

## "Heidi Pitre: A Permanent Record" at Elisabet Ney Museum

The artist's finely drawn illustrations on used library cards link viewers to books and libraries in ways both nostalgic and intimate

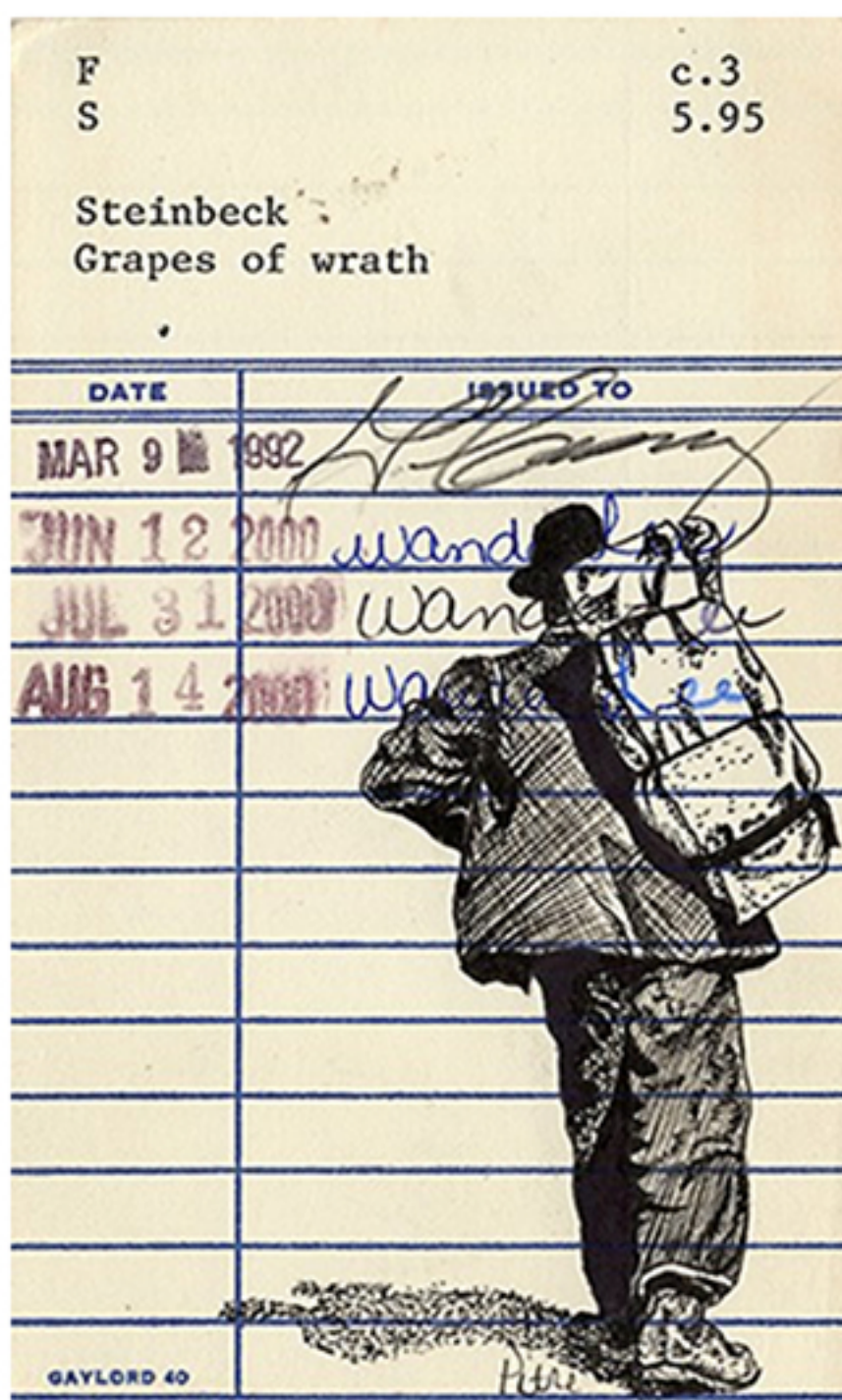
REVIEWED BY ROBERT FAIRES, FRI., MAY 31, 2019

I can't recall the first book I was allowed to check out of the library on my own and so was able to sign the library card myself – Poe's *The Gold-Bug and Other Tales*? Heinlein's *Farmer in the Sky*? – but I should, given what a potent rite of passage it was for a budding bibliophile. Prior to that, printing my name was something I had done only on school assignments. Now, here I was committing it to a public document as a promise that I would safely return this item from the city's literary collection by – *stamp!* – the date set down by the librarian in permanent ink beside my name. In return, the municipal government would entrust me with its property – an adult-sized responsibility for a 7-year-old. Moreover, in that first act of affixing my signature to that card, I was joining the vast fellowship of readers who had long engaged in this exchange to obtain temporary custody of books. And not just that larger fellowship, but the smaller one, the near-secret society of those readers in this town who had also checked out this volume by Poe or Heinlein, the ones whose names preceded mine on the library card, who had taken the book and made good on the card's promise by returning it so

I might now have it. All that was bound up in those 3 by 5 inch white cards with the blue lines, tucked snugly in their manila pockets.

Library cards are largely a thing of the past now, made relics by the rise of electronic circulation methods. But for library patrons of a certain age, they exert a powerful pull the way vinyl records do in the age of Spotify: They're the physical objects that we handled, that we had a tactile connection to, in a cultural ritual. Remove the record from its sleeve, place it on the turntable, set the needle down, play. Take the library book to the circulation desk, sign the card, have it stamped, take the book home, read. Seeing the object is enough to evoke the feel of the ritual and a nostalgia for the past that it belonged to – something artist Heidi Pitre has clearly experienced, since she was inspired to rescue dozens of used library cards and give them a new purpose. They're the canvases for a series of pen-and-watercolor drawings that pay visual tribute to the books these cards were once attached to. And yet, they're more than that, because Pitre has taken care to leave the historical record of the cards – the patron signatures and dates for return – visible so the viewer may appreciate the story of the books' use within the libraries, such as, say, the 24-year gap between the only two readers to check out Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* or the dozen who raced to check out Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* over five months in 1986. Names, dates, and places all figure into the significance of these card artworks, with Pitre's finely rendered images – realistic portraits of the books' subjects or authors or objects in the books, full of delicate cross-hatching and stippling – providing illustrative complements to the cards' histories.

Not surprisingly, the portraits communicate the most soulfulness. Pitre has a feel for emotional expression: a brooding James Dean as Jett Rink, a melancholic Langston Hughes, a surprised Bela Lugosi as Dracula. There's an intimacy in her faces that builds on the intimacy of the show, created by these small works being shown in a small room at the Elisabet Ney Museum. You're forced to get close to the artworks, as close as you have to get to a book when you're reading it, and to pay a like kind of attention. You may not leave "Heidi Pitre: A Permanent Record" with the exact feeling you would from reading a book, but its connection to books is so strong that you may want to go buy one as soon as you can. Or maybe borrow one from a library.



Grapes of Wrath by Heidi Pitre

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Elisabet Ney Museum, 304 E. 44th

Through June 2