How the Images Came Alive

*Cellophane Bricks*, Jonatham Lethem (hardback, Ze Books)

This collection of fictions, essays and the images that Lethem is responding to or is inspired by, is a quirky and entertaining one. Brought up spending time in his father's art studio, attending art school, whilst making his own art, Lethem swerved into prose aged 19 to become the author we know and love. The blurb on the front inner jacket suggests that *Cellophane Bricks* is 'a stealth memoir of his [Lethem's] parallel life in visual culture.'

I'm not so sure. This kind of approach treads backwards into notions of truth and autobiography that I feel Lethem, and many others, have done their best to avoid, instead concentrating on narrative play, character invention as well as quirky and intriguing subversions of the novel.

These subversions, mostly in the shape of different forms and structures – be that prose poem, strange layout, or wide-ranging and sometimes hard-to-follow critical pieces – are foregrounded here. Typesizes change across the pages, paragraphs drop into columns after their first lines, text wraps itself around pictures, quotes and overheard phrases appear; this is slippery stuff.

Lethem uses language dangerously and disingenuously, sometimes playing with the fact he is writing about his father, other times showing us the art that is the source of his own inspiration or response, asking us to trust him. I'm not sure I do. Is that his father he writes about? I mean, is the photo actually his father, or some stranger he liked the look of? And aren't the stories he tells, now, stories that have been honed and retold and edited and shaped over the years since he was the kid he claims to be writing about or as?

We all riff on ideas that are sparked by others or other things, but it is not always clear how those ideas mutate into words, become changed to make better stories or poems, detach themselves from their source material and simply become something else. And I think Lethem is well aware of all this and is playing with his readers throughout what is subtitled 'A Life in Visual Culture'. The 'A' here seems key. It is not 'My Life', it is 'A Life': a trick of memory, a fictional conceit, an adaptation, a hybrid of fact and fiction, a collection of rememberings and misrememberings, tangents and diversions.

Just the kind of thing I like, in fact. Here are sections on graffiti and comics, including paintings by the likes of Raymond Pettibon who appropriates and make use of graffiti slogans and motifs; hyper-realist fictions on the back of Hopper-esque images; stories or truths about 'living with a forgotten painter's masterpiece' along with other work; lists, remarks and statements; writing about or in response to 'art writing'; musings on collage and appropriation, collecting art and collections of art; studio visits, memoirs and tales about what has been forgotten, or perhaps should have been.

Throughout, there are colour reproductions of relevant and possibly irrelevant paintings, sculpture, comics, illustrations and people. They are as delightful and as impossible as 'cellophane bricks', but nonetheless as colourful, surreal and inventive as the proposal to build anything from coloured lenses and light. Lethem's responses are original and offbeat, wide-ranging and questioning. This gathering up of previously scattered pieces is a glorious, unclassifiable collection.

Rupert Loydell [550 words]