
**Summary:**

*The Baron in the Trees*, by London artist Su Blackwell, is a book sculpture created from a copy of the novel of the same title. The sculpture, wrought from the pages of the open book, invites the viewer to reflect on the current state of reading, as well as the shifting forms and roles of the book. Blackwell’s manipulation of shadow and light, Victorian fairytale aesthetic, and intimate, intricate detailing conjures both whimsical and mournful affective responses. Not merely an example of book sculpture, Blackwell’s *Baron* highlights the materiality of the book, and may be understood as a metacommentary on the life cycles of print books. The motif of the tree, in addition to other flora, is central to Blackwell’s *Baron* as well as the rest of her book-cut sculptures. The dominant arboreal theme evokes the book’s botanic origins while simultaneously suggesting its demise. For the raw material from which Blackwell carved *The Baron* is in fact an old, forgotten book that would have otherwise been thrown out. In resurrecting the forsaken book, Blackwell enters the discourse on the supposed death of the book. Therefore, *The Baron in the Trees* must be viewed in the context of print after new media to be well understood.

**Description:**

English artist Su Blackwell carved her book sculpture, *The Baron in the Trees* (2011), from a discarded English translation of the eponymous 1957 Italo Calvino novel. The sculpture portrays a scene from the novel, in which the protagonist, a young elite Italian boy—a future baron, no less—rejects his family and the cultural scripts deemed appropriate for 18th century aristocracy and instead determines to live alone in the canopies of trees. To illustrate the young baron’s self-sufficiency, Blackwell provides representations of his dwelling (illuminated by tiny electric lightbulbs), his laundry hanging from tree branches, his umbrella, and his books.

*The Baron* is one of Blackwell’s most recent works from her extensive portfolio of cut book sculptures, a medium she began using in 2003. Prior to that time, Blackwell worked mainly with textiles. The artist regards paper as a highly social medium, in more ways than one: she notes that it has historically been used for both earthly and spiritual communications. Of note, the book sculptures retain their material identities as books (if re-purposed ones), rather than become mined for scrap paper. In fact, in most of her works, including *Baron*, the book’s cover is used as a base for the sculptures. In her artist profile from her website, Blackwell describes how the books themselves guide her creative process: “I always read the book first, at least once or twice, and then I begin to create the work, cutting it out, adding details. The detail is what brings it all together, the magic element [É] It is a tediously long process.” (From the artist’s website: [http://sublackwell.co.uk/profile]).
Images of *The Baron in the Trees* (2011) from the artist’s website.
Research Context:

*The Baron in the Trees* may be approached from a variety of critical scholarly perspectives, particularly in light of art history, literary studies and media studies traditions. Those interested in the history of books as well as current and future directions in book arts since the age of new media may find *Baron* and Blackwell's other book sculptures particularly compelling for these research purposes. More precisely, an engagement with *The Baron* helps elucidate Garrett Stewart's concept of *bookwork* (Stewart 2010; Stewart 2011). *Bookwork*, according to Stewart, is a kind of artistic hollowing-out of a book's textual features and functions—a process termed *demediation*—leaving only the fetishized, defunct materiality of the book behind. However, bookworks do not lose their discursive performativity in the abstract sense; in fact, they often provide insights into reading and book culture. Specifically, bookwork art such as *The Baron in the Trees* pokes at underlying cultural anxieties surrounding the real or imagined *print book in crisis* as digital media becomes increasingly central to daily life. Finally, while *The Baron* accommodates a traditional literary *close reading,* such a reading can only be a shallow one. Blackwell's theoretical position *implicitly* requires the comparison of electronic textuality and print to clarify the specificities of each (Hayles 2002, 106). Therefore, an analysis of *The Baron in the Trees* raises questions surrounding (literal and analytical) *reading practices.*

Technical Analysis:

While stylistically and thematically similar to Blackwell's other works, *The Baron in the Trees* exhibits an almost surgical attentiveness to minute details, as shown in the figures above. The medium of paper conveys a sense of ephemerality for Blackwell. Regarding what her medium means to her, Blackwell said: *I employ this delicate, accessible medium and use irreversible, destructive processes to reflect on the precariousness of the world we inhabit and the fragility of our life [sic], dreams and ambitions.* (From the artist's website: [http://sublackwell.co.uk/profile]). The careful, deliberate violence of Blackwell's cutting technique reminds the viewer of the book's *resurrection* as *bookwork* and therefore also its previous incarnations as a book to be read, certainly, but also as a tree, as raw pulp, etc. Remarkably, all of the book's *embodiments* as objet d'art, as raw materials (trees), as *conveyor of textual knowledge* are displayed in the bookwork itself. Finally, the use of electric wiring, which casts haunting shadows on the sculpture, serves as another reminder that a book is always mediated through the technologies available.

Although *The Baron* conveys a sense of bereavement through her sculptural *chiaroscuro* technique, it is not a traditional *memento mori.* Whom, or rather what, is being mourned never becomes obvious. Blackwell's view on the subject provides some clarification, although not much specificity for this reading of *The Baron.* Blackwell writes of her preference for young
child characters in her dioramas, for this allows her to place them in haunting, fragile settings, expressing the vulnerability of childhood, while also conveying a sense of childhood anxiety and wonder. There is a quiet melancholy in the work, depicted in the material used, and the choice of subtle color. (From the artist’s website: [http://sublackwell.co.uk/profile]). However, a surface reading of The Baron in the Trees, if one ignores its literary allusions, shows a young boy engrossed in a book as he perches high up in a tree. In fact, the boy possesses a library of sorts: two small books hover in the air beside the treetops, suspended from wires. This idyllic scene imagines reading in a nostalgic, idealized way surprising, since in fact, the sculpture is itself an adulterated book. Here Blackwell intervenes in the debate surrounding the perceived demise of the book after the digital media revolution. In "salvaging" the book from its untimely death through this sculpture, The Baron in the Trees raises questions about how reading produces knowledge. Since the scene here is actually conjured from the content of the book it is carved from, one wonders how we make meaning from books. Do we mentally carve the text we read into elaborate thought-images, like the art Blackwell creates? Is her project a literal attempt to capture the experience of reading through visual imagery?

**Evaluation of Opportunities/Limitations in Bookwork after New Media:**

Blackwell’s project offers many opportunities for further exploration. A fuller assessment of the artist’s specific techniques will pave the way for rich media-specific comparison and analysis. Art historians may wish to examine Blackwell’s art in the context of other book art highlighted by Garrett Stewart’s Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept Art, such as Brian Dettmer’s body of work. Additionally, a reading of the text on the sculpture itself may provide deeper insight into The Baron’s significance, especially re: the loss narrative Blackwell constructs about reading and the book. Finally, one might compare her book sculptures to her other projects. For example, there is an exciting opportunity to be had examining the effect of scale on Blackwell’s book sculptures. The Baron in the Trees is a small, intimate work; indeed, most of her sculptures are small enough to fit into shadowboxes or bell jars. However, in January 2012, Blackwell created the set design for the production of The Snow Queen at a theater in London, England. To achieve this, she proportionately enlarged her smaller replicas of these sets, and she said that just by increasing the scale, some of the intimacy of my work is lost. (From the artist’s website: [http://sublackwell.co.uk/profile]). How do our affective responses to the larger book sculptures change? What might this reveal about entrenched attitudes toward a specific materiality of the book?

**Resources for Further Study:**

