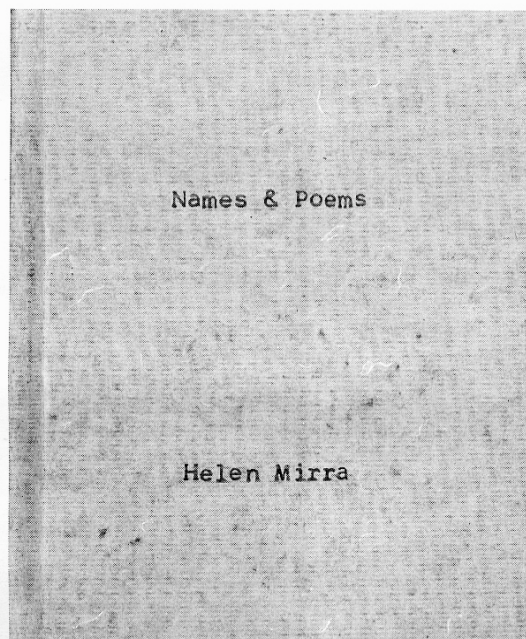


ONBOOKS

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Names and Poems

by Helen Mirra
WhiteWalls, Inc., Chicago, 1999
hardcover, 386 pages, \$10.00

Alow

by Helen Mirra
Herkimer Editions, Gasser &
Grunert Gallery, New York, 1999
hardcover, 63 pages, \$5.00
reviewed by Karl Erickson

Helen Mirra's work has always beguiled me. Her nautical themes, slightly anachronistic Nantucket stoicism, and quiet romanticism evidence a yearning for the personal dramatics of a bygone time. However, these same elements kept the work taciturn and, if not unfriendly, then at least remote. Like a seaman who has spent too much time at sea, the work has a richness dulled by restraint. Two recent books by Mirra, *Names & Poems* and *Alow*, add a more emotional element to her oeuvre. Through them she seems to reach

out a bit more in an attempt to become more personable.

Names & Poems is a companion piece to Mirra's show at the Chicago Project Room that took place in early 1999. Instead of a guest book, Mirra provided a typewriter and blank blue cards near the front door with these instructions: "If you type your name and address on one side of a postcard I will write a small poem for you on the other side and mail it to you." At the exhibition, I did so. Months later, I received my poem—"Kahn Erforscher."

I felt, in some way, like I had been cheated. It seemed as if the poem had been rattled off, using simple phonetics to quickly carry out a project in which Mirra seemed to have lost interest. Plus, I couldn't figure out what it meant. But then, more and more folks I knew received their poems, all equally short and phonetically matched. Still, while pleased that I, along with so many others, had

received a card, I didn't think too much of it.

Recently, I received a copy of the collection *Names & Poems* and realized the true beauty of Mirra's project. I don't know how many names are in the book, but it is dense with poems. The book is heavy with the smell of the printing press, and like most of Mirra's work, seems warmed by the human hand. Reading through *Names & Poems* I became aware that my initial reaction to my poem was incorrect. Mirra did a wonderful service for everyone for whom she wrote a poem. She makes us into a small community.

Assembled in India, the book is like a letter from a traveler far away from home. Though I doubt that Mirra would recognize the face of everyone for whom she wrote a poem, she now has a memory of us, and we of her. The poems (just a few examples: "Heather Hubbs: Hiding Here," "Al Ravitz: Awe Rapture," "Nancy

Ford: Nearer Far") resonate with intimacy. Mirra forges a connection that begins with the common experience of the art and the exhibition, then creates a unique encounter for each individual.

Alow starts from the other direction, taking familiar, though slightly archaic, texts and personalizing them. Herman Melville's *Mardi*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, and Buster Keaton's *The Navigator* are each recoded and altered by Mirra's own private interpretation. The artist's *Mardi* reads as a poetic version of the original story; select words and phrases from the original text are pulled out and recombined. Chapter 20 became "when the fore-yard swung around, over board." In response to *Potemkin*'s first few moments, Mirra creates an extended list-poem of the movements of sailors along a ship. Strangely hypnotic and foreign, the action becomes destabilized and obscure, an attempt to itemize activities too numerous to count. *The Navigator* is likewise a description of the actions in the film, embracing Keaton's deadpan delivery and just telling it like it is. Whereas Keaton's stone face results in laughs, Mirra's application imbues the text with a sense of melancholy and yearning, describing a couple's missed attempts at finding one another and a too-close brush with cannibals.

These two books make me feel like Mirra is being more generous toward her audience. *Names & Poems* is beautiful as an act of remembrance. *Alow* is an attempt at understanding the presented texts through the artist's eyes. Both are acts of tenderness, allowing us to believe we know Mirra better.

Karl Erickson, "Khan Erforscher," is a boat explorer.

