

A study of the Art of the Book - A melding of Experience, Tradition and Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

When a poetry manuscript arrives on the desk of the book artist, it is printed by computer on 8 1/2" x 11" paper in a generic font, and stapled in the upper left-hand corner. The goal of the book artist is to transform that manuscript into a book; essentially to present the text and complimentary images by integrating the traditions of fine press printing and book design with aesthetics and the intricacies of the written word. The goal of this project was to edit, design, hand-print and hand-bind an edition of limited edition fine press chapbooks of original poetry by Michelle Mitchell-Foust and images by Carolyn Parker.

INTRODUCTION

A "fine press book" is a limited edition publication of a selected genre and design, which is constructed of fine materials, and in which the labor of the publication is done by hand, as opposed to mechanically. In this case, the printing was done on a Vandercook Press, utilizing moveable typefaces and often times hand-made paper. The successful publication of a literary fine press book relies on research in the tradition and application of fine press technologies in combination with creative activities as an approach to the problem. The combination of these two endeavors presents this problem as a research project as well as a creative activity. It is necessary to marry the understanding of the art of the book, with the function of the poetry it carries, and an appreciation of the aesthetics of design. Just as a blank canvas is to a painter, or a blank notebook page is to a poet or writer, so a limited edition publication of a fine press book is to a book artist.

METHOD

My Undergraduate career in English culminated to focus almost solely on the reading, writing, and presentation of poetry, so I had a sufficiently steady ground to stand on when approaching the first step of the project, which was the editing of Michelle's manuscript. She had presented me with over 150 poems in her manuscript "The Sea Poems", and I had to select around 12 for publication in the book, the traditional length of chapbooks. After narrowing the manuscript down to 12, Michelle and I discussed which poems would make the final cut, and named that small collection "Exile". This decision was based on the appeal of individual poems as well as what argument they made as a collection; based on subject matter, language, and rhythm as well as the length and width of the lines of the poems. I chose the typeface for the book by looking at these same elements of the chosen poems. The working typeface must be chosen based not only on personal aesthetic preference. The face which I chose, Bulmer, is a modern type face, with spare yet bold elegance which was reflective of

the voice in Michelle's poems, as well as her use of the line. Each letter, space, and element of punctuation was then set in lead type and stored in trays until all of the poems were set.

Based on the selections of poems and the nature of the typeface, the visual artist, Carolyn Parker, drew 10 images for me to choose from. These images would be made into magnesium blocks at Royal Graphics, and printed on the press as the poems were. I had to simultaneously design the layout of the book while choosing the images. What image worked the best as the title page?—the title page being the “thesis statement” for the rest of the book. Which images complemented which poems? How many images should be used, and for that matter how many pages (or folios) would the book have? What color ink would best reflect the value of the image and make a statement for the tone of the poems? Research for this design portion of the project was based on perusing other editions of fine press books printed by other book artists, consulting my mentor, as well as reading such printing “bibles” as *The Design of Books* by Adrian Wilson, and *Printing Poetry* by Clifford Burke. I chose an intricate and brave image for the title page to counterpoint the title of the book, (*Exile*) a somewhat simpler image to start off the poems, and only a whisper of an image for the closing of the book, which was reflective of the final poem of the collection, entitled “Sanctum”. I had chosen a stark white for the text paper based on my personal preference, and found that I then had to design the rest of the book around that color of paper. The “vehicle” for the “tenor” of her poems was the sea itself, and while not wanting to over-exaggerate this reference, I wanted to make the book a little “marine-ish”. The images were influenced by seashell shapes and the layers of seaweed found beneath the surface of the ocean. I chose a “silvered blue” for the ink, a sandy charchol for the cover paper, and an off-white for the end-sheets (the blank pages found at the beginning and end of the book designed to protect the “text block” itself), in an attempt to capture the visual elements of sand, water and the marine layer of fog that often times awed and inspired Michelle while writing these poems.

When the design of the book was completed, and a “dummy copy” produced (a simulation of the final product compiled with proofs of the poems and images arranged in their final “order” on the book's size of paper), then it was time to print. One hundred sheets of the stark white paper were folded and torn in tenths to create the bifolio (four “pages” in the book), dampened, and left under weight the night before the press run (a “run” being all pages of one folio—one side of the bifolio—cranked through the press by hand). The press run itself is the most tedious as well as the most exciting part of fine press publication. Each letter must be inspected to be certain that it is the same font, that it is not broken, and that it is set in line with all of the other letters of the poem. The position of the poem on the page must be set in precisely the right placement. The technique for this placement varies from printer to printer, but non-arbitrary margins are commonly determined by a graphing technique that is reflective of the proportions of the human body, therefore un-consciously comforting to the viewer. A typical press run of around 130 pages takes on the average three hours to complete, including primping and proofing.

When the printing is done, all pages must be inspected and “graded” based on the color of the ink, any smudges acquired during printing, and any typos, broken letters or mistakes in design that may have been discovered and corrected during the printing process. Once “graded”, the bifolios are collated into “signatures” (in this book a “signature” was three bifolios, resulting in twelve “pages” of poems and images). These signatures are then ready for binding. First the signatures are “punched” with holes (called “stations”) along the “spine”. These stations are the entries for the binding string. There are many methods of sewing books, and

the choice is made based on the size (length, thickness) of the book, the paper and covers that are used. Binding is the final step of the project, what remains of the publication process is the mailing of announcements, and dissemination of copies of the book. The copies will be disseminated to various collection libraries (including the section of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Special Collections Library recently named Emerson G. Wulling Collection of Twentieth Century Literary Fine Press Books) as well as the poet, the artist, and all who assisted in the printing of the book.

FINDINGS

There is a common saying that states that the goal of climbing a mountain is not to reach the summit, but more so in the experience of the climbing itself. I also discovered that in terms of fine press printing, one must love that work which produces the reward, must truly enjoy it for it's experience, because it is difficult, and frustrating, and tedious, and sometimes rage-producing, and euphoric, and sentimental, and meditative, and wonderful because of all of these things. My research, as I have said before, was based on tradition, imitation, and guidance, but mostly in my own experience of enacting the project, the trial-and-error, and the discoveries that I made in the process. I learned how to work a Vandercook Press. I learned the meditative task of setting and distributing type, and the process of designing a page in a book. I learned about mixing inks, and matching their color, and the perfect length of time to press dampened paper so that the ink sinks into the paper when it's printed. These things were based on a mixture of research and personal experience, but the acquisition of true knowledge is found only in true experience. What I discovered about the nature of poetry and it's relation to the book and the printer I couldn't have read in any essay, and even so couldn't have truly understood it until I experienced it myself. I am first a poet, and second a printer, and I discovered that printing, like poetry and most other artistic experience, reveals itself through the making of it. When printing Michelle's book I was forced to view the book as a whole. I could no longer look at the poems as a manuscript, the paper as just paper, or the type which the poems were printed in as only letters. All of the elements of the book were conversing with one another, and each became a necessity for the other. The cover paper and title page with its color of ink, bold image and surrounding type were "splinting" each other aesthetically, the italic font of the Title on the title page gave movement to the image of the title page, the final poem in the book "Sanctum" provided a solace for the title of the book, *Exile*, and so on. These creative supports were not accidental, but also were not purely intentional, and therefore-I hope-not contrived. This, I realized, reflected the experience of writing poetry. When one begins to write a poem, they do not know what the poem will "be about", they don't know what the final line will be, or perhaps what the title will be. They don't know if there will be a girl in a yellow sundress eating pearls, or a dog digging a hole for bees. They discover their poem through the writing of it, it reveals itself, it develops through the experience of writing. So is the publication of a fine press book. Intricate details, sometimes "happy accidents" occur that reveal the character and even the "thesis statement" of the book itself. So, after my work on this project I see why some poet/printers that I know find each experience a feeding to the other, and I know that I wish to continue with both endeavors.

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