

WHO: Buzz Spector, Chair of Painting in the School of Art and Design, U of I

RECOMMENDATION: Names & Poems by Helen Mirra

"My most exotic recent perusal is Helen Mirra's Names & Poems. This volume of exquisitely brief poems actually started as a gallery project. She placed a typewriter on a table near the entrance to an exhibit of her work with a sign inviting visitors to type their names and addresses on blank postcards. Whoever filled out one side of a postcard would later receive it in the mail with a small poem, written by Mirra, on the other side. The book documents the project, with names on the left-hand pages, the poems on the right. Mirra's poetic method is simple, too. Her two or three word texts reference the spelling and pronunciation of the corresponding names. Sometimes the results are near anagrams, as in 'Klindt Houlberg' becoming 'Hint: Iceberg' or 'Walter Andersons' turned into 'Altered Wanderings,' but more often the poems wander far away from the sounds of the names that inspired them. 'Dominic John Molon' is transmogrified into 'Momentarily Doubting Joy,' while 'Matthew Goulish / Lyn Hixson' become 'More Gardens / Less Houses.' "Does it help to know who these people are? Sure, but the names of strangers far outnumber the several well-known Chicago artists, critics and curators whose names appear in the book. The consistent inventiveness of Mirra's transformations is all the more marvelous when you consider her roll call amounts to 192 people. Think about Shakespeare's question, 'What's in a name?' According to Mirra: Poetry."

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