

## THREE LIVE BOOKS

### **Ecstatics a language of birds**

Laura Drever Lesley Harrison

Brae Editions

Buckquoy

Harray

Orkney

KW172JS

### **The Bees**

Sally Evans

illustrated by Reinhard Behrens

diehard

### ***ink***

– *in the fields* and Ken Cockburn

Abertay University Press, Dundee

## REVIEW BY IAN STEPHEN

A few weeks ago, I collided with the final deadline for moving a roomful of books and prints from one house to another. The dream of moving to a clean, clear digital studio and library has not yet entered my own waking life. It's possible I may still be in love with the very idea of books as well as individual examples. So the boxes did not go straight to charity shops or to those who dispose of lifetimes of collecting. Leather and marbled volumes have found their way into the living room that was Spartan for only a few weeks. I did manage to part with some exhibition catalogues but the artists' books and small press editions went back into suitcases.

But I'm not the only one in Scotland who still savours paper and print and has to run a finger over a new book. Brae Editions of Orkney have just published a very handsome slim collection of drawings by Laura Drever and poems by Lesley Harrison. And Ken Cockburn, a co-editor of the pocketbooks/Polygon series and its successor Platform projects, is a poet and translator who is clearly fascinated by the opportunities offered by the book as a well-made object as well as a storage device for language. His new title *ink* – made with the artists collective, *in the fields*, is published by Abertay University Press. I've also just been given the very handsome diehard (Callander Press) book *The Bees* by Sally Evans illustrated by Reinhard Behrens.

The latter has been out for some time but I'd like to mention it in the context of discussing the other two recent publications because it seems to me that the three books, which all have a vital visual aspect, are very different.

*The Bees* uses pleasing paper, clear layout and very sympathetic illustrations to add to the pleasures provided by the poem. It's a virtuoso piece where the sound of the last word in the middle line becomes the rhyme or half rhyme for the first and last lines of the next stanza. (They tell me that's called Terza Rima.) The poet is on a roll, fuelled by wit and playfulness and this is skillfully echoed in detailed drawings which underline the humour. All that craft is put to the service of entertainment. But don't be fooled – it's a thoughtful publication, with the form of the book helping the communication.

*Ecstatics* takes the relationship between poet, artist and designer (Alistair Peebles, in collaboration with the artist and poet) into a balanced work, produced by equal partners. The slim long rectangle and the typography are part of the craft which has come together into a unified whole thing. Poet and artist are also joined in a shared passion for observing birds. It begins with a spare observation of auk –

far out, they hang together  
like notes on the wind  
a brown line above the swell

That one comma gives just the right pause and it seems to me the suggestion of musical notation could be applied to many of the drawings which follow. These are placed, or balanced with other short bird-poems though the publication. Usually there are three lines, sometimes two and sometimes four. Sometimes the poems are on the right, sometimes left. Sometimes the top and sometimes the bottom. They always look just right, the typography working well visually with the line and shading and half-tones.

The plotted movements of individual birds or flocks is sometimes seen in relation to the marks made by humans. This is *starling*:

tiny angel in the flue;  
mackerel green,  
salted with stars

Here and there I did have the sense that the language which comprises the poems does not have quite the same clarity and sense of a drawn line as these quoted examples. But there are hallmarks of a recognizable style – a spare elegant line is disrupted here and there with an exotic word, to startle you: “ventricles”, “mandbles”, “macular”, The drawings themselves remind me of the tracings made by sensors – like a barograph or record of temperatures.

The whole amounts to a book which is beautiful to hold and which you feel like returning to.

Ken Cockburn’s new publication, made with University of Abertay, seems to be produced as part of an ambitious public arts programme, with several partners but with Stefan and Nicole, collectively known as - *in the fields*, *VG Bild-Kunst* as main collaborators. It is a hardback, nearly square format with a very handsome cover where the spill of ink seems to find a natural visual equilibrium.

As a former assistant director of the Scottish Poetry Library, and a well published translator, Ken Cockburn is an erudite scholar and a reader with an appetite. He loves marginalia – the notes which have the fluency of drawings. The examples quoted here are a book within a book, gathered from “five printed books from five centuries.” They are preceded with a series of prose reflections on the nature of writing such notes. This type of prose-poem has been extensively used as a

form by both Ian Hamilton Finlay and Thomas A Clark but Cockburn adds his own wry contribution: "...we might consider the book as a forest; leaving litter should be avoided, but the odd marker might nonetheless prove useful."

This central section falls after a series of photographs of clear glass bulbs which have been partly filled with blue ink. The remembered tracings of these marginal notes are seen in this modern visual echo. The documented found notes are followed by a short series of images of ink-spills set beside apposite quotations. My favourite is from Isaac Bashevis Singer – "You can spill ink but it won't write a letter by itself."

And there is yet another layer in the book from nearly hidden phrases which are just visible at the foot of uncut pages – they raise your curiosity and you have to hunt a bit to read them.

The book is full of interesting ideas and images but, for me it is not one book but four. This is surely caused by its need to document and interpret an arts project. For me it inhibits the book becoming a satisfying work in its own right, despite the riches contained. And Ken Cockburn's poems are a large part of these riches. These also range in style within this one set of covers – from circle poems which sit well visually across from the photos of the ink-swilling globes, to more simply expressed meditations. Let's end with one of these:

A paradox – before  
this book or any other  
absorbs the library  
stamp of ownership,  
marginalia's  
a proper response, a nod  
to posterity; but afterwards  
unwanted, wanton,  
a desecration,  
proper grounds for censure.

**Ian Stephen** is a writer and artist from the Isle of Lewis. He has received bursaries from the Scottish Arts Council, won the Christian Salvesen/Robert Louis Stevenson

award, and in 2004, was the first artist in residence at StAnza, Scotland's annual poetry festival.