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# AT THE QUEENS MUSEUM, JULY 19 - SEPT 27

## ROBERT SEYDEL: THE EYE IN MATTER

### EXPLORING THE ALCHEMICAL UNIVERSE OF THE ARTIST-POET ROBERT SEYDEL

“**Robert Seydel: The Eye in Matter**” features a definitive selection of over one hundred collages, drawings and illuminated writings from the fictional archive of artist-poet Robert Seydel’s alter ego Ruth Greisman.

Curated by Peter Gizzi, Richard Kraft and Lisa Pearson, the exhibition premiered at Smith College in Fall 2014, organized by the Mortimer Rare Book Room. The Queens Museum will feature a substantially larger selection of framed works, as well as focus on Ruth’s “journal pages” and excerpts from Seydel’s “Knot-books.” There will also be special series of intertwined events at the museum (listings on the last page).

#### CURATORS’ STATEMENT

The art of **ROBERT SEYDEL (1960-2011)** is a rare hybrid species of the visual and literary that dissolves boundaries between the lyrical and the narrative and the acts of reading and looking. In a body of work marked by an unrelenting sense of play, Seydel collapses the historical past with the notated, emotional present and mingles actual personages with fictional characters. Much of his work is made under the auspices of various personas in place of the singular first person perspective. His is a multiplicitious “I”—the self fractured and expanded into many, the lines between them quivering and permeable.

Beginning in 2000, Seydel created a series of works using the alter ego Ruth Greisman who was inspired by his aunt of the same name. “Robert Seydel: The Eye in Matter” features a definitive selection from this fictional archive. Along with a selection of Ruth’s “journal pages” (now collected in *A Picture Is Always a Book: Further Writings from Book of Ruth*, Siglio 2014) and almost one hundred collages (some published in *Book of Ruth*, Siglio, 2011, and many previously unpublished and unexhibited), this exhibition features Seydel’s notebooks (Knot-books), open to pages that reveal glimpses of the process of making this visionary body of work.

These notebooks are the crucible of his expansive, alchemical imagination and eclectic body of knowledge. An exceedingly solitary man who spent untold hours each day reading and studying, writing and making art, Seydel used the notebooks not simply as a diary or record but as a means of selecting, arranging and composing. Many of Ruth’s journal writings are first drafted there—merging daily life and dreams as Seydel traces the leaps of her acrobatic consciousness from the banal to the hallucinatory, the melancholic to the ecstatic.

In Ruth’s collages, Seydel applied his combinatorial magic to debris from the street, forgotten photographs and faded scraps of paper, transforming earthly detritus into illuminated arrangements whose meanings shape-shift as each collage is “read.” In all of Ruth’s works, Seydel explores the implacability of the artistic impulse, while recording loss, desire and the tenuous but persistent creation of self. “The Eye in Matter” invites the viewer into a world made from the daily, devotional practice of making art, into a world in which the work of art is life itself. As Ruth writes: “I’ll invent who I am, against what is. My time and name: a Queens of the mind.”

#### PRAISE FOR ROBERT SEYDEL’S BOOK OF RUTH and A PICTURE IS ALWAYS A BOOK

**NEW YORKER:** Burrowing into the pop-detritus archive somewhere between Ray Johnson’s mail art and Tom Phillips’s *Humument* project, Seydel’s *Book of Ruth* describes an allusive fantasy about his aunt and alter ego Ruth Greisman, her brother Saul, and their escapades with Joseph Cornell.

**MORE →**

## PRAISE FOR ROBERT SEYDEL'S BOOK OF RUTH and A PICTURE IS ALWAYS A BOOK, cont.

**BROOKLYN RAIL:** It is as though Seydel has submerged himself into Ruth to a point of near indiscernibility in his crossing of visual art and poetry, male and female, past and present. . . And it is this near total seamlessness that blurs the bounds between author and subject, real and unreal, primary and secondary roles, master and mastered.

**VICE (Blake Butler):** Descriptions of dreams here seem more like reality and the reality more like dreams, and together the effect is like an enchanted closet, an eye into a set of worlds somewhat akin to the innate privacy and incubating perspectives of Henry Darger and Emily Dickinson.

**BOOKFORUM:** The intermingling of visual art and poetry, and Seydel's way of inhabiting Ruth's and Joseph's personalities, produces a multi-layered, dizzying effect. "All language is finally collage," he writes. Referring to Abbé Henri Breuil, a French anthropologist quoted in *A Picture Is Always a Book*, Seydel notes, "He believed in fact that art began there IN DESIRE FOR DISGUISE, as I do, now, today." Seydel submerged himself in his disguises to such an extent that, at times, author and subject become nearly indiscernible.

## ABOUT THE ACCOMPANYING PUBLICATION

**A PICTURE IS ALWAYS A BOOK: Further Writings from Book of Ruth by Robert Seydel** collects over seventy of Ruth's "journal pages." These are luminescent writings—typed up on paper purloined from old photo albums, adorned with drawings in colored pencils, oil pens, white-out and ink stamps—that penetrate Ruth's consciousness with visceral honesty and poetic precision. As Ruth, Seydel explores the boundaries between the salvaged and the lost, the unknown and the unknowable, the art that is made and art that is found. With the acrobatics of her emblem the hare, Seydel's Ruth makes leaps from the banalities of her daily life into an imagination that embraces the shape-shifting of meaning, the occult in letters, and the magical invocations of animals—domestic and hallucinatory. The distance between the ecstatic and melancholic in Ruth's world is "infra-thin." *Edited by Lisa Pearson with an interview by Savina Velkova.*

\$36 HB 6 x 8.5 112 pages All color illustrations Co-published by Siglio and Smith College Libraries. ISBN: 978-1-938221-06-4.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

A prolific artist and writer, Robert Seydel (1960-2011) created a multi-layered, highly original body of work. Seydel's ongoing and interrelated series incorporated collage, drawing, photography, narrative and lyric writing, often using various personas and fictional constructs. In 2000, Seydel began a vast series of works using the alter ego Ruth Greisman, including the "journal pages" collected in *A Picture Is Always a Book: Further Writings from Book of Ruth* (Siglio and Smith College Library, 2014) and the works Seydel himself selected for *Book of Ruth* (Siglio, 2011). Other Seydel alter egos and invented personas include S., author of the *Songs of S.* (Siglio and Ugly Ducking Presse, 2014), Saul Greisman ("scholar of sewage"), Eckstein-Sousa ("sometimes lecturer and a kind of [failed] poet with Proustian leanings"), and R. Welch (a professor developing a theory of "the biochemical construction of Charismatic figures"), among others.

Trained as a photographer (MFA, Rhode Island School of Design, 1990) with an academic background in literature (BFA, New York University in Photography and English, 1984), Seydel began his pursuit of a very hybrid species of art and literature soon after graduate school. "A Short History of Portraiture," an early and important series (for which he received a fellowship from the NEA), was comprised of almost two hundred Polaroid transfer montages which Seydel described not only as an exploration of the "head" as a dense and multi-valent emblem but also as its own form of literature. This interest in portraiture persisted and is readily evident in the many collages (often made by Ruth) in which the heads and faces of old photographs are altered and transformed. Seydel made a parallel and hidden body of portraiture work in his purposeful act of collection: the reverse side of many other collages are old photographic portraits left untouched.

The exhibition "Robert Seydel: The Eye in Matter" is Seydel's first solo show since he passed away in 2011. In 2007, poet Peter Gizzi curated Seydel's only previous solo exhibition, at the CUE Art Foundation, which included Ruth works and other series including *Siselnamés (Mixed Melody)*, *Hommages* and *Droon Works*.

**MORE →**

## ABOUT THE ARTIST, cont.

In addition to his work as an artist and writer, Seydel was also an curator, editor and teacher. He curated more than a dozen exhibitions at various venues including the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University where he served as Director of Exhibitions for a number of years, and he taught at Hampshire College in Massachusetts for over a decade.

## EVENTS AT THE QUEENS MUSEUM

**EXHIBITION OPENING: Sunday, July 19, 2 - 4 p.m.**

**with readings of Seydel's writings by poets Peter Gizzi and Mónica de la Torre at 3 p.m.**

*Open to the public and free.*

## ROW / SEW: 3 Sundays for Robert Seydel

A series of gatherings of artists and writers to address, to read, to perform, to pay homage to the life and work of Robert Seydel, his alter ego Ruth Greisman, and her friends Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, et al. Organized by Emmy Catedral with Nathaniel Otting in conjunction with Siglio and Ugly Duckling Presse.

*All events start at 3 p.m. and open to the public and a donation is suggested for museum entry.*

## JULY 26

### Art a Grammar, Grammar a House: A Gathering (or, Artist-Writers: A Weaving)

An afternoon of short performances & shorter lectures by "artist-writers" (as in a page from Seydel's Knot-books) delivered from the place where Stein's "Arthur: A Grammar" meets Seydel's "Grammar a house / or window in a house." Happenings by Cecilia Vicuña, Maria Damon, and Emmalea Russo; gatherings by Rachel Valinsky & Lanny Jordan Jackson and Zanna Gilbert; and opening microreadings by Anna Gurton-Wachter & Alan Gilbert.

## AUGUST 13

### Plaid Duchamp Record in Magenta

*A picture always wants to be something else — Robert Seydel  
dream sacred plaid Duchamp record in magenta moleskin — Paolo Javier*

A program of photographs, poetry and 8mm short films inspired by Joseph Cornell who figures large in the universe of Seydel's Ruth. Flushing-based poet and filmmaker Stephanie Gray and former Queens Poet Laureate Paolo Javier will read and perform their collaborative film narration inspired by Joseph Cornell's short films. Preceding Gray and Javier will be Harry Roseman, who captured Cornell and the details of his house in photographs. Roseman will tell a story of Cornell's Utopia Parkway house and working closely with the artist.

## SEPTEMBER 27

### "Quail rise": "R's Queens" Reprised

*My name & time: a Queens of the mind.  
There's an occult meaning in initials.*

"Read in splendour" between these two lines from Robert Seydel's *Book of Ruth* (Siglio, 2011). The eponymous Ruth Greisman writes: *JC, MD, will never understand our distance from life—they're pretenders in that.* This restaging of a scene from last year's Eterniday event has new players, including Ross Simonini and TK. Proceeding from the "occult meaning in initials," the afternoon includes Songs of S's with readings by Stefani Barber, Sarah Wang, Simone Kearney and TK.

**Queens Museum** is located in the New York City Building at the Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens, NY 11368. Open Wed.- Sun., 12-6 p.m. All events are open to the public. Suggested admission: General \$8 / Students \$4. Subway: 7 to Mets-Willets Point (with a walk through the park—see the museum website for directions). T: (718) 592-9700.

**END**

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