Index of Desire

BY Nathan Guequierre

Books chain us down as much as they provide the means to escape our everyday lives. They're heavy, make for difficult cross-referencing, and with thousands of titles published yearly, there are far, far too many of them to ever read. The ideas they contain, if cunningly presented, can bind us to intellectual systems we might otherwise abjure. "In My Library" (through Oct. 22 at Cardinal Stritch University) features the work of three Midwestern artists who tackle the meaning of books in different fashions but lead to a similar conclusion: Reading books-and even owning them-is work.

Karen Wirth approaches books as constructed objects, building her own out of industrial materials such as sheet metal and roofing shingles. The word "construct" often appears in her titles, playing on its meanings both as a verb and a noun. Building Books, a series of tiny hinged metal plates stuck to the gallery wall, shows photographs of factory workers, diagrams from penmanship exercise manuals and architectural objects similar in form to letters (two arched doorways look like the letter "m"). Her Ten Books of Vitruvius takes up an entire wall to display a handful of quotes from the classical architecture text stamped into huge steel plates. Wirth's books are physically ponderous, difficult to manipulate. These books don't invite one into new worlds, but crush the would-be reader between their heavy leaves, as though the accumulated knowledge of our culture were too much for any one person to bear.

For conceptual photographer Buzz Spector, books are remarkable for their physical presence as well, but in quantity, not quality. Too Spector, a library is a form of autobiography.

Such is Spector's conceit in his photographic portraits of the artist as piles of his books. By or About Christian Boltanski shows a stack of a dozen or so books, the edges of their pages toward the viewer, against a soft and empty ground. It looks like a portrait, and like good portraiture pretends to offer a glimpse of its subject's inner life-all that theory-but like any portrait, it is ultimately mute on the subject of inner life. In the end, one can only admire the quality of the books' paper. Those towers of tomes are too heavy to move out of the way to get a glimpse of their reader.

Green Bay artist Carol Emmons builds the exhibition's most complete temple to the act of reading-her visual metaphors most deeply explore our curious relationship to the world of books. Emmons' installation Index of Desire consists of a raised platform with a little lopsided house on it, just big enough to hold one person. The building contains a shabby-genteel easy chair, a sconce with yellow bulb and walls papered with reversed pages and covers from innumerable paperback romance novels. It functions both as sanctuary and throne, through the door of which one may survey a narrow slice of the world.

The building is a love shack if ever there was one, a physical construction of that neither-here-nor-there place one enters when one enters a book. But those pages, backwards and bleary, are very difficult to read-perhaps not really worth reading-and Emmons' space can be confining. The doorway is small enough that it is difficult to leave the building.

Books seem to offer limitless opportunity for exploring the world, but libraries, with their hundreds, thousands or millions of volumes, can be overwhelming. Two hundred years ago, Samuel Johnson was said to have read every single book worth reading. Now, who can tell what's worth reading? Emmons' romance novels might offer a cheap and temporary escape, but eventually they hem your life in. Knowledge, we're told, is power, and the truth will set us free. But the mere existence of so many millions of books can be more oppressive than liberating.