multiples beginning in 1979. Originally I made color Xeroxes which I contained in notebooks similar to the originals. Later, I had bound "livre de luxe" books created which were fabric-covered and contained the color Xeroxed images. Finally, I produced *Windows*, the first offset book, which is four-color, hardbound, cloth-covered, and in a large though limited edition. All of my books, however, including *Windows*, exist first as one-of-a-kind notebooks.

**Are such notebooks best as one-of-a-kind objects, or would you like to see them reprinted, that is, published, as multiples?**

I do not feel at all that these notebooks need to be one-of-a-kind. I think that the earlier ones work equally well reproduced as when they were "original," and the latest ones are better in printed form because the best way to view the images is as single pictures on single surfaces. I also enjoy the idea of many people owning *Windows* and being able to spend "quality" time with it that I feel it needs and deserves by buying it and taking it home. I would like to see the other books appreciated in this same way, of course.

**I think Dinah Berland wrote a wonderful review of your work in the Los Angeles Reader. And her Edvard Munch epigraph heading the review, "Art is the opposite nature of man. A work of art can come only from the interior of man," certainly goes along with what you've said. Would you agree in her linking you with the late 19th century Symbolists?**

I believe that the connection is valid in the sense that I feel that my work does "dip well beneath surface appearances" as Berland suggests. I do feel, however, that my work is very firmly rooted in a contemporary reality in many ways, especially in the collage elements themselves.

**In Michael Ham's essay on *Windows* he dealt with the way in which the book itself communicates. Do you agree with him?**

Yes, I do. In particular, I agree that "This book speaks to us as music does, not through the left brain with its verbal, analytic, linear skills, but through the right brain. The book awakens our intuition, communicates its ideas with a cadence of images, each a chord of dissonant and consonant tones, and leaves us saying 'I know what it says, but I can't put it into words' . . . The Archetypal power of the component elements in each image makes the image speak strongly to us, so that we get the direct impact that hits a child's innocent eye, but with the experience and understanding of an adult with which to feel the echoes and overtones."

*Windows* is available at Artworks, Printed Matter and other artists' book outlets, and directly from the William Blake Press, 140 Tennessee Ave., N.E., Washington, DC 20002 for \$25.00 (add \$1.50 for mailing costs).