

The Stuff of Dreams

by Andreas Langenbacher

54 **C**loak, scallop-shell, staff: stand in front of the magnificent cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, its weed-encrusted towers spiralling into the uniform blue of the Galician spring sky like pagodas run rampant, and dip discreetly into the Who's Who of your Baedeker, assiduously trying to identify the numerous figures on wall and portal, and you will quickly notice that the only attribute a modern tourist still has in common with the church statuary, those beautifully executed figures of James, other saints and Apostles, is the book.

The book, mobile mirror of salvation, pilgrim's stalwart companion dispatching us to the places we long to see – and awaiting us there again as a scroll on a sarcophagus or an eroded Bible in a petrified hand: in this city so close to what Latinate Christendom knew as "*finisterre*", the end of the world, the book is omnipresent, more common than even scallop-shell, staff, or peregrinator's paunch. For almost every figure gracing – or passing – a façade holds a book under his arm. "*The way of the pilgrim is wonderful but narrow,*" reads the mediaeval quotation in my thick travel guide.

Then visit the monastic library adjacent to the cathedral and, suddenly finding yourself before an enormous censer – reserved today for the reading of the liturgy on high feast days, when its smoke sketches ephemeral hieroglyphics over the heads of the faithful –, inhale the silent scent of its essences, seemingly emanating from the theological tomes preserved in glass cases, and you will fall irrevocably under the spell of the genius loci of this place of pilgrimage.

And, because Santiago de Compostela is also a bustling university town today, rejoin the fray in its labyrinthine lanes, where cheerful throngs of students swing their required reading, casually belted together as a fashion accessory, at hip level to the walkman's beat.

"In this church there is no crack, no deterioration to be found; it is a piece of marvellous craftsmanship, large, spacious, bright, of impressive size, perfectly matched in width, length and height, wonderful and robust in execution; whosoever has viewed its beauty will be joyous and cheerful if, before, he was sad." The

words of the *Liber Sancti Jacobi*, the first known pilgrim's guide to Compostela, written over eight hundred years ago to describe the Romanesque tomb church long before it was recast in its Baroque guise, could as easily apply to our true destination: the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, or Galician centre for contemporary art, built in the mid-1990s by Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza and arguably Santiago de Compostela's most significant modern edifice.

Ascetically discreet, multifariously allusive and rigorously disciplined – as seamlessly as this erratic yet elegant building slots into the cityscape, so perfectly does Swiss artist Peter Wüthrich's exhibition suit the interior and surroundings of the museum.

That the Bernese artist who has worked exclusively with books as raw material for over ten years now has been able to stage his first major retrospective here, seems an incredible stroke of luck. For the formal, chromatic and architectural presence of his sculptures, reliefs and installations are born of the same spirit as Siza's museum design: using the most minimal means, they create an at the same time sensual and reflexively expanding, indeed exhilarating, space, embodying concrete meditation and meditative concretion – an attitude that conveys itself effortlessly to the viewer, gently enfolding him and equipping him with a liberated perspective free from superfluous baggage.

In the fifth book of his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo describes how, as the greatest event in human history, the printer's art replaced architecture as the chronicle of mankind: "*The book was to kill the building... In its printed form, thought is more imperishable than ever; it is volatile, elusive, indestructible. It mingles with the air. In the days of architecture, thought had turned into a mountain and taken powerful hold of a century and of a place. Now it turned into a flock of birds and was scattered on the four winds occupying every point of air and space simultaneously.*" (Trans. John Sturrock)

Peter Wüthrich's works are all fashioned from a single, pre-formed material, stuff of dream and theme and academe – the book. Though offering complementary, confirming or con-

tradictory commentaries on the impressive but always over-generalized proclamations of the beginning or end of the Gutenberg Galaxy, they as radically undermine attempts at theoretical attribution or interpretation. And this if only by virtue of the sheer simplicity of their chromatic and formal perfection, their capricious rigour, which continually generates new laws of effect and meaning in ever changing contexts and permutations. From an artistic perspective, at the very least, the curtain is far from falling on the age of the book, for here edifice and book still form the most perfect symbiosis.

With his minimalist book paintings, architectural sculptures, witty photographic picture stories, video sequences and the self-contained universes of his installations, Peter Wüthrich – cutting a swath through multiplicitous literary borrowings – scotches all rash metaphor and Baroque allegory that might rob the book as object of its materiality and aesthetic possibilities. And, with that, transports an object so vulnerable to inflationary projection and petrification to pure emblem into the twenty-first century as a new, surprisingly fresh material basis for art and life.

For Wüthrich has no, but absolutely no, interest in the aura of dusty bookrooms, yellowing dog-eared pages, the gloomy melancholy of bookworms and greedy eyes of bibliomanes and bibliophiles. On the contrary: with their relaxed precision and meticulous lightness of touch, his studies and etudes test the limits of the subject "book", entangling it in ever new and more amazing constellations and figural situations, taking possession of space with the crystalline austerity, the irony and wit, of a composition by Eric Satie – and exercise as liberatingly purifying an effect on us.

The book – material of precarious plasticity and Platonic substance, generally predisposed to distract us from the sensual present as it withdraws in permanent transparency to the plane of imagination, idea and transcendence: through the concrete experiments of Peter Wüthrich's sculptures and installations, our word-ridden thoughts are focused once again on the form, colour, weight and configurations of the object itself, which is thereby given back its opacity and ontological dignity, leaving it open for new associations.