Books by Canberra Artists

Academics have been trying to define the concept of an artist’s book for decades. The notion of a point of origin, the very first (Western) book artist, is regularly contested: William Blake or Ed Ruscha? Or medieval monks? To attempt to answer is undeniably complex, but there is one fact that contains no doubt: the combination of an artist and a book can transform the entire premise of what a book is and can be.

This exhibition, planned to coincide with Canberra’s Centenary, is a microcosm of the breadth and depth of the field of Books as Art. Canberra has a rich and lively art environment, and long before the more craft-based notion of ‘book arts’ became popular in Australia, the book as an art conduit was being taught and encouraged in our community. Canberra has a particularly print- and book-centred history: we have the National Library, we have an active craft bookbinders guild (the first in Australia), and we have a history of active small private presses (including Les Petersen’s Raft Press, which specialized in artist’s book production). We have had two public-access printmaking facilities (Studio One and the still active Megalo) and a highly respected art school that nurtured a particularly European artist’s book sensibility in its early days and that has carried on teaching artists’ books in a broader form to this day.

The curatorial concept behind this exhibition is to showcase a number of current local artists of various career stages who have included books in their broader practice. For some, like Dianne Fogwell, books are central to their career. Others, like Kirsten Farrell, byrd and Hanna Hoyne have used books as preparatory thinking for bigger works: not quite sketchbook, not quite endpoint. There are those, like Tanya Myshkin, who feel comfortable when they work within the solid parameters of the traditional book, and those like Nicci Haynes who seek to subvert everything about the book to see how close to non-bookness they can get without losing it completely. Each artist was asked to show ‘early’ work and ‘recent’ work. This sometimes means only a few years in the case of an emerging artist like Shellaine Godbold, but when it extends for a few decades, there are interesting shifts: look at the movement from representation to abstraction in Jan Hogan’s images.

As you move around the room you can see everything from sculpture to altered books to original bound books. The connecting thread is the iconic status of the Book itself, manifested here in its concrete (actually, bronze) form by Nick Stranks. Humans have an ancient connection with the Book: it represents knowledge, authority, power and status. We are hardwired to know what a book is, how it works, how to use one. We know that a book is intended as an intimate space, a personal experience that connects the thoughts of many. By choosing to make a book, or by using ready-made books or by suggesting book-like qualities, these artists are pulling you halfway into understanding their message, making you do some of the work. That is the essential power of an artist’s book.

Caren Florance, Ampersand Duck, 2013.
100% Quick Reference List

Please refer to the Sales Catalogue for more details.

1. Nick Stranks, Reference Library (2009)
5. Kirsten Farrell, *Untitled: (green), (red), (blue)* (2012/13)
19. UK Frederick, *100 Collisions* (2013)
20. UK Frederick (with Katie Hayne), *Excavating Georgia* (c. 2008)
34. Bernie Slater, *Other* (2009)
42. Ingeborg Hansen, *Collected Works (Samlede Verker)* (2012)