

arts

Glendon's novel book exhibition bound to fascinate

By HENRY SUM

Tired of the same old thing? Mystery-thriller putting you to sleep? Not finding any bargains in your bookstore's remainder bin? Why not give "Artist's Books," the recently opened show at Glendon Gallery, a look? You might find it rather novel.

The show has been especially curated by Tim Guest from a loan by Art Metropole. "They are not about art," says Tim in the accompanying handout. "They are, instead, complete works of art in themselves. They are artworks which take the form of books."

More than half of the books on display can be freely picked up and leafed through. The rest are enclosed in plexiglass cases. Stanley Broun's metre-long book rests in just such a case. The idea behind this lean, white, 3-page fibreboard book is to "measure and compare distances in metres." Far from being a typical book we're accustomed to reading, this work is more like a conceptual piece of sculpture.

Equally conceptual is Bruce Nauman's book "CLEARSKY" which is a series of empty pages, all printed in varying shades of shiny blue. Totally absent of clouds, the pages look like photographs of a clear sky taken at different times of the day. These are not photographs, however, but pages of blue ink; the photographic step has been eliminated in reproduction. The ink combined with the flat pages and our imagination attempts to imitate a sky's enormous sense of depth.

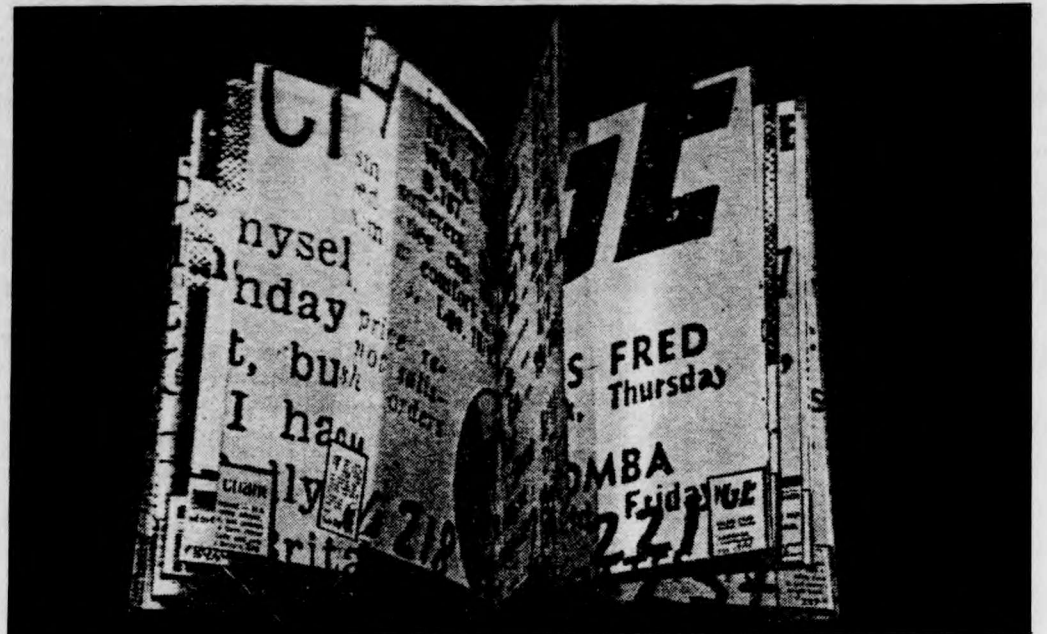
Diter Rot likes to bind random pages of color comics and coloring books, then haphazardly die-cut circles in various places to achieve a polychromatic, swiss-cheese effect. At other times, he'll take sections from the newspaper, blow these up 10 times then randomly compile these enlargements into a chance sequence of page. The book certainly takes on a typographical poetry all its own but Tim Guest's esoteric hypothesis might be stretching things a bit too far. "This dislocation... draws the reader's attention towards a kind

of deliberate confusion which then jumbles the reader's thoughts into a new order." If this is so, then we might as well go hunting for character development in our telephone directories.

Some artists do however explore the way we read and perceive words. "Generally they ask to be read in a totally different way than other books, indeed they often defy literal interpretations and avoid the beaten track of linear thought," says Tim Guest. Carole Schneemann's book "ABC," for instance, is a non-fictional novel in a boxed set of cards. The "book" can be read in a numbered sequence or shuffled and read as a series of individual fragments.

Still other artists make books out of collecting photographs. "Various Small Fires" is a slim volume of fires ranging from acetylene torch to zippo lighters. Some collections burn with political indignation. "Staecke: Pornografie" assembles newswire photos of bloody street confrontations with unidentifiable fascist police. Victor Burgin's "Family," on the other hand, is a totalitarian primer for adults. The book critically knocks our cherished family institutions in a series of pithy, biased statements accompanied by photographs depicting various forms of social persuasion (national flag, commercial advertisements), all designed like a child's alphabet book. If we're to take Burgin literally, then returning to a pre-civilized state of nuts and berry pickers would be our only hope for salvation.

General Idea's "Cocktail Book" makes the cockamamie suggestion that state control is feasible through the seemingly innocuous indigestion of homogenized milk. Thumbing through Liz Magor's photo collection on bread and baking, however, makes one re-think General Idea's concept all over again. Shots of ordinary dough rising is juxtaposed against profiles of overweight, flabby men, pubescent nudes and new-born babes. The resemblance of the fat, glorpy dough to puffy human flesh is uncanny. What are they putting into all that wonder bread anyway?



Diter Rot's Gessammelte Werke Band 10.

Additional artists take photographs. Ed Rucha, for example, took his shots of Los Angeles a couple of hundred feet above ground and came up with "34 Parking Lots." These shots look like a series of minimal paintings created out of asphalt and striped guide lines. Hamish Fulton takes "photo souvenirs" of marathon treks through vast uninhabited landscapes and accompanies these photographs with the location, date and number of miles walked in each journey.

Famous artists have shown an interest in making books. Andy Warhol released a curious novelty in the late '60s. It consists of black and white photographs of various underground starlets augmented with pop-ups of WWI bi-planes or tacky soup cans. Michael Snow's "Cover to Cover" on the other hand appears to transcend this material realm. The

360 pages of photographs not only toy with our understanding of reality, but seem to touch base with Einstein's time/space theory of relativity. This is an exceptional study of perception and illusion, and deserves special attention.

Marcel Duchamp knew a thing or two about illusion. His book "The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even" offers "no solutions because there is no problem." The anagram is typical of Duchamp's quixotic humor. The book is as much a puzzle as the man was a legend. Schematic drawings, verbal puns and unusual word arrangements all contribute allegorical data to his finished glass sculpture. Duchamp thumbed his nose at connoisseurs and philistines alike, no doubt laughing all the way to the bank. It's hard to imagine finding another book this rich in ideas.

Tarragon and Workshop theatres kick off new year abysmally

When the Wind Blows
by Raymond Briggs
Toronto Workshop Productions
currently

'night, Mother
by Marsha Norman
Tarragon Theatre
until Feb. 3

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Tarragon Theatre and Toronto Workshop Productions, two of Toronto's best established small theatres, both opened 1985 on a sour note last week; TWP with a lame nuclear comedy entitled *When the Wind Blows*, and Tarragon with a stiff rendering of Marsha Norman's Pulitzer Prize winning tragedy, *'night, Mother*. While there is much to lament in both of these productions (i.e. the acting in *'night, Mother* and the ineffective stage techniques in *When the Wind Blows*), it seems that the most culpable individual in both cases has to be the playwright.

When the Wind Blows is probably the worse of the two efforts, a thin, supposedly 'black comedy' adapted by Raymond Briggs from his critically acclaimed cartoon book of the same name.

The play follows what are supposed to be the humorous antics of a doddering British couple, Jim and Hilda Bloggs, as they prepare their country cottage for a nuclear attack. While following the survival instructions from the government pamphlets, actors Maggie Askey and Colin Miller plod through an endless series of vapid puns, mispronunciations, and malapropisms, all of which, no doubt, are meant to be funny. From time to time the ill-fated couple is overcome with nostalgia for the last great war, and while strains of Vera Lynn rise and fall in the background, Askey and Miller struggle heroically with some of the most heavy-handed satire ever put on stage. The veteran actors are surprisingly good under the circumstances, making the best of silly sight gags and hopeless dialogue, and for the most part preventing the play from becoming embarrassing; but while some of the audience appreciated their efforts, most sat in bewildered silence, waiting for the humor to arrive.

The set, a two dimensional cartoon land, is initially interesting, as are the video images

which present offstage action, cartoon style, on a raised screen. The novelty wears off quickly, however, and by the time we are treated with a cartoon version of Mr. Bloggs in an off-stage telephone conversation, it is clear that we are dealing with little more than a cute stage trick.

TWP specializes in theatre with a message, productions with a social conscience that address a significant current or historical issue; but good intentions are no substitute for good drama, and as drama, *When the Wind Blows* is a resounding failure.

Tarragon Theatre's *'night, Mother* is similarly unsuccessful, although in this case the script is only partially to blame. American playwright Marsha Norman's drama is a study of the relationship between a suicidal woman and her elderly mother, and documents the mother's futile effort to persuade her child not to end her life.

To begin with, the play's premise is a little hard to accept. Armed with a final list of mundane household tasks, Jessie Cates, a young, intelligent, but depressed woman spends the last 90 minutes of her life trying to prepare her mother for her imminent suicide. She organizes her mother's shopping, cleans out the fridge, drinks cocoa, then outlines in detail the various reasons for her act before calmly stepping into the bedroom and blowing her brains out. Meanwhile, her mother Thelma tries everything she can think of to persuade Jessie to change her mind, but during the course of their discussion (and this is perhaps the most difficult thing for the audience to believe) she herself becomes at least partly convinced that her daughter is right.

The change in Thelma's character occurs perhaps a little too quickly to be credible, but Norman compounds the problem by giving her a string of inexplicable reactions to her daughter's distress. In the early going she clowns her way through some rather tiresome stock comedy, and this image of Mrs. Cates as the doddering old woman is never wholly dispelled as the play continues. The play's more dramatic moments are replete with trite similes and some rather rudimentary philosophical observations; never are we given the impression that any fresh insights have been gained from the repetition of what has become a common dramatic situation. Combine all of this with a *pot pourri* of obtrusive and contrived imagery, and one wonders if the Pulitzer Prize

Doris Petrie and Nancy Beatty (l) star in Marsha Norman's smashed Broadway hit *'night, Mother*.

people weren't all suffering from swine flu when they chose this play for their Drama Award in 1983.

Still, with a better cast it is not inconceivable that some of this could work, but Nancy Beatty (Jessie) is so flat, and Doris Petrie (Thelma) so overstated that the good moments are lost in a nightmare of poor timing, empty silences, and cheap laughs. Scenes demanding speedy exchanges are executed in slow motion, while moments of conflict or emotion are single-handedly destroyed by Beatty's awkward intonation or emotionless monotone. Beatty appears to have no involvement whatsoever with her character, her lines disgorged like a high school memory work project. By the time the set's kitchen clock has ticked off 30 minutes it is difficult to stifle the urge to walk on stage

and shoot herself.

In an effort to compensate, perhaps, Petrie plays much of her part for laughs, transforming what should be guilty snickers into cheap guffaws, and swallowing important dramatic exchanges in the process. While the audience doubtless appreciated a relief from stillborn melodrama, Petrie came across as a ham for much of the performance.

The set itself is an elaborately realistic presentation of a kitchen and living room, and though it offered plenty of room for natural movement, Beatty and Petrie spent most of the time looking awkward, uncomfortable, or lost.

In the end, the audience must turn to the kitchen clock for release; with all this nonsense going on one can only mark the seconds until this 90-minute ordeal is over.