



School: School of Art

Researcher: Rachel Withers

Project Title: *Roman Signer's Library of Marvels*

UOA: 32: Art and Design

300-Word Statement

Library of Marvels emerged from an ongoing conversation between Swiss artist Roman Signer (b. 1938) and Rachel Withers. In 2011 Withers proposed to Signer that she start a speculative exploration of his library, an idiosyncratic collection reflective of his broad knowledge base and omnivorous curiosity. The collection's visual contents emerged as key, and Withers's focus narrowed to its large quantities of antique scientific and technical illustrations, comprised in treatises, manuals, *vulgarisations*, 'journals of marvels' and other historic volumes. Digital scanning offered the easiest means of collecting data. Over several visits Withers accumulated over a thousand image scans and used Photoshop to eliminate signs of physical ageing present in the originals. The resulting digital prints, featuring rich colours and contrasts, enhanced the scans' visual information, "shocking" them into a new, uncannily vivid afterlife.

Decision-making around the 2015 and 2020 iterations of the *Library of Marvels* was directed by Withers but always subject to moderation by Signer. Important critical considerations informed the display's design. The implication that Signer's library is a 'research base' needed to be avoided: his practice is antipathetic to the notion of art as 'practice-based research'. Withers was also concerned to avoid an archival display that (a) suggested 'the interesting' in aesthetician Sianne Ngai's sense (designating work that is dilute, repetitive or bland – a "weak source of wonder") and (b) that courted an overly traditional biographical-critical interpretation. Both *LoM*'s installations "rhyme" imagery from the library with elements in Signer's work in a playful, speculative fashion, and their aesthetic is uninhibited, maximal and far from Signer's own. An accompanying leaflet offers entertaining glosses on the installation's 'chapters' and draws out ambiguities around their contents: representing Withers's interests as much as Signer's, they collectively offer a picture of the Western history of science and exploration that is both ironic, and heroic.