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A Tantalizing, Mysterious Art Book (Or Is It Book Art?)

By AIMEE FARRELL DEC. 15, 2015

The artist's book, a medium that originated in France at the turn of the last century, gets a digitally inspired reboot with "RadioPaper," a project launching today at Studio Leigh in Hoxton, East London. Taking its title from the electronic paper that replicates the physical page in Kindles and other e-readers, the exhibition provides a showcase for the debut book work by the British artist Mary Ramsden, which will also be available to buy in an edition of 30. Framed in fluorescent-edged Perspex boxes, each of the copies of "RadioPaper" contains a series of abstract artworks by Ramsden, and perhaps more surprisingly, submerged within their French folds, five specially composed super-short stories by the Granta award-winning novelist Adam Thirlwell.

Ramsden hit upon the idea for "RadioPaper" while leafing through an old art volume: "I noticed the show-through winking at me from page to page," she says, referring to the glimpses of printed text visible on the other side of the paper. "I wanted to take that experience and create an object that could be enjoyed without scrolling or swiping." Ramsden achieves this conceal-and-reveal effect by leaving some of the pages uncut and impenetrable — at times the reader must reach for the scissors in order to reveal Thirlwell's completed texts. "The original title was 'Unopened,'" he says of the visual tension, which dovetails with the exploration of self-exposure that informs much of his work. "What interested me was how to exploit that double nature: the visible and the hidden text. I decided that

each mini-story would cut on a cliffhanger — where the second half is dirtier or more mischievous than the first.”

Ramsden has long been fascinated with the digital world. Her abstract canvases often comprise upright rectangles whose bold serenity is punctuated by smudges and haphazard brush strokes that mimic fingerprints left behind on computer screens. “It’s as if Ellsworth Kelly has been redesigned by Apple,” says Thirlwell, who was first introduced to Ramsden by her London gallerist Pilar Corrias. “We had a long conversation about books,” he recalls of the meeting. “Which always makes me adore a visual artist.” So enamored was the author, in fact, that he invited her to create a canvas in response to his most recent novel, “Lurid & Cute,” which was published in January; little did he know that within the year she would return the invitation.

“RadioPaper” is the sophomore show for Studio Leigh, a new “commissioning and exhibiting platform” founded by the former Mario Testino art director Tayah Leigh Barrs. “It’s an interesting shift from the breadth of the first show,” says Barrs, who launched the space this summer with a group show featuring 28 artists. “This time we’re honing in on one object that we consider commonplace, the book, and exploring how it sits within the domestic space.” Studio Leigh’s focused founding principle — that art, like design, should consider function — is, Barr believes, what differentiates its output in the crowded London gallery scene. “A lot of artists today are encouraged to concentrate on one aspect of their practice, and that’s what they’re constantly expected to produce. Studio Leigh is a chance for them to step away from that and create something completely different.”

“RadioPaper” is published on Dec. 15 and available online through Studio Leigh in a limited edition of 30, plus two artist’s proofs. Each artwork is produced by Book Works and signed and numbered by the artist.