



Beauty contest

Each year *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books* are honoured in a state-sponsored competition. Patrick Burgoyne takes a look through this year's list of titles

Following an initial suggestion by the great Swiss typographer and book designer Jan Tschichold, since 1943 an annual competition has showcased the Most Beautiful Swiss Books of the year. Run since 1999 by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, the mission of the juried contest is to highlight excellence in the fields of book design and production, thereby drawing attention to the work of Swiss designers, publishers and printers.

The selection is displayed in an exhibition and catalogue which, in itself, has traditionally been an opportunity to push the boundaries of print production techniques.

Such an enlightened level of state support for the publishing world may seem unimaginable to those of us in the UK, especially when the nature of the books selected is taken into account. Because this is no parade of blockbusters and bestsellers. There are no lavish, glossy coffee table tomes or publishing cash cows here. The 27 titles



Left: From Lange Liste 79-97, Christian Lange's family history using the lists of household expenditure compiled by his mother as its source. Printing: OsirisDruck; Druckwerkstatt Alligator. Publisher: Reederei Verlag

chosen by a five-member panel from 393 submissions this year sit toward the 'art book' end of the spectrum – as in 'work of art' rather than Phaidon-style lavish monograph. In fact, the title 'Most Beautiful Swiss Books' is itself something of a misnomer – these are by and large challenging, ascetic works rather than publications of conventional beauty.

Take, for example, Christian Lange's *Lange List 79-97*, which reproduces the lists drawn up by his mother to monitor family spending as

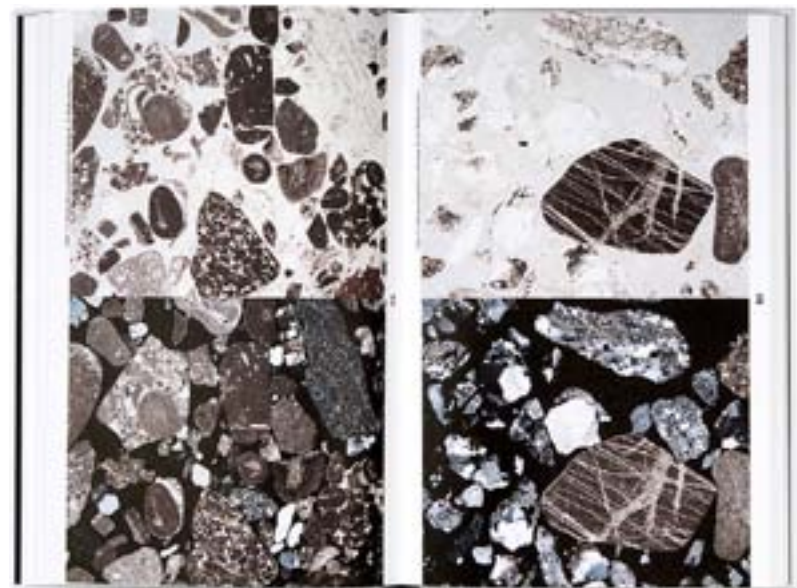
THIS IS NO PARADE OF BLOCKBUSTERS AND BESTSELLERS. NO COFFEE TABLE TOMES HERE

Lange grew up in the old GDR in the years 1979 to 1997. "The book reflects the everyday life of my family based on precise handwritten cash books. Thousands of items, like food, taxes, parties, leisure activities, clothes, or gifts are listed with an exact price index," he explains. From these items emerges the story of his family, its needs and desires, pleasures and dislikes, work and play, achievements and losses. It's an intriguing piece of social history, rigorously and pretty uncompromisingly designed.

A mainstream title it is not. Somewhat more accessible in subject matter, if equally esoteric in terms of audience, is *Post Apocalyptic Sciencefiction B-Movies*, a lovingly assembled history of an obscure movie sub-genre. It is, says co-author and designer Noël Leu, "an anthology about post-apocalyptic science fiction B-movies from the 20th century. During the Cold War period there was a huge output of low budget action movie productions, with a simple formula: take a renegade biker



Far left: From Post Apocalyptic Sciencefiction B-Movies. Authors: David Elsener, Can Evrenol, Wolfram Höll, Noël Leu, Patrick Savolainen. Design: Noël Leu. Printing: Atelier Hochschule der Künste Bern. Publisher: Edition Grilli. Left: From Kiese und Sande der Schweiz. Zuschläge für die Herstellung Historischer Mörtel und Putze. Design: Jonas Voegeli, JTV. Printing: Druckerei Odermatt. Publisher: VDF Hochschulverlag



“gang, a cyborg or a mutant, add some gloomy synthesiser sounds and spice the whole package up with some big boobs.” The book lists these titles with imagery from their VHS covers and plot descriptions, alongside an essay by a film student that Leu found online. The result is an entertaining and affectionate delve into a forgotten world of filmmaking presented in three colours with typefaces designed by Leu and a friend.

If Post Apocalyptic Sciencefiction B-Movies has the advantage of fun, if

obscure, subject matter, *Kiese und Sande der Schweiz. Zuschläge für die Herstellung Historischer Mörtel und Putze* (Swiss Gravels and Sands. Additions for the Production of Historical Mortars and Plasters) is definitely one for the connoisseur. Providing some welcome light relief from this compendium of photographs of, er, sand and gravel, there are two children’s books in the list this year – *Oskar Tiger*, a charming story of a mouse by Dieter Meier and Franziska Burkhardt and *Ghost Knigi*, a tale

about a young ghost and the book he receives from his Aunt Abel, by Benjamin Sommerhalder. Takahiro Kurashima’s *Poemotion*, in which various abstract graphic forms can be transformed and set in motion by overlaying them with a sheet of plastic, is also a playful addition to the selection, as is *Empty Words* by Jürg Lehni and Alex Rich, a printed counterpart to an installation piece in which a plotter punched characters into paper, mechanically visualising the artists’ favourite song titles.

Other titles explore the principles and techniques of book-making itself. *Tooled Sundays*, for example, is both an art exhibition catalogue and an exploration of offset printing. It was created by David Keshavjee and Julien Tavelli, carrying on an interest in print processes which they had both begun while students at ECAL in Lausanne. The book was published to tie in with the exhibition *Pièces d’Origine* by Philippe Daerendinger, a young Swiss artist, at the Forde gallery in Geneva. ▷



Left: From Philippe Daerendinger. *Tooled Sundays*. Authors: Francis Baudevin, Guillaume Pilet. Design: Maximage, David Keshavjee, Julien Tavelli. Printing: Medialis Offsetdruck. Publisher: Forde, Espace d'art contemporain, Genève. For a complete list of all 27 Most Beautiful Swiss Books, see swissdesignwards.ch/beautifulbooks



“In his work, Philippe is using elements of the DIY Shops. For the catalogue we tried to work in the same direction,” the designers explain. “We worked directly on the offset plates by marking and scraping them before printing. We used many different kinds of DIY tools such as a drill, sandpaper, gaffer tape, squeegee, developer liquid etc. The book is printed in duotone,” they continue. “This technique allowed us to play with the images and text by revealing overprinted colours with manual

intervention on the plates.”

While *Tooled Sundays*' concern is with the limits of print production, 1961–2011 *Frauenzentrale Luzern* is an exercise in picture research and juxtaposition. It was produced to mark the 50th anniversary of the Lucerne Women's Centre and takes the form of an extended visual essay on the changing roles of women in society. It was the product of a workshop at the University of Lucerne on image search and handling with the final publication being put together by students.

With the exception of *Poemotion* which was published by the well-respected and distributed Lars Muller, and the children's books, it is hard to believe that any of these titles would sell more than a few hundred copies – a few dozen in some cases. Even the most commercial titles on the list, Editions Macula's survey of mid-20th century documentary photography perhaps, are hardly likely to trouble the bestseller lists. Were a competition of this kind to exist in the UK I suspect it would be derided for being far too

obscure and elitist. But perhaps that's the point. Popular books will find their own reward in their commercial success. The aim of the Most Beautiful Swiss Books is to keep alive a tradition of fine bookmaking (this year's Jan Tschichold Award for outstanding contribution went to a printer, Erich Keiser of Odermatt), of experimentation and of exploration. If printed books are to survive, they need such initiatives. Now, I'm off to spend some quality time dipping into my copy of *Swiss Gravels and Sands*. ☞