

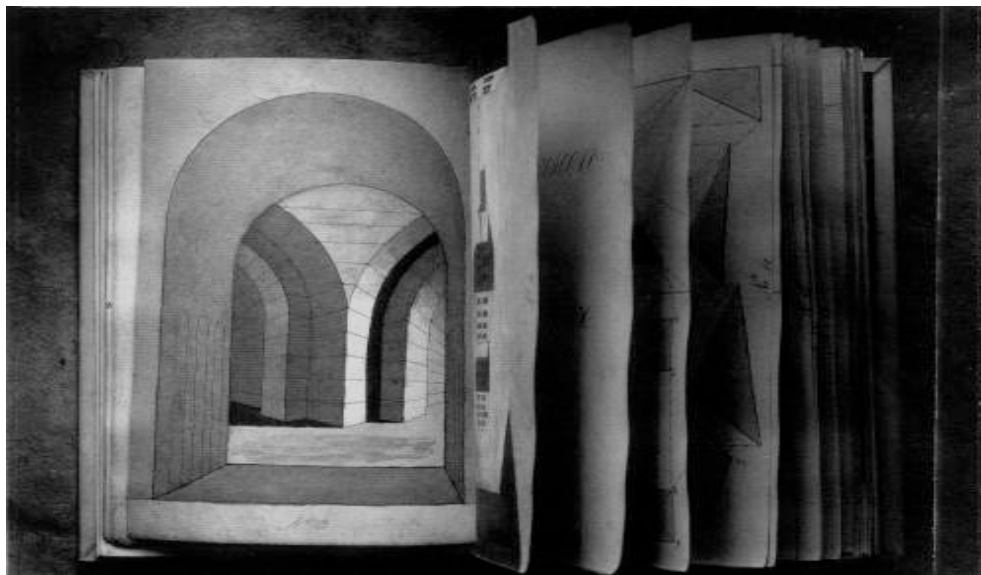
Sean Kernan

***The Secret Books*. Photographs by Sean Kernan. Writings by Jorge Luis Borges
Leetes Island Books, 1999**

Skulls are etched with words that define a universe of infinite possibilities. Slain birds lie fallen on a page, blurring the clarity of scholastic meditations. Angry nails crucify one text, while another is seen as a window into the starry universe itself. These are just some of the remarkable images in *The Secret Books*, a new volume of pictures by the renowned photographer Sean Kernan, whose work uses Borges as a “guiding star” to navigate the space between the text and the imagination.

Borges once wrote: “A book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader . . . A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.” And expressing a similar idea, “Poetry is the encounter of the reader with the book, the discovery of the book.”

More than just a way of perceiving the act of reading, these profound words contain something of a challenge as well. It is not enough to allow a book to merely transmit information to the reader; the reader must *engage* the book, create a space between the text and the reader’s own imagination, a space where the book is in fact rewritten. It is here, and not in the text itself, that Borges locates the “book;” a dramatic shift of focus from a closed system to a perpetually open one, disallowing the total completion of any work and investing a book with near-mystical qualities. In a very real way, each book may be seen having a double life. First, there is the book as generally agreed upon; it is so and so pages, has such and such characters, and has this and that as a basic plot. But each book also revolves through a universe of readers, past, present and future, generating a multiplicity of worlds that collect, like ghosts, like secrets, into the pages of the work itself. Each single book has a myriad of secret books folded up inside of it, a house with an endless series of hauntings, spirits blind to each other and yet sharing a basic vocabulary of unconscious symbols and archetypes.



Sean Kernan has done more than simply “encountered” the works of Borges; he has plunged wholeheartedly into the journey in an attempt to explore how our collective unconscious responds to the archetype of the Book itself. And like any good traveler, he has returned with an album of photographs. Forty-three photographs, to be exact, forty-three duotone meditations that speak directly from a reader’s occult fascination with the written word in all its forms.

Though it’s something of an homage to Borges, and all the captions come from his work, *The Secret Books* is not an attempt to illustrate Borges. Loosely framing the flow of images, Borges’ text is best described as parallel meditations, and includes poetry, interview excerpts, and two complete stories (appropriately “The Book of Sand” and “The Library of Babel”). The photographs all share a similar theme—the juxtaposition of books and text with natural and artificial objects such as skulls and animals, stones and fruit, cathedrals and candles. The books used span a wide range of languages and subjects, and Kernan has photographed them quite lovingly, with an amazing eye for the visual impact of differing typefaces, alphabets, and effects such as italics and capitals. Even the photographed pages look delicious, with shadows highlighting a degree of graininess or creaminess so vivid that one aches to touch them, to feel the weight and texture of the pages between your fingers.

But of course the real “message” lies not in the books or the objects, but the arrangements and systems formed between them, and in this Kernan is less of a photographer as he is an heir to Joseph Cornell or Edward Kienholz. The photographs seduce the eye with their strange beauty, and not one fails to evoke some *frisson* of recognition, like an image recovered from a dream, full of mystery, wonder or surprise. Here is a potent procession of symbols, each image silently pointing to our endless quest to make sense of the universe. Instruments of rational science are forced into relation with charms and talismans; the plenitude of nature and the promise of new births are contrasted with the inevitability of dust and bones; and page after page of enlightened thought is fraught with twisting serpents, sinewed with the primordial sin of Knowledge.

Occasionally the texts themselves are obscured by their environment, and in one case both text and object fuse, suggesting that the natural world itself may be spelled from some hermetic alphabet; a tongue of insects forever barred to our comprehension. Or perhaps we merely project our desire for meaning onto chaos; indeed, one of the images depicts a Möbius strip of text that tantalizes the reader to “recall other rooms,” hinting at some revelation that is forever sealed by infinite, one-sided darkness. Kernan’s photographs provide no answer, no interpretation; the perfect “open work,” we are invited to create our meaning from a treasury of shared symbols.

Despite the layered ambiguity of its images, however, there is never any doubt that the concept of the Book, whether as an object, archetype, or metaphor, is always central. *The Secret Books* is essentially a meditation *on* books *using* books, and the work shares the same mesmerizing but elusive quality possessed by two mirrors reflecting each other. Here is our fascination with books, captured in mythopoetic images and bound as a book of its own. A book which will take its place on the shelves of literature, ready to be rewritten by each new reader seeking reflections of his own encounters and discoveries within the Library of Babel.

All in all, I couldn’t recommend *The Secret Books* more highly. This is a work which

should both intrigue and delight not just lovers of Borges, but any reader who has ever treasured a book as a magical artifact, a secret garden of forked paths, or as a numinous encounter with the living and the dead.

Allen Ruch