

When I published a book last year about the American artist “Grandma” Prisbrey (1896-1988), I was repeatedly asked at presentations how, as a visual artist, I had come about translating another artist’s (Tressa Prisbrey) autobiographical work into German and how I’d ended up turning it into a book. I explained that I felt that’s what I always did in my artistic work: translate. I was surprised that the book was viewed as something else: a meta-level or a completely different realm altogether. Something to be classified more in terms of cultural history than art.

The images in this exhibition were shot at two different locations, both of which are related to the book and both of which frame its genesis, so to speak. I photographed one series at the Los Angeles Public Library, where I first encountered Mrs. Prisbrey’s work. In the winter of 2019, the library had displayed an assortment of delicate pencil collages dating from between the late 1950s and the late 1970s. Some of the pencils had been used, some had names, logos or slogans printed on them, and some were adorned with beads that were attached to the end of the pencils where the eraser would have ordinarily been. I found these collages incredibly beautiful, but also quite eloquent when viewed as a form of commentary on the material culture of their time. Pencils have fascinated me for many years. They are my favourite working material and I feel they can also serve as objects onto which we project our perceptions and dreams. I took a few photos of the arrangements with my phone’s camera to serve as visual notes.

I shot the second series last autumn, a short time before my book launch, at the site of Bottle Village, Tressa Prisbrey’s monumental architectural work that forms the focal point of her story. The village is located in Simi Valley, a town about 60 km north of downtown Los Angeles. Amongst other things, Simi Valley is known for space technology, as the film location of the Poltergeist movie, Ronald Reagan’s burial place, and an area in the greater Los Angeles region where the most cops live. It was the first time I’d ever been there; and Bottle Village felt smaller and more desolate than I’d envisioned it to be, based on others’ photographs and accounts of the place. I walked through the village taking photos of details with my smartphone. A few wider-angle shots show the bad state the village is in. It was badly damaged in 1994 by the Northridge earthquake and hasn’t been rebuilt since. Nevertheless, the place has a special aura. It’s hard to describe.

Tressa Prisbrey was a grandmaster of appropriation, of repurposing objects, shifting contexts, of constructing and reconstructing buildings, entities and histories. I’ve thought about what she would have called what I’m doing and exhibiting here, and I think she would have said: Call it ‘pictures’.

Kathi Hofer, 2022