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“A Layered History: From Semitransparent to Opaque” At Furthermore to June 14

A literal arc of art history could learn from its own scanned pages.

By Kriston Capps • June 6, 2014



“A Layered History: From Semitransparent to Opaque” by Dean Kessmann (2014)

“A Layered History,” a new photo sculpture by Dean Kessmann on view at Furthermore, is a physical accomplishment, that’s for sure. A nearly seamless print (it’s actually two), the photo-collage is mounted on a 40-foot curved wooden support that spans the gallery. It’s a bibliographic achievement as well: Kessman scanned all 1,184 pages of H.W. Janson’s *History of Art*, from the acknowledgments to the index, and collaged them semitransparently, recto to verso, in the file that inspired the print.

Students of art history may remember the tome with a shudder. Fixed in its temperament if not its final page count (it has been revised eight times since its publication in 1962), *History of Art* is a tool that seems older than the history it recounts. Kessmann affords it due deference, even as he is rendering its words entirely unreadable. The Janson is still altogether recognizable, even folded in on itself. For some students, its inscrutability is its defining characteristic.

Kessmann might've done well to linger over the modern chapters toward the end of the book as he was dutifully scanning its pages. As the latest edition details, if memory serves, in the best Minimalist artworks, the rules used to guide the creation of a piece are rendered explicit by the execution of the piece—what Frank Stella called the “regulated pattern” of his black-stripe paintings, for example, or the rules of chance by which John Cage composed and performed much of his music. Kessmann’s “Layered History” isn’t Minimalist, but it would benefit from a logic that showed itself to viewers as it worked.

There does appear to be a system to “A Layered History,” at least on first glance. The conceptual thrust is plain, as a kind of end-of-history gesture to deconstruct the trajectory of art. Kessmann serves up all of Western art, from snout to tail, in one big blood pudding. Yet he keeps utensils and recipe out of sight. One could picture him laying out the scanned pages in Photoshop, making careful but ultimately arbitrary decisions about where the pages overlap. Yet it also seems like the pages might fit over one another according to regularized steps.

Is it a severe piece of science or a pleasing collage? It’s possible to be of several minds on “A Layered History.” Kessmann’s sculptural print object has a specific glow to it: The arc of art history is long, and as it turns out, it bends toward orange. The fact that art history has a reddish hue (as seen from this broad perspective) is a delightful piece of trivia that Kessmann coaxes from the text. In other words, the print is isotropic: It looks the same all over, basically. But Kessmann is forcing other factors—the length of the arc, the assemblage of the pages—that don’t have anything to do with the book or its subject matter.

You could fill a Janson’s *History of Art* with artworks about the canon and all its impossible accomplishments (and on its glaring lacunae, too). Kessmann doesn’t mean to add to that art-on-art category, exactly. Rather, he seems to be taking a physical configuration of art history and turning it into a process for making photographs. Which makes it more forgivable that “A Layered History” has some gaps in vision of its own.