



FEATURED ART REVIEW by ARTHUR WHITMAN  
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*Trumansburg artist Barbara Page  
explores her past through an unusual medium*

Back in 2008, artist Barbara Page embarked on what would become yet another of her obsessive multi-year projects. Finding old-fashioned checkout cards, now unneeded, inside some of her library books, the committed bibliophile began to document her current reading by decorating these with imagery. Using handwriting, drawing, rubber stamps and collage, Page transformed these quaint artifacts into playful works of art. Soon she was going back to her childhood, trying to reconstruct a lifetime of reading, arranged in—at least approximate—chronological order.

The project was cemented when the artist found a two-drawer wooden card catalog in an antique store as well as, eventually, two thousand unmarked cards from a library supply outlet. The cabinet now holds over eight hundred completed cards, organized by year. (She continues to post new entries on her Instagram page.) Since then, Page has exhibited work from the series — christened her “Book Marks” — at the Center for Book Arts in New York City and in various libraries and museums.

Released last month by Bauer and Dean Publishers, “Book Marks: An Artist’s Card Catalog” combines color reproductions of 434 decorated cards with an affecting, impressionistic memoir. Sections of cards—displayed four to a page in neat grids—alternate with six narrative chapters, each tracing roughly a decade of the artist’s life.

The memoir sections begin with Page’s rural Pennsylvania upbringing, begun under the shadow of the Second World War. They take us through her time as a young faculty wife in Berkeley and Ithaca; her personal liberation as a pilot and art student; her years as a commercial painter; and finally through the commissions, personal projects and global travel that have occupied her over the past three decades. Along the way, they trace a family life marked by mental illness and untimely death.

References to her book life are interwoven throughout. Clearly Page values reading — and by extension, learning and art — as a form of imaginative self-definition and growth.

Both a compelling standalone effort and a somewhat oblique commentary on her ongoing card catalog project, “Book Marks” will be of great interest to local art aficionados as well as lovers of memoir, travel, nature and literature.

This is a beautifully produced hardcover: a rarity amongst local-interest publications. Although not an “artist’s book” in a strict sense—the book art genre generally includes handmade or individually altered pieces, rather than mass publications like this one—it can nonetheless be seen as literary-visual work of art. The interior layout is of particular note. In addition to the aforementioned checkout card intermezzos, illustrations interspersed with the main text include personal photos, images of the artist’s paintings (alas, too few for some of us), and choice book covers.

Page is known to many Ithacans for her earlier project, “Rock of Ages, Sands of Time,” which like this one, takes on an elaborately conceived chronology: in this case, the history of life as traced in the Earth’s fossil record. This she captured in 544 small painted relief panels — each representing a million years of evolution — and had permanently installed as a freestanding wall at the Museum of the Earth, which opened

in 2003. Combining painstaking research with subtle imaginative liberties, the project bears comparison with her current one.

Like “Rock of Ages,” both “Book Marks” projects can be seen as eccentric variations on what the theorist of comics Scott McCloud has called sequential art: discrete images arranged in a larger sequence to form a narrative, direct or oblique. While her card catalog version, one-of-a-kind, can be seen as an artist’s book (following the loose definition of “book” familiar to devotees of the genre), her latest effort can be seen a hybrid graphic novel: combining fiction and non-fiction, as well as conceptual abstraction and intimate personal narrative, into a complex whole.