

LOS ANGELES

## ALLEN RUPPERSBERG

MARGO LEAVIN

If Allen Ruppersberg has always had a severe case of *bibliomania conceptualis* so much the better for us. His most recent show investigated the secret lives of books—as admired and debased objects, embodiments of a zeitgeist, and repositories of laughter, value, and mourning.

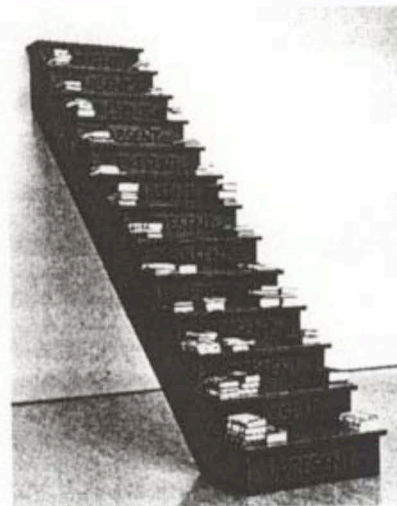
Portraits of books were presented as though the tomes themselves were famous personages. *Fiction*, 1991, is a drawing of a book whose cover modestly declares: “Good Stories by the Best Authors of the Day. 10 cents.” This piece sets the show’s tone: tongue-in-cheek reverence mixed with sly elegance. *Low to High*, 1994–96, gives us republished versions of books from the ’20s, ’30s, and ’40s stacked on a library-ish mahogany staircase with the words PRESENT and ABSENT inlaid on the vertical faces of alternating steps. Some of the volumes are exact reproductions of old books, others sport the original covers of old editions but the pages are blank. Are these books paired with their own ghosts or are they tabulae rasae? This piece has a complex conceptual subtext. It attempts to evoke a historical moment by reproducing the popular novels likely to have been read by soldiers who fought in World War II’s 1944 Battle of Arnhem. Ruppersberg’s penchant for linking literature to his art production is so strong it’s as though books were a species of sacred animal he had decided to breed because he could not get enough of their company.

This playful show was delicately balanced between the giddy and the grave. Here Ruppersberg toyed with issues of the handmade versus the mass-produced, and with high/low dichotomies, by redrawing mechanically printed texts and by presenting low-brow or expendable forms of writing as though they were precious and deeply significant. *Paul Barrett Humes*, *Peter Alan Ginn*, *Gregory L. Broyles*, and *Jonathan Schenker* (all subtitled “Study for Book-

mark,” all 1994) are graphite-and-ink renderings of bookmark-shaped, single-column newspaper obituaries of men who died of AIDS. The typography is enlarged and redrawn on the white paper often used for funeral announcements. Somber, wreathlike decorations float above and below, hemmed in by black frames. Part of the hand-drawn type looks uniformly machine-printed, the rest determinedly alive (the typewriter-aping shaky pencil letters seem to squirm). Bemused rather than irreverent, these pieces appear to grapple with the best way to “mark” losses: to record deaths and shape memories of the departed into items of daily use, preferably something kept as close to hand as a much-used bookmark.

*Good Dreams, Bad Dreams, What was Sub-Literature?*, 1996, was a witty installation showcasing Ruppersberg’s fondness for B-grade literature, hand-painted signs, and juicy American slang. From 19 brightly hand-painted signs blared hilarious lists of cheesy, melodramatic pulp-fiction titles, some paired with authors’ names (*Too Young to Die*; *So Fair, So Evil*; *The Incurable Wound*; and so on). Below the eye-poppin’ book-title signage, large color photos of building signs which, due to urban wear and tear have lost their lettering, leaned against the wall. A small sign with moveable letters, the kind churches use to announce sermon topics, stood in front of the piece, inscribed with the work’s title, followed by “LECTURE TODAY, 4 PM.” The viewer was placed in a state of alert anticipation, imagining the impending lecture, and at the same time, hearing versions of it blurted, whispered, and mumbled by all the elements in the show.

—Amy Gerstler



Allen Ruppersberg, *Low to High*, 1994–96, mixed media, 10' x 38½" x 13'6".