



SYMBOL=METAPHOR=FABLE : The Work of Katherine Venturelli

by Sandra Kroupa

In many areas of modern life, there is increasing emphasis on the visual. A diverse population necessitates more reliance on pictures than text. Text may not go beyond basic definitions whereas visual language may carry more intricate meanings. In the history of the book, visual language, with and without accompanying text, has been a reoccurring element. Whether in the Mayan Codices, hieroglyphs, 17th Century Emblem books or modern graphic novels, the power of symbolic images have long been used to convey complex thought. Such images may be universal or culturally specific but can be visited and revisited for deeper understanding. Communication through symbols requires the artist to know the audience for the work. Symbols must welcome the viewer rather than create an impenetrable wall. This task has challenged artists throughout history.

The work of Katherine Venturelli *depends* on symbolic language. In Venturelli's own words, "We communicate on personal, cultural, and spiritual levels with messages which manifest as symbols. My intent is to 'look' at the meanings of these varied communications. I found that the small, intimate book format relates well in this exploration." Venturelli's books are image based, with text used occasionally. The artist works with classic symbols: the burning house, whirlwind spiral, geometric shapes and lunar images. Her own list also includes the chalice, cross, ladder, vessel/ship and pole.

Venturelli's artists' books, created primarily with beautifully produced and printed intaglios in small editions, are often in the accordion form, sometimes with a sculptural shape in keeping with the theme. They can be read in two page spreads, in multiples of pages or stretched out, sometimes many feet in length. This facilitates juxtaposition of images and a variety of readings. Venturelli encourages the viewer to build the text and context as he/she moves through the piece. In many ways, the form and content envisions a miniature museum, allowing stopping and starting in the progress of pages. Venturelli packages her artists' books in elaborate shaped wooden containers which she calls encasements, painted black and free standing, which are sculptures in themselves.

Of particular interest is Venturelli's reuse of her intaglio plates in one-of-a-kind or varied edition artists' books. Creating altar piece accordions with copper engraved pages, Venturelli responds to a common artist attachment to the beauty of the means of production of her prints. These pieces contrast the tactile – hinges are supple

leather rivetted to copper. Few non-artists ever see etching plates and these books have a compelling richness.

Thematically Venturelli may work with a harmonious cycle such as in *Lunar Temple* (1998) displaying phases of the moon in 7 copper pages, or focus on variations of a theme as in *Blueprint of a Symbol* (1997) exploring the circle in a copper book using etched text. *House on Fire* (1996) is a visual narrative with both a main image and a contrasting symbolic reference point above. Venturelli also uses monoprints and graphite.

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Parenthesis