

In Waterbooks, Powning turns words into art

Artist gives altered books a new existence

By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter

PETER POWNING exhibits beautiful, potent images of books underwater.

The Waterbooks are part of a solo show, *Between the Pages*, at Studio 21, that sees the well-known New Brunswick ceramic artist working in glass, ceramics, metal and photography.

Powning is married to author Beth Powning, whose latest book is the novel, *The Sea Captain's Wife*. However, his book images and sculptures with unreadable text are rooted in an interest in stela, tablets and ancient artifacts with indecipherable symbols.

"I'm often asked if my interest in books is a reflection on the fact that my wife is a writer," he said in an email interview.

"It certainly isn't in any conscious way, though I live in a book-filled world and am an avid reader. To me, I'm simply exploring another aspect of bookishness. Their physical presence, the stuff they are made from and how they respond to experimentation. It's a kind of creative play."

Powning mixes media and invokes all the elements in the Waterbooks. There are pure photographs of the books riffling underwater. Or he matches a photograph with a wavy, thick, pale-green, glass wave beneath it.

In *1,000 Words*, a photograph of creased pages of an open dictionary connects to a lower photograph of a rock face, and the similarities are startling. The clouds in *Bookscape* and *Clouds* float up from a craggy, eroded book like a mountain. Below it is a photograph of pages as blond fibres.

These books can't be read, though sometimes letters and words are visible. They become sculptural objects. But they can't avoid containing their original purpose, even if it is lost or voided. A book is a very powerful thing. Books can contain civilizations or one individual's memory.

"These signify the memory loss of an individual, or the destruction of civilizations. They could also be about a meeting of the mind and imagination with the forces of nature."

Powning is not into analysis. In fact, he wants to engage the viewer immediately before he or she over-analyses the work.

"I am interested in creating a direct experience with my work that happens in that moment before the mind begins spinning off its web of associations, labels and word-thought.

"It's a reaction to what is seen before the labelling sets in and words like 'drowned' kick in. The books look like exotic sea life to me. With the images of the Waterbooks, I'm recording books in motion, animated by the sea. I have no sense of drowning them but of giving them a new existence."

The Waterbooks started when a friend of his wife returned a borrowed book that she'd dropped in the bath.

"It was bloated and transformed. It was very interesting as an object," says Powning, winner of the Saidye Bronfman Award in 2006.

"Books are freighted with handling taboos dating back to our earliest encounters with them, so baking them, photographing them underwater, mulching and transforming them has a frisson of wickedness about it."

He admits people respond emotionally.

"People react strongly to them, mostly in quite positive ways, although a few people are troubled by what to them seems like book abuse and want to know what books I used. I use old books I choose mainly for their paper quality and the fact that they've been abandoned. A number of the Waterbook prints have sold to libraries so I feel somewhat absolved in regard to the liberties I'm taking with the books I use."