

The new book on art

Jen Mazza's 'Les Mots' is her first Manhattan solo show

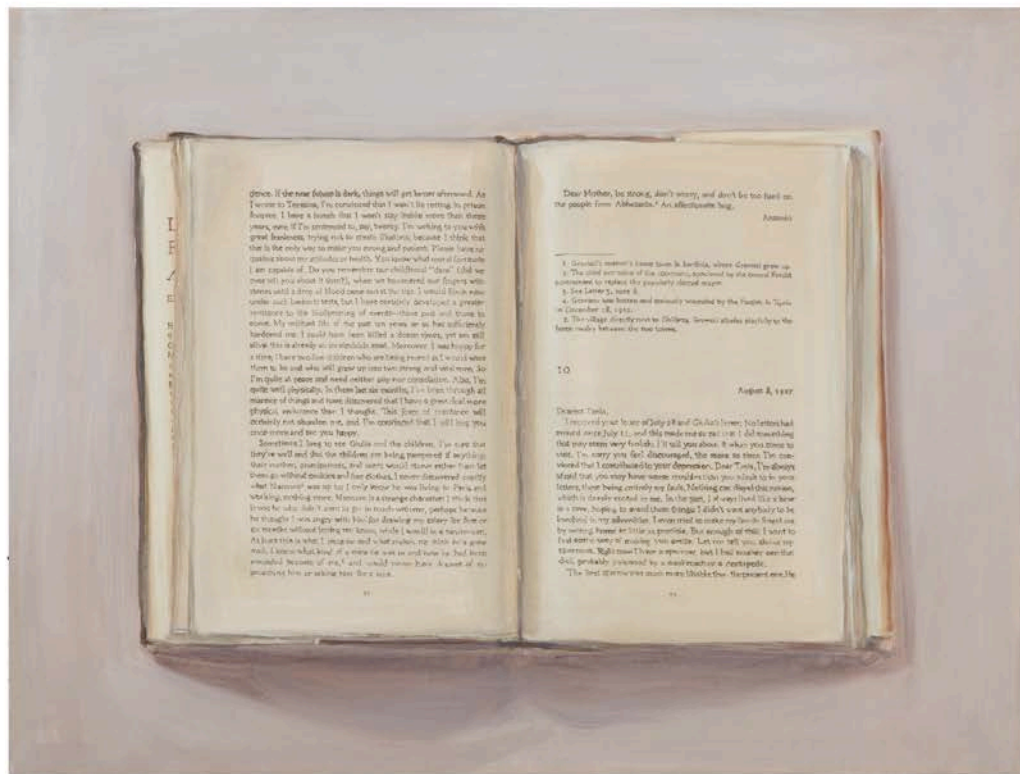
If you can remember the 1990s, when adding machine gears and wooden cable spools and all sorts of other detritus abandoned in the crumbling industrial centers of American cities began to show up as art in galleries and museums, you may find the sudden appearance of recognizable books in contemporary art faintly ominous.

Williamsburg artist Tom Broadbent showed a series of watercolors at Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark last spring featuring books and birds, like an absolutely convincing chickadee pecking letters from the page as if they were tiny insects. Any number of sculptors have made fake books or used real ones as found objects, folding and cutting the pages, turning them into elaborate origami.

Through Oct. 14, the Stephan Stoyanov Gallery in Manhattan will show the latest paintings of Jen Mazza, who for years was part of Newark's downtown arts community after a stint as artist-in-residence at the Newark Museum. Mazza is a meticulous and atmospheric realist, and for her first Manhattan solo show, "Les Mots (The Words)," she's painting books, too. Mostly French books.

"I started noticing the preponderance of books in art objects around the same time I started this new series," says Mazza, who moved to downtown Manhattan almost a year ago. "I don't know if that was just because I was interested in them as a kind of autobiographical record, or if there

CN ART
Dan Bischoff
nj.com/art



Jen Mazza turns her attention to books for her exhibition "Les Mots (The Words)," such as the oil paintings "Dear Tania (a letter from Gramsci)" above, and "Courier Sud," below.

really was a sudden surge. "Whatever, I think we all recognize that books have the potential right now to become obsolete," she continues.

"And at the same time I've noticed a tendency for artists to go back to older forms and traditions, but not for nostalgia, for a kind of discipline. ... I got interested in French philosophers who wrote in imitation literary styles, you know, like writing a philosophical treatise in the form of a science-fiction novel, that sort of thing. It

made me conscious of the way styles and genres are really a set of rules, rules you accept when you decide to work within them."

Mazza, who paints in oils on an intimate scale that renders her books at pretty much their exact size in life, usually works in series. She's done pictures of hands, of fruit speckling bed linens, and of bunches of flowers; all her subjects have some art historical resonances, and they often suggest miniature details from larger works. Treating a book as a still-life, however, is almost like a diary entry for her: It's less art history than personal history, and even when the texts are themselves half a century old or older, the paintings are oddly contemporary.

"I remember where I was and what I was doing at the time whenever I look at a book I've read," she says. The wear and tear on Mazza's covers suggest the time you take to read a book, which is both a discreet measure and a reminder of what that time was like. "I think this subject really started to make sense after I'd read Proust," Mazza says.

books placed against a plain white background, like G.B. Shaw's "Man and Superman" or Andre Gide's "Narcisse," their simple covers rendered with precise detail, down to sun-faded edges and dog-eared covers. Others boast illustrated bindings, like "Hiroshima, Mon Amour"; still others are shown opened to pages of text or to printed illustrations.

Some images are visually arresting, like "is an extension of the eye" (2012). It shows a book open flat with an illustration of a human eye split by the central fold between two pages, making the eye ever so slightly off register. It brings to mind the scissors tearing through the eyeball in Salvador Dali's animation sequence for Hitchcock's "Spellbound"—and 18th-century neoclassical anatomy illustrations, too.

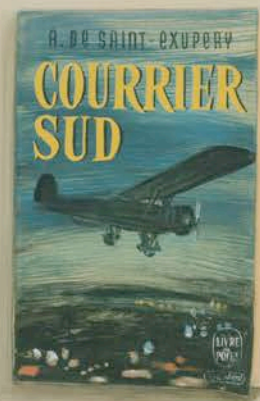
The most beguiling picture here is

"Lover," a painting of a paperback novel whose cover illustration shows a nude woman on a chaise with a fully clothed man towering behind her—only, we can't see his face, or the full title of the book, because the top right-hand corner of the book flap has been torn off. The word "Lover" on the inside title page is revealed by the rip, but whether it's Lady Chatterley's or someone else's, we can only guess.

An accident—except of course nothing is in a painting. That's one of those rules of the art that give it shape, to Mazza's way of thinking.

Mazza plays with disjointed hints at narrative all the time, feinting at stories and just skittering away from resolution. It's a way of making the personal universal—and nothing's more French than that.

Dan Bischoff: dbischoff@starledger.com



Jen Mazza:
Les Mots (The Words)
Where: Stephan Stoyanov Gallery, 29 Orchard St., New York
When: Through Oct. 14. Open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday, noon to 6 p.m. Sunday
How much: Free. For more information, call (212) 343-4240 or