

FEATURED ARTICLE

Blanco, The Capricious Search in Absolute White

by Maria Eugenia Roballos

When fine crafts meet, new languages and new ways of expression often emerge.

Sol Rébora, a successful Argentinean bookbinder, envisioned *Blanco* and managed to create a profound relationship between the interior contents of the book, and its cover. Betina Naab and I were in charge of the calligraphy and the compositions. The book was well received at the 2017 Codex Book Fair in San Francisco, California. *Blanco's* subtlety intrigued the audience.

For this book we chose a more experimental path, playing around with calligraphic strokes, lines, shapes and textures. We regarded the book as an object with very few rules. Pages were edited as we went and the meaning of each page slowly emerged while working on it. It is a conceptual approach, inspired by texts, art pieces, compositions and personal ideas.

We used a beautiful text by the poet, linguist, typographer and art historian Robert Bringhurst, *The Solid Form of Language* as a starting point for our book. He maintains that, "Writing is the solid form of language, a precipitate. Speech comes out of our mouths, our hands, in something like a liquid form and then evaporates at once. What else are those words that we drop like pebbles in that ocean if not condensing droplets of evaporated speech, recycled bits of the ocean of meaning itself? In solid as in liquid form, the intersecting meanings may reinforce each other or rub each other out."

This text worked perfectly with an idea we discussed for some time. "The solid form of language" is the materialization of language and of how the words we speak transform into writing. So we decided to make this process visible, to transform it into a book.

We decided to work only with minimum contrast and to search for different shades of white through different types of media, like gouache, with a more opaque finish, and acrylic, which we used to create glossy surfaces. The type of paper was also relevant and invited us to experiment with transparencies, using layers of Japanese tissue paper over thick cotton sheets with writing.

First we interpreted relevant passages of Bringhurst's text using both sides of large sheets of paper. We laid out different compositions to develop the idea. Then the paper was cut into smaller sheets to make the sections of the book.

The result was a complete surprise. The whole layout changed! New spaces, rearranged arbitrarily, appeared before us. We shuffled again and played some more. New scenarios emerged and we kept on creating. More letters were added. A whole side of the page was covered with a thin layer of acrylic to add dimension. Shapes and strokes were connected with a delicate white thread. Patterns were stitched on the surface and words were written softly with a 9H pencil, to follow the rule of keeping everything white. Once more, a new shuffle of pages began until we heard the melody we imagined.

From the first moment we hold an artist book in our hands, a journey begins. There are moments when we keep turning the pages softly and go from one spread to another, breathing slowly. But sometimes the uncertainty devours us; these are instants where the sewing of the book turns into a sort of passage where incomprehensible gestures escape and where we can't hold back our curiosity to explore, to follow them. There are also moments of clarity, which make us sit

down comfortably again and resume our journey, more calmly now. This journey started with the covers of the book with a sort of treasure hunt, with hidden messages in a delicate leather binding crossed with soft cut lines connecting all three pieces.

Blanco can't be seen in a glance, it has to be discovered. White on white, subtle details, small collage additions, soft layers of white. Light, an indispensable ally, is necessary to appreciate it. It has to be moved, turned, brought close, and be looked at from afar. It has to be touched and read with one's fingers. It has to be given time and, when finished, it must be looked at again and again. Each time it is viewed, something new appears.

Blanco is the result of three artists and our collaboration together. The book can surely be seen, touched and admired. But the process in which the three of us engaged during the whole of last year achieved a result far greater than the book itself. That is what changed us and added new dimensions to our craft.

Maria Eugenia Roballos studied calligraphy for five years in Italy, at the Associazione Calligrafica Italiana with Anna Ronchi, Giovanni De Faccio, James Clough, Monica Dengo, Brody Neuenschwander, Thomas Ingmire, Brenda Berman, and Annet Stirling. During the past 20 years she has had the opportunity to teach many workshops at ACI.

Maria has worked with Betina Naab at their studio in Buenos Aires for more than 13 years. Betina trained at Roehampton University in London. Both earned degrees in graphic design from the University of Buenos Aires. "We prefer pure letter forms, but enjoy the potential for expression with counter shapes. We also appreciate the tiny details that develop with the use of a particular tool or movement. Sometimes this smallest gesture is responsible for the overall success of a piece."



To see the complete image gallery click [here](#).