

In these works, Ian Carr-Harris is equating *Let's Find Out...* with the *Ten Commandments*, with *Lolita*. They are all equally important: the child's reading primer, the religious tenets, the postmodern fiction. They are all equally as complex as all language. Carr-Harris's works perform in the way that Michel Foucault notes of Gustav Flaubert's *The Temptation*:

"...it unites in a single "volume" a series of linguistic elements that derive from existing books and that are... the repetition of things said in the past. The library is opened, catalogued, sectioned, repeated, and rearranged in a new space; and this "volume" ... is both the thickness of a book that develops according to the necessarily linear thread of its text and a procession of marionettes that, in deploying its boxed visions, also opens a domain in depth."

The works reflect not just the content of the books they reference, but they take on new meanings about language and knowledge in general. These works seem to say, in a deadpan manner, "Look, it's simple." Ian Carr-Harris contrasts the naïve sense of wonder and discovery in language (like the children's book series "I can read it all by myself!") with the underlying sense that this territory can never truly be comprehended or known. Language flows upstream in a universe where the First Law of Thermodynamics prevails, the idea that all matter tends toward disorder. All language is the effort to create order out of a sea of noise and chaos. And the "library" is so vast that certainty of knowledge becomes impossible.

And this, from Carr-Harris, a former librarian. But the works are not overwhelming in themselves. They are simple and direct, and playful. The artist is having fun with language all the same, regardless of what can be known, and creating new texts — a new volume — through his rearrangements. His act of copying, or tracing, as he prefers to call it, comprises his art practice — just as a primary student practices those cursive letters with loops and curves (even the tricky Q) over again in a ruled notebook. If you like language, it's fun just to practice. I wonder if I can get my hands on a new primary printer.

Dana Samuel, 2006

Ian Carr-Harris May 05

Ian Carr-Harris is a Toronto based artist whose work has been exhibited nationally and internationally since 1971, including the Venice Biennale (1984), Documenta, Kassel, Germany (1987), the Sydney Biennale, Sydney, Australia (1990), and The Power Plant (2002). He is represented by the Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto as well as Program Gallery in London, UK, and teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto. His publication history of reviews, articles and catalogue essays is extensive, and he is currently Toronto correspondent for the London (UK) magazine Contemporary. He was a founding Board member of A Space and of The Power Plant, and has served on the Board of the Art Gallery of Ontario, He is currently on the Board of the web-based Centre for Canadian Contemporary Art.

Images courtesy of Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

The leftside images are from the series:

*Je me renseigne sur ce qui est gros, grand ou petit, par Martha et Charles Shapp. Illustré par Vana Earle. Adapté en français par André Saint-Pierre. Montréal, Grolier Limiteé, 1965.* (2002)

materials: fabricated book with backlit images, metal wire.

dimensions: each unit (of 20) approx. 50 cm high, x 60 cm wide x 8 cm deep.

The rightside images:

*Molly (pop-up version)*, (detail and installation)

painted wood, paper. 69cm x 53cm x 6cm, 2005

This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Dana Samuel who has been chosen by the artist because of her particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about

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the Stride Gallery

# PRIMERS

## Ian Carr-Harris

Exhibition: February 17 - March 18, 2006

Reception: Friday, February 17 at 8 PM

First Thursday: March 2, open till 7 PM

## Primers

Describe:

*La sécurité* (Je me renseigne...)

*Annabel* (Glimpses)

*Molly* (Glimpses)

*10 Commandments* (Verb series)

Let's find out about *Primers*

At the start of every year in grade school, (perhaps like others of my generation who grew up in Ontario, anyway), myself and my fellow students and I were faithfully issued a single, fat, eraserless lead pencil with red coating on which was inscribed the words "PRIMARY PRINTER." I loved receiving the red coloured pencil at the start of the year (my fetish for office supplies starts early) and I cherished it all year, not chewing it like the other children, or losing it, carelessly, but protecting it diligently in my cloth pencil case. In fact, the Primary Printer only showed up in the early grades, along with the hard-backed box of eight thick crayons and a ruled notebook with a pink cover (which, in my case, stated "Hamilton Board of Education" "The Board of Education for the City of Hamilton"). I seem to remember that by grade 4 and 5, students were to have moved on to the more slender style of pencil, having gained stronger motor skills, bigger hands and better writing abilities. Because I took care of my Primary Printers, I had them well into middle school. Actually, I think my mother took me to a teachers' supply store at some point, where I bought scores of the forbidden pencils that the grade school authorities withheld after grade 3. The primary printer was meant to be a first step, to prime students for progressively complex written exercises in later years, but I liked the soft lead and the brightly coloured coating, and didn't understand why I shouldn't keep using it — despite the fact that my language skills had progressed well beyond the fat, red pencil.



Ian Carr-Harris's exhibition *Primers* shares some of that desire to hang onto the aesthetically simple and beautiful first objects we might associate with learning and language, problematic as this territory has proven itself. Carr-Harris uses children's books, a blackboard motif (both of which also occur in his past works) and the childhood favourite, the pop-up book, to explore language, learning and literature in subtle yet playful ways.

*Je me renseigne...* are illuminated books following from Carr-Harris's earlier illuminated bookworks using primarily encyclopedias. This work takes the educational children's book as

its starting point, using a series published in English in the 1960s and 70s called *Let's Find Out...* by Martha and Charles Shapp. In each volume, the authors explore such topics as animals, the seasons, relative sizes, holidays, and more, alongside whimsical illustrations. At a thrift store in Montreal, Carr-Harris stumbled on used copies of a



French translation of this same series that was published in Canada. Carr-Harris has titled his series after the French translation of the English series title, *Je me renseigne...*. His bookwork series' *La sécurité* and *Ce Qui est Gros Grand ou Petit* are taken from the volumes *Let's find out about safety!* (*Je me renseigne sur la sécurité*) and *Let's Find out What's Big and Little* (*Je me renseigne sur ce qui est gros, grand ou petit*). Carr-Harris has reproduced each of the 21 page spreads in the 42 page books, carefully cutting out and literally highlighting various characters and scenes throughout the book. As with his other illuminated books, he further emphasizes the division between words and pictures by shaping in aluminum a keyword from the page spread and placing it above the book itself.

For the past several years, Ian Carr-Harris has experimented with making pop-up books. (He has also taught this skill to his foundation year students at the Ontario College of Art & Design, to much delight). Whereas my pop-up books as a child involved Snoopy, Carr-Harris's characters and texts are more troubled. *Annabel* is a pop-up tableau which features one spread from Nabokov's *Lolita*, the end of Chapter 3 and start of Chapter 4, where Humbert Humbert shifts from remembering Annabel Leigh to ruminating on why he has a taste for young girls (nymphets) in general and Lolita specifically, before plunging back into memories of Annabel.

In Carr-Harris's *Molly*, the artist takes a classic text, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and creates a scenario for his chosen page spread. In *Molly*, much like in his past work of the same title using chalkboard and oil stick, Carr-Harris has excerpted from Chapter 18 of Joyce's work which sees Molly Bloom recalling memories and experiences in a stream-of-conscious fashion. Carr-Harris's pop-up displays eyeglasses which don't magnify but reduce the size of the text, near-sightedly.

Finally, in this exhibition, there are further works in his *Verb* series, verbs taken from *The Ten Commandments*. These works consist of a small chalkboard tablet with rounded corners, on which the artist has inscribed, in cursive letters and using oil stick, the action word and its initial letter, as if to say, "K is for Kill," and "C is for Commit." Removed from their original context, they portray a complex morality — especially when viewed alongside *Annabel*.