

MAPPING THE EDGES OF THE NIGHT

The Artists' Books of Enid Ratnam-Keese

*A cup of tea...*



*Mapping the Edges of the Night*, concertina book of drawings, H 25 cm x W 18 cm x D 3 cm, 14 pages, 2007



*'In the darkness of a Blue Mountains winter morning in 2007 we heard the voice of a woman who seemed to be talking to someone she knew. She was in our sitting room. When the lights went on and she saw us, she gently reminded us that we were in her house. She had entered through an unlocked door in the night. We discovered later that she had lost her way and become disoriented. She had come up from Emu Plains by train. Our address had some similarity to hers and she decided that she had returned home.'*

ENID RATNAM-KEESE makes books in response to the people and places she encounters on a daily basis, to conversations, incidents and to other books. She says they are products of a nomadic life, personal experiences which are made visual through prints, paintings, drawings and collages. She quotes Jorge Luis Borges. A book, in particular an artists' book, is more than a series of verbal structures and images, it is 'a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships'.

The encounter with the woman in her home that morning is described in a concertina book of drawings, rubber stamped images and paintings on paper drypoint prints, mounted on cardboard. They describe illogical, disconnected images of disorientation through the loss of memory. The book has cloth-bound covers with a small etched image in industrial zinc on the back cover. The title *Mapping the Edges of the Night* references Rita Carter's *Mapping the Mind*.



*'Notebook' ends abruptly and tragically... with the death of someone close....*

Enid Ratnam-Keese makes books because she loves books. 'I have no training or experience in the art and technique of bookbinding. My books are constructions on my own artistic terms—a combination of sculpture and printmaking. Although some of the books I have created are three-dimensional objects, I am still attracted to the traditional structure of the book: the way books are bound; the covers, the spine, text and colophon; their dependence on the body, on being held. This, and the information that is found within a book, is the essence of the book.'

*Left: Bookmarks I, II & III  
Cloth-bound books, each in a balsa wood slipcase.*



'The smell of new books connects to the memory and new beginnings. I am reminded of the touch and smell of new school textbooks at the start of every year, inspiring and hopeful. Opening a new book is a promise of new experiences. Old books, on the other hand, books which have been handled, mishandled or invaded by creatures like insects, are a reminder of a homeland where high humidity and perspiration curtail the longevity of paper, where books age prematurely.'

In *Bookmarks I, II and III*, she references the marked (foxed) paper of such books, as well as the markers, bookmarks, used by the reader when books are being read. These are cloth-bound books, each in a balsa wood slipcase and made from a single sheet of Moulin du Gue paper which had foxed over the years, was resurrected and made into the three books with string, pieces of other papers, cloth and the ephemera which readers use as instant bookmarks fixed to the monoprinted pages. The text simply describes how foxing occurs.

*Notebook* shown on these pages and the next, is a cloth-bound book of paintings and drawings with some embossed pages, made from scrap paper stitched and bound, with a padded and embroidered slipcase. *Notebook* was intended to be an ongoing record of the extraordinary things that happen daily. It began in January 2010 with reports of the discovery of a large and silent owl on a friend's property in North Sydney—the Australian frogmouth. The image was at first purely imaginary but later informed by photographs from a book on owls.

The text reads:  
*Threat display of the Australian Frogmouth... Its wing is fringed for silent flight. All animals display some kind of fear. The fearful owl has strong feet and a bill. It stands 30-38cm high with white eyebrows, chin and throat. Feathers near the inner edge of the facial disc are also white... the tongue is thin like a scrap of paper. Gaping... hissing... defence mechanism.*

Other drawings come from the discovery of a strange fruit on a friend's property in Narellen, NSW. The fruit resembled the *mespilius germanica*, the medlar.

The text reads:  
*Mespilius germanica, the fruit of the medlar tree... resembling a small brown-skinned apple with a large cup-shaped eye between the persistent calyx-lobes. It is eaten only when decayed. 'You'll be rotten ere you be half ripe and that's the right virtue of the medlar.'* (Shakespeare)

*Opposite page top, right and over page:  
Notebook, 11 cm x 12 cm x 2 cm, 60 pages, 2010*

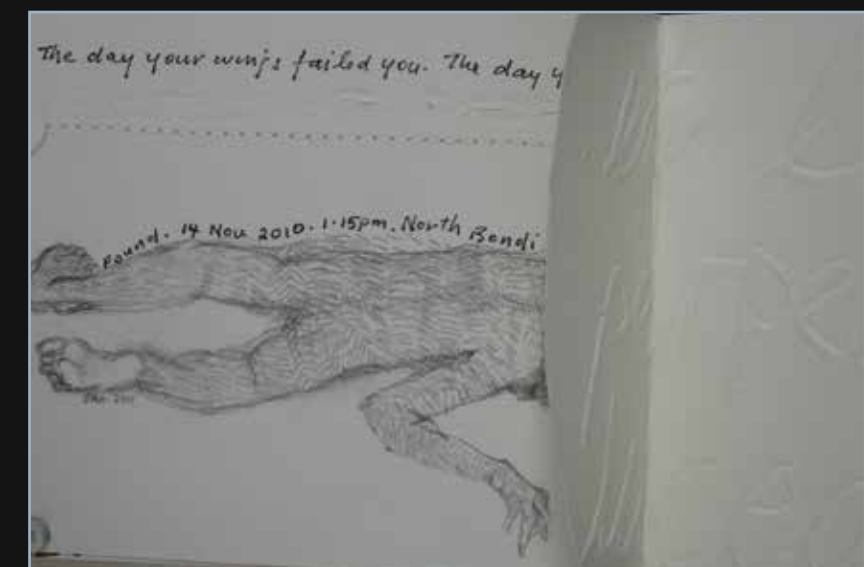
This fantastically formed plant is also seen beside the saint in Hieronymus Bosch's 'St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness' where it symbolises sensual delights which St. John has rejected for his life of religious devotion.

Central to *Notebook* is a statement about breaking into parts of the mind one never knew existed but must exist somewhere in some people's minds; spaces where there are no openings, no windows to the outside, no exits. As the notebook continues to record other events and images of disconnection, loss, strangeness and hybridity... the text in parts reads... *of chimeras and imaginary monsters one after another without order or plan... recorded in order to contemplate their oddness and absurdity at leisure.*

*Notebook* ends abruptly and tragically in November 2010 with the death by a traumatic fall of someone close. The final images simply record feelings and emotions connected to the reality of this event.

Enid Ratnam-Keese: 'I am also fascinated by the durability of natural materials and the things—both natural and manmade—which have a capacity for survival: paper, bones, wood, string, metal and discarded and battered books. These are the 'found objects' whose life I try to extend by incorporating them into my work.'

*Eye, Hand and Memory* are three paper-bound, miniature 'resurrected' books. The folded pages were made from a ruined and discarded German bible, disintegrating from age and the use of acidic tapes as repair material. Several pages were missing and the Gothic text is foreign and unreadable. These 'unreadable' books issue from the idea that just as tools are an extension of the body, so the book is an extension of the vision, the hand and the memory.



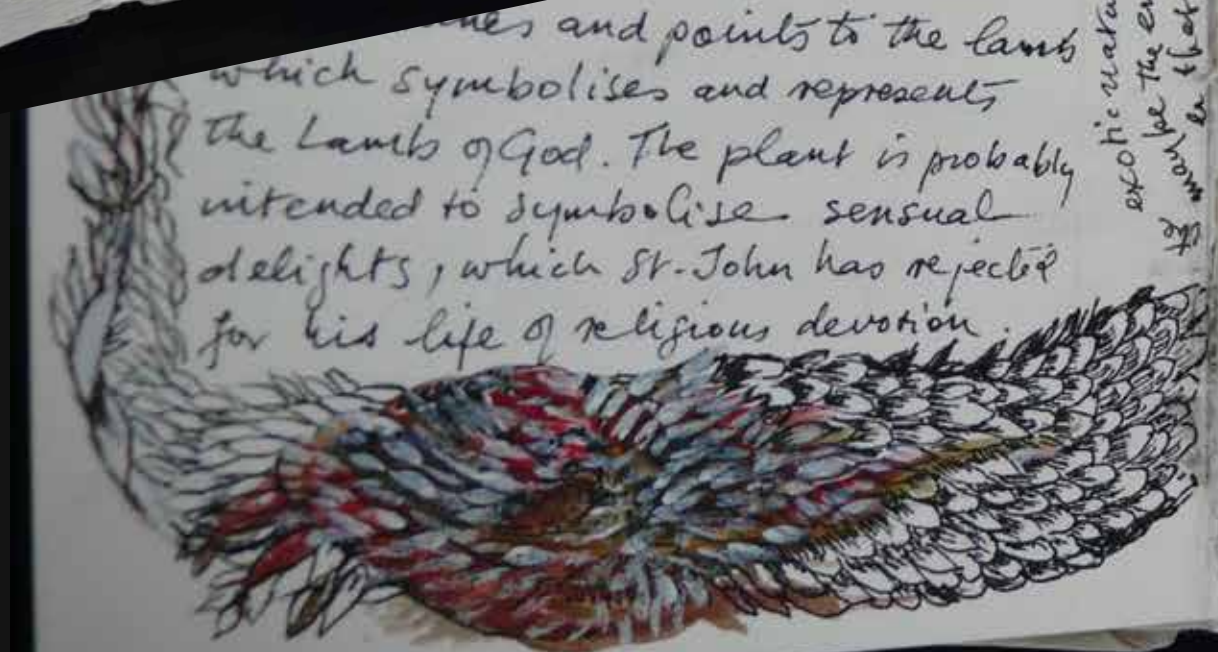


without notes in place... to contemplate this



the Baptist in the  
a huge, fantastic-  
beside the Saint

exotic nature of all life's  
shape the embodiment of  
of whom



... and points to the lamb  
which symbolises and represents  
the Lamb of God. The plant is probably  
intended to symbolise sensual  
delights, which St. John has rejected  
for his life of religious devotion.

forms: The symbolism of plant and animal forms  
of humanity; of people who are not with him in the wilderness  
of humanity; of people who are not with him in the wilderness  
of humanity; of people who are not with him in the wilderness



Of disconnection, loss, strangeness & hybridity

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Notebook, 11 cm x 12 cm x 2 cm,  
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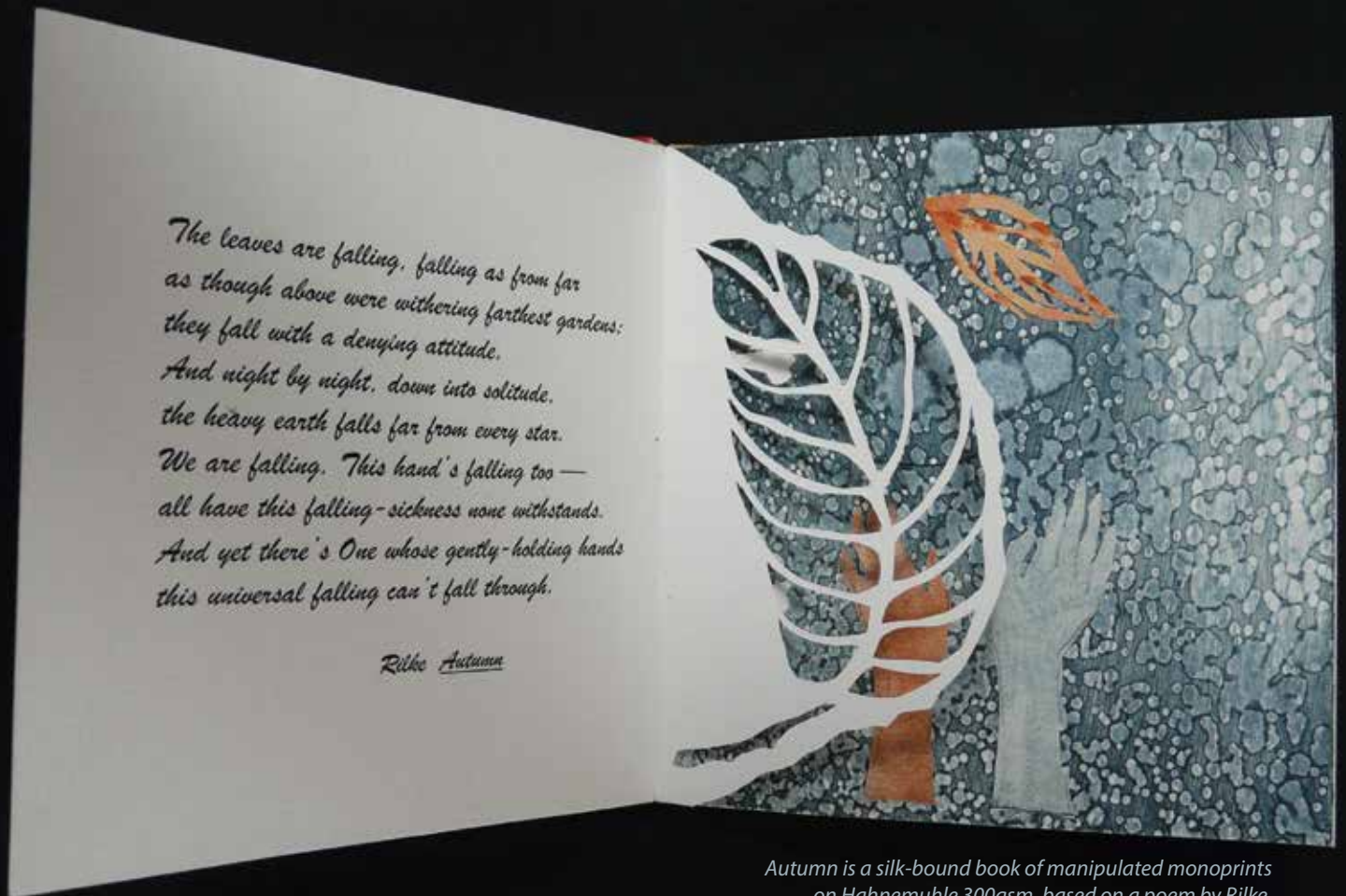
the fruit-tree 'mespilus germanica'. the fruit  
Agarolus... you'll be rotten  
when decayed (Crataegus)

The rejection of sensual delights for a  
life of religious devotion.

of the Medlar tree resembling a small brown-skinned  
apple with a large cup-shaped eye  
between the persistent calyx lobes. It is eaten  
when decayed. Agarolus... you'll be rotten  
when decayed (Crataegus)



Threat display of Australian Frogmouth... its wing is thin  
all animals display some kind of fear. The 'mespilus germanica'  
high, its white 'eyebrows', chin and throat are offset against  
a rufous colour  
the wing of a Black Swan  
the 'mespilus germanica' is a small brown-skinned  
apple with a large cup-shaped eye  
between the persistent calyx lobes. It is eaten  
when decayed. Agarolus... you'll be rotten  
when decayed (Crataegus)



*The leaves are falling, falling as from far  
 as though above were withering farthest gardens;  
 they fall with a denying attitude.  
 And night by night, down into solitude,  
 the heavy earth falls far from every star.  
 We are falling. This hand's falling too —  
 all have this falling-sickness none withstands.  
 And yet there's One whose gently-holding hands  
 this universal falling can't fall through.*

*Rilke Autumn*

*Autumn is a silk-bound book of manipulated monprints on Hahnemuhle 300gsm, based on a poem by Rilke. Autumn, 12.5 cm x 12 cm x 8 mm, 12 pages, 2015*



*Reading to the Blind is a concertina folded book bound in calico and placed in a cardboard box with a clasp made from a quaking aspen twig taken from a tree outside the retirement village at Emu Plains. The cover bears the shoots and twigs from the quaking aspen. The word "open" is embossed in braille on the cover and throughout the book there are embossed marks. The text consists of snippets of conversation which evoke memories of the life of a sight-impaired friend from the retirement village. Reading to the Blind, 26 cm x 19.5 cm x 3 cm, 15 pages, 2004*