

## Melissa Jay Craig: Bookish Investigations

by Deborah Kogan

*This is the second article investigating why some artists working in the book form make their own paper and how the use of handmade paper has influenced their works. In this article, Deborah Kogan describes the linkages between paper making and book arts for Melissa Jay Craig, an artist and book arts instructor based in Chicago.*

In the first half of this article, published in *Ampersand* Volume 27, No. 1 (Winter 2010), I talked with Peter Thomas, a fine press printer and book artist in Santa Cruz, California, Mary Ellen Long, an installation and book artist in Durango, Colorado, and Lisa Beth Robinson, a printmaker, book artist, and college art instructor in Greenville, North Carolina. From these initial interviews, I learned that for each artist, hand-made paper contributes to the physical presence and intended meanings of the completed book works in a very personal way. My e-mail conversations with Melissa Jay Craig have confirmed that initial impression.

**Discovering book arts.** When Melissa Jay Craig moved from Cleveland, Ohio, to Chicago in 1986 to attend graduate school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), she thought of herself as a painter, sculptor, and installation artist. She initially was attracted to the book format as a vehicle for disseminating the images from her paintings to a broader audience. Soon, however, she became interested in the book form as an expressive medium in its own right. Craig began studying bookbinding with Joan Flasch and Heinke Pensky-Adam at SAIC, but, she says, “it was Ray Martin’s ‘Book Concepts’ course that originally started the fire, that sparked my bookish investigations.” After completing her MFA at SAIC in 1991, Craig continued to take numerous classes and

workshops with a wide variety of skilled bookbinders.

Between 1991 and 2009, Craig taught bookmaking and book arts (initially at Artists’ Book Works in Chicago and subsequently through a long-term affiliation with the Columbia College Chicago’s Interdisciplinary Book and Paper Arts MFA program—as well as at other institutions. Craig’s fascination with the book as an object, as well as her role as a book arts instructor fueled her need to keep learning and honing her binder’s skills. She says, “I wanted to know everything I possibly could about how . . . [books] . . . function. After nearly twenty years, I’d say I’m maybe about a third of the way there.”

Craig has never fitted neatly into the categories that people like to use for visual artists. In an interview with Jen Thomas in *Bonefolder* Volume 3, No. 2 (Spring 2007), Craig explained, “I’m difficult to pigeon-hole. I’m not exclusively a sculptor, a book-binder, a papermaker, a printmaker, an installation or collage or assemblage artist, yet I do all those things, without a set hierarchy. I use what I learned as a painter and a carpenter constantly as well, and periodically incorporate my drawing into my work, and I tend to think and solve problems with drawings rather than in words. Book artist is the most convenient term, but it’s one that people like to argue with.”

The first body of book works that Craig developed between 1989 and 1998 consisted of altered books. These works

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usually retained the title of the original published book, and were altered in a way that provided social commentary on the stated topic. For example, for her work titled *Revised Roberts Rules of Order*, Craig cut the book into thirds, removed the middle third of the book and re-inserted it upside down with the spine edge lined up with the fore-edge of the rest of the book. In making her work entitled *The Building of our Nation*, she hollowed out the inside of the original book to form a cavity that holds reproductions of corpse tags from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Some observers might question whether Craig's altered books have much in common with her more recent books using handmade paper. However, I note one important connection between these early works and Craig's more recent works—in both instances, rather than being displayed as discrete pieces, the individual books often became parts of larger installations. For her altered books, Craig developed an installation called *Library*, in which the altered books became part of a larger environment that includes a Reading Room and a “flock of flying books.” This treatment of individual books as part of a larger environment has been repeated in the current installation of Craig's recently completed edition of 99 copies of the book “(S)Edition” as a wall of sprouting mushroom books. In both bodies of work, there are no clear boundaries between the “art object” and its larger environment. A collection of book objects transforms the entire field into an art installation.

**Learning to make paper.** Craig's work took a new direction in the late 1990s, when she learned that she was losing her hearing and would soon have to be able to navigate in a world without sound. For a brief period of time she stopped making art while she prepared for this major life transition. Craig's artmaking hiatus ended during her

first artist's residency at the Ragdale Foundation near Chicago, where she began experimenting with the use of kozo fiber to make paper. Experimenting with making paper and figuring out how to engineer bookish structures out of her handmade paper satisfies a “mad scientist” aspect of Craig's nature as a multimedia artist. “The truth is,” she says, “I fell in love. Working with paper consolidated all my varied interests into a whole that never becomes stagnant. I love that there's always an unknown, experimental factor, a dialogue with the material that keeps me fascinated. I love the infinite variety of texture, tactility, and surface that can be derived from the fibers themselves, and also its malleability, the fact that paper can be manipulated to resemble almost any other material on earth, natural or manufactured. I love its toughness contrasted with its perceived fragility, its delicate appearance. And it is enormously satisfying to be working with renewable, sustainable source materials, from plants to recycled fibers; it's in harmony with my world view and my politics.”

Craig says that she is, in a strict sense, a self-taught papermaker. She has taken exactly one formal papermaking class in her life, on Japanese papermaking. “However,” she says, “when I began to explore paper's potential for my own work, I was employed at the then-brand-new Center for Book and Paper Arts in Chicago, where I had access to a well-equipped paper studio, and, much more importantly, to some of the finest papermakers in the land, particularly our revered founding director Marilyn Sward. She was always more than generous with enthusiastic advice, though my questions often evoked a puzzled look, and the response: ‘But . . . why would you *want* to do *that*?’”

Although she started experimenting with paper in a well-equipped paper studio, most of Craig's paper-based work has been developed during artist's residencies



and in other situations that are not specially equipped for papermaking. She developed ways of working that are particularly suited to her nomadic circumstances. She used the paper studio she had access to only to process the fiber, which she drained and carried with her, and did all her sheet-forming, building and manipulation on-site. She also has built (or cobbled together) a variety of portable equipment that serves in her home studio but also travels with her. Craig began sharing these working methods and tools in workshops and classes with other artists who may not have ready access to papermaking facilities. Recently, however, she has been able to outfit her home studio with her own paper beater. An artist grant enabled her to purchase a “beautiful early Reina beater with a tub made of bronze.”

**The influence of handmade paper on the book works produced.** When she started making art again in 1998, Craig’s new work—made with handmade paper—reflected a transformed set of thematic concerns. As she learned how to navigate in a world without sound by using other cues, such as reading lips, Craig’s work became more tactile and began appealing to a broader set of senses including smell, touch, and visual form. Her work also moved away from the use of written language, and began using the book form as a way to represent processes of natural and bodily decay. Craig’s initial works were freestanding book sculptures depicting empty book “hulls,” hollow trunk-like forms that were sometimes four to six feet tall. Figures 1 and 2 depict a more recent work called *Passage*, which shows the general “look” of

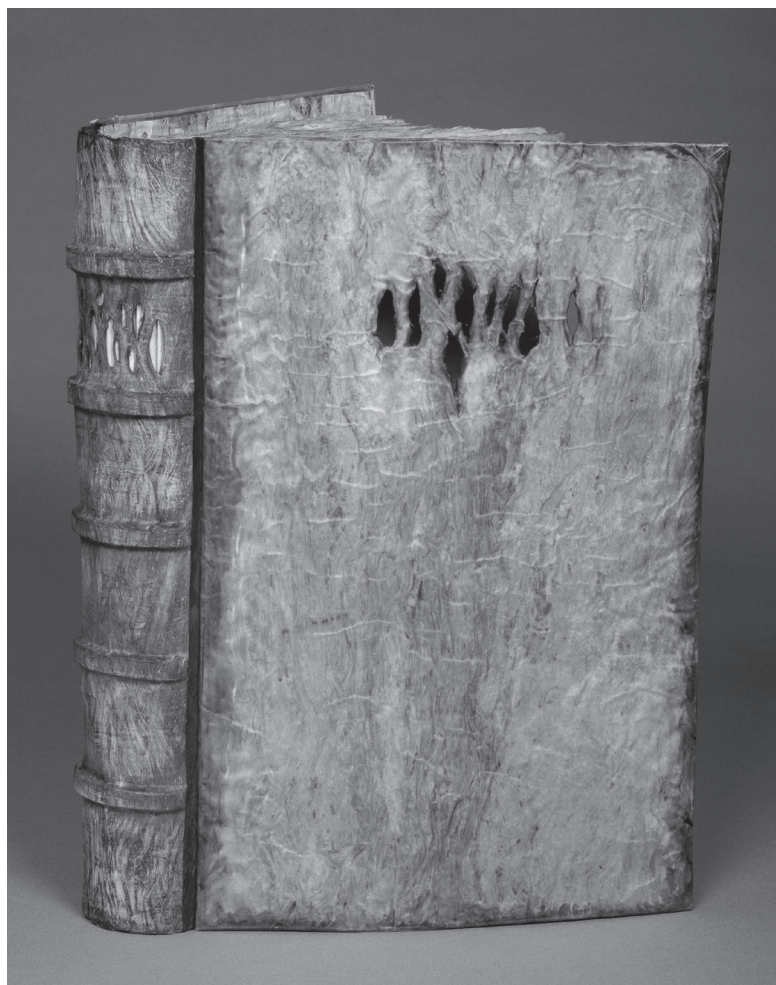
Figs. 1 and 2. *Passage*, 2009. Spine view (left) and fore-edge view (right).



these freestanding book sculptures, though on a smaller scale. At this time, she also became interested in images that explored the process of entropy in nature, including seed pods and fungi as “decaying carriers of information.” Handmade paper involves Craig physically as well as metaphorically in the natural cycles that intrigue her.

In *Manifest, O* (2005) (figures 3 and 4), Craig developed some of her ideas about using shape and texture to represent language, rather than sequences of words. This work, she says, “was an attempt to make a book that would allow people to see how I hear, to ‘read’ my experience. Though I usually hear enough to know you are talking, I can’t hear any of the sounds of the consonants in your speech; I must see your mouth move to supply that information.”

Fig. 3. Cover of *Manifest, O*, 2005.



Craig describes the making of this book as follows:

*“Manifest, O* began with the simple question, “What would my experience of conversation look like?” The text paper came first; abaca slightly overbeaten, just enough to have some translucency, but not a huge amount of shrinkage. The sheets were made with a deckle box, poured directly onto thin non-woven interfacing (Pellon) supported by a su [the flexible screen on which sheets are formed in Japanese papermaking].

After I made each sheet, I positioned a mask (cut to the proportions of the ‘golden rectangle’) over it to establish margins and gutter, then shot holes through the wet fiber with a spray gun to make sentences and paragraphs, one hole for each letter, two pages per sheet. After each sheet was hung to dry on its Pellon sheet, which allowed some cockling but restrained much of the shrinkage, I stained and sized each surface of each sheet individually, with a combination of walnut dye and acrylic stain mixed into methylcellulose. The patterns I made both resembled aged parchment and symbolized noise; all in essentially duochromatic tones of dull brown and ochre.

I decided to intersperse the pages with views of mouths making the shapes of speech or emotion, all drawn from a mirror, rather than photographs (though I minimized my large front teeth and overbite). The tight scientific-illustration style of drawing took an embarrassingly long time; I found many ways to avoid the discipline of sitting and painstakingly drawing. Each drawing was repeated with slight variation on the verso. You see them appearing and disappearing indistinctly, through the text-holes and translucency of the paper as you page through the book.

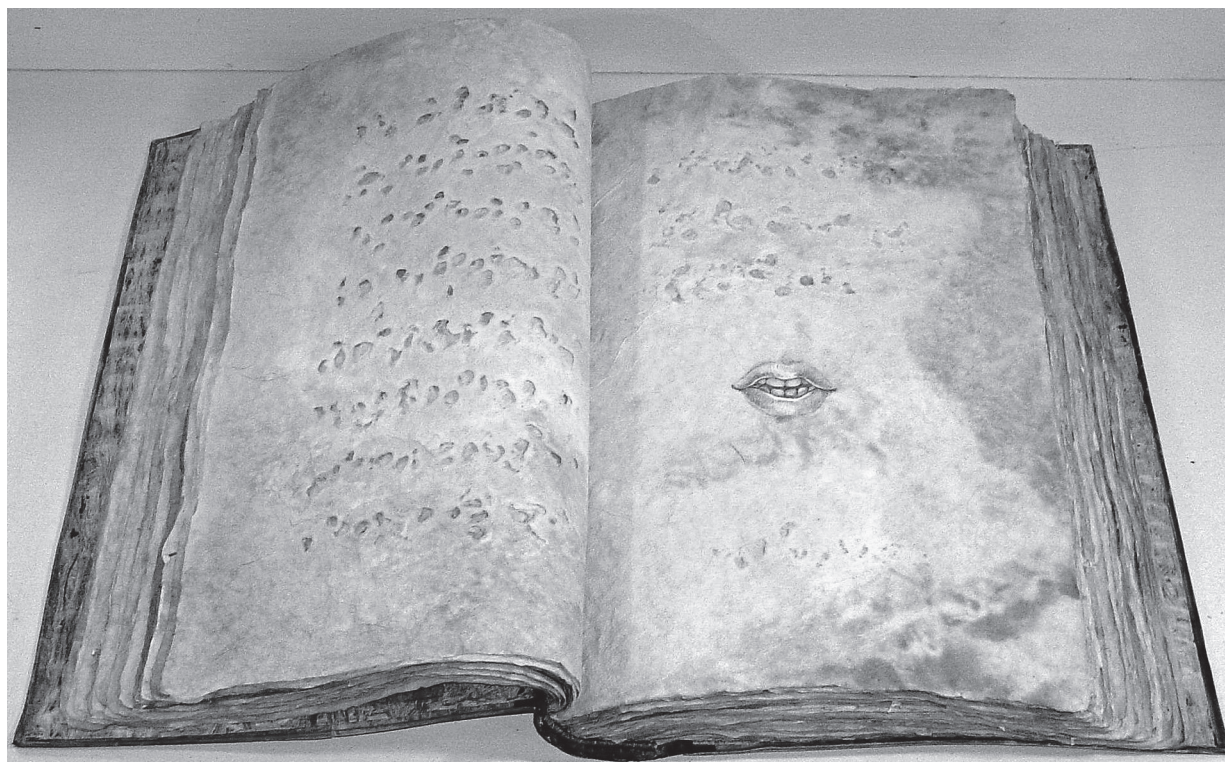


Fig. 4. *Manifest, O*  
page spread

On the cover, I used Pergamena transparent vellum over uneven cast kozo boards; some of the fibers had been treated with walnut dye before they were pounded together in a controlled amate style. The book was sewn to double raised cords, adhered to the spine, and then the boards were attached. It's a sort of strange fusion between a Bradel and split-board structure, and the strength and flexibility of the abaca allowed it to be tightbacked. Although I added bamboo inserts at the board edges to help support the book in the event of warping, the book cover did indeed warp; in fact it constantly fluctuates; and so does my ability to hear in any given situation."

The works that Craig has made since 2000 exist along an undefined boundary between paper sculpture and hand-bound books. As Craig describes them, these works turn bookbinding processes "inside

out" to make sculptural books that "take full advantage of paper's inherent qualities" and are still constructed as books, but which "imply narratives authored by our beleaguered planet, set forth in a language long overlooked by humanity's intellectual arrogance." She says, "I perceive this as a language of dichotomy, of adaptation, of infinite cyclical renewal, of double-edged humor, of fierce, disturbing beauty, and always, of the ultimate triumph of time."

**The characteristics of the paper made for book works.**

Craig's book sculptures are formed with natural fibers—including kozo, abaca, and flax—that she has processed herself and shaped into the book pages and covers that make up the formal vocabulary of her sculptures. She describes her choice of handmade paper as follows: "I work with handmade paper specifically for its minimal environmental impact, its utter versatility, its enormous variety and its deceptive strength contrasted with its



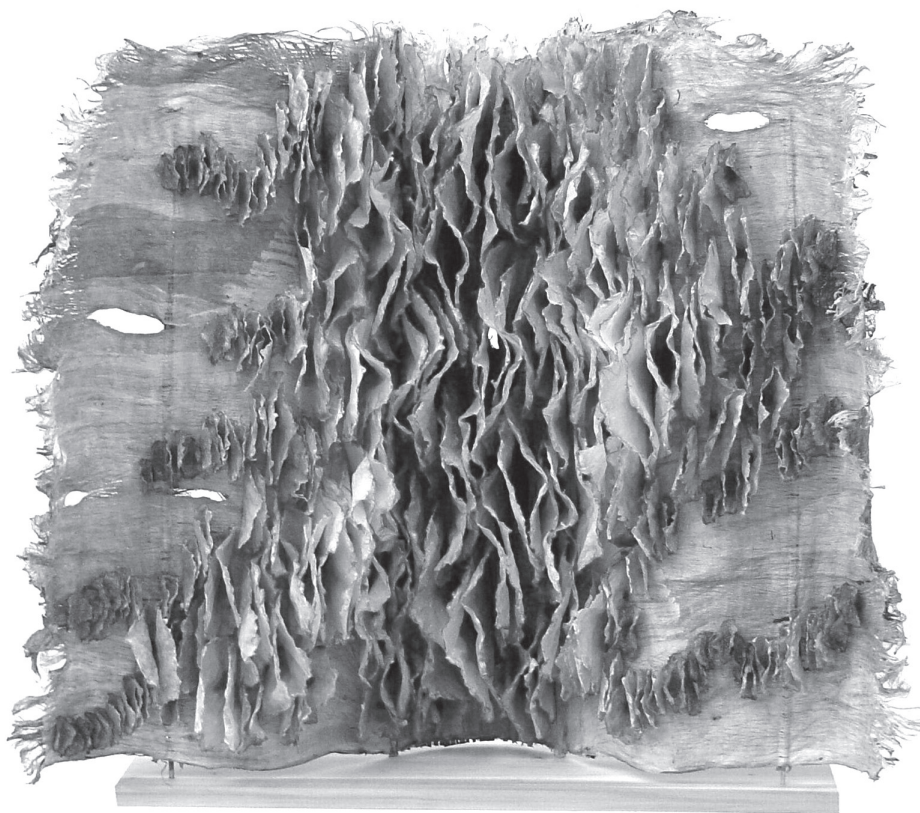


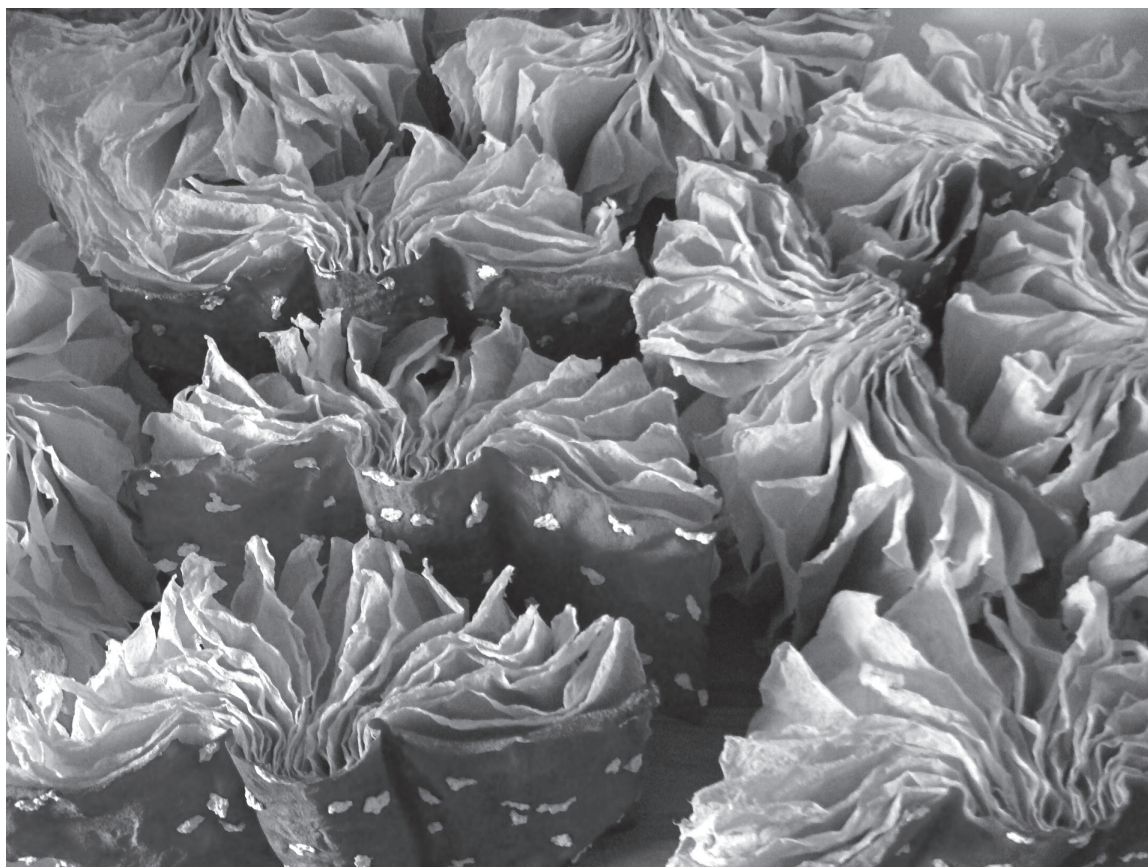
Fig. 5. *That's Life* (2005)

perceived fragility.” For each new work, Craig experiments with the process of casting or shaping the paper until she gets the material to do what she envisions. About five years ago, she began to adapt fabric dyeing techniques to provide more vibrant color in her works, as she describes:

*“That’s Life* (2005) (figure 5) is still one of my favorite pieces, even nearly five years after making it. I was on a residency in southern Indiana, just across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky, walking deep in 400 acres of protected woods on a grey, still January day. There wasn’t much snow and my surroundings were fallow, wonderfully textured, but all in shades of gray and weathered brown, when I saw this bright, multicolored fungus. It was like a sudden shout. Moreover, it was growing vertically, like the deckled edge of weathered book pages.

I didn’t have a camera, only a small sketchbook and a black brush pen with me, so I sketched it and wrote down its sequence of colors. When I got back to the studio and my Prismacolor pencils, I made a drawing.

Later, when I wanted to make a book thrown open, revealing an entire life cycle, I decided to use that fungus. All the ways I had added color to my work previously, through pigments, paints, or stains didn’t begin to touch the intensity of the experience of seeing the fungus almost glowing with color in its drab surroundings, so I began my experimenting with fiber-reactive dyes sealed into very overbeaten abaca. The excitement of working with that saturated color was equal to the sighting; the dyes crawled and moved and made exquisite patterns on their own, and I’ve been working with them ever since.”



In her most recent book work, *(S)Edition* (2007–2010), completed in an edition of 99 copies, Craig combines a number of her previous interests, including her fascination with fungi, making a work that exists both as an edition of identical copies and as an installation piece, and transforming the book form into something altogether different. This work is currently on exhibition during June and July 2010 (perhaps shown for the only time as an installation including all 99 copies) at the Morgan Art of Papermaking Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio (see figures 6 and 7). Craig says of this piece,

*“(S)Edition* came about rather atypically, and had a very long gestation period before any physical work commenced. I began by thinking about making a work that would quietly address some of the rhetoric abounding in the artists’ books

field. I wanted to fulfill some of the criteria which had been put forth as parameters for ‘true’ artists’ books by editioning one of the field’s most controversial manifestations: a sculptural book-object.

I’d been making works dealing with cycles of decay and renewal for awhile, and a few of these were based on the forms and colors of different fungi. I was intrigued by the wide variety of uneasy reactions to these, and by questions asked during gallery talks. I began to examine my strong attraction to these forms, and as I defined my interest, I decided that my edition needed to be derived from fungi.

That opened the floodgate; I would work with a stemmed fungus, and the work would become both edition and installation. It could ‘infest’ a space, almost overwhelming its viewer/readers, and resonate with an indication of the

Fig. 6. *(S)Edition* (2007–2010), individual books, packed for transporting.





Fig. 7. *(S)Edition*,  
installation view

surreptitious spread of ideas, perhaps of ‘going viral.’ I researched thousands of images of fungi occurring worldwide, but kept being drawn back to *Amanita Muscaria*, the ‘toadstool’ of fairy-tale illustrations. As I read up on the facts and the plethora of theories and legends surrounding this fungus, the title *(S)Edition* came to me. The overt implications of that title, and the appearance of (and legends surrounding) the fungus made *me* uncomfortable—so, naturally, I decided to use both.

That decision is a typical part of my process; I often seek a certain, somewhat disturbing tension between what I know about a work and what I don’t. Works that walk an uneasy boundary line on my comfort zone are inevitably the pieces that become the most personally powerful for me; the ones that keep my inquiries moving forward.

Then I had to learn how to make what I visualized, and I devoted an early sum-

mer residency to experimentation. I chose dark, unbleached first-cut abaca for the covers, and a lighter unbleached abaca for the text, both overbeaten for high shrinkage. I used a temporary deckle to form the test covers, and then built a test armature that worked beautifully to shape them; then figured out the size the text papers should be to fit the shrinkage of the covers. When I had the correct proportions, I built permanent moulds and deckles for both.

My biggest problem was the stems; it took increasingly elaborate tests, including a five-part plaster press mold, before finding that the stuffed armature I’d initially believed to be far too simple to even try actually worked best. Next were dye tests, and discovering how the raised white flecks typical of the fungus would be formed: cotton rag tinted to match the abaca and mixed liberally with methylcellulose and wheat paste. I left the residency with three viable test



copies (though I didn't like their color), the moulds and deckles, three cover armatures, and three stem armatures.

At home, before my next residency began, I built two more cover armatures and a collapsible, portable air-drying rack that would allow me to simultaneously dry 90 text-sized sheets at a time, and beat and drained eleven and a half pounds of abaca. On my second residency, I refined the cover colors, made seven more stem armatures, and completed the first 27 copies; almost all my personal working time the following year was spent making more."

In one of her most recent handmade paper works, *Listen* (2009), Craig's inves-

tigations have taken her away from the book form. These works, made with cast and shaped unbleached abaca, are wall pieces based on Craig's study of the different types of lichens found in the Scottish highlands and on the Hebrides and Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland. Although they do not refer to books, these pieces, like Craig's book forms, refer to messages that are difficult to decipher—in this case, messages from a coexistent species whose survival is endangered because "we are unable, unwilling or too arrogant to decipher [these messages]." &

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#### SEE MORE IMAGES ONLINE

You can see more of Craig's work on her web site at [http://web.mac.com/melissajaycraig/Melissa\\_Jay\\_Craig/Melissa\\_Jay\\_Craig\\_Home.html](http://web.mac.com/melissajaycraig/Melissa_Jay_Craig/Melissa_Jay_Craig_Home.html) where she has visual galleries documenting her different bodies of work. She also writes a blog which she refers to as her "blahg" and can be found at <http://melissajaycraig.wordpress.com>. Craig explains the importance of her blog as follows: "Sharing how and why and what I do is also an important part of the process. Partially because I am deafened, I think, the blog is a part of it, taking the place of what, with earlier functioning ears, would have been long group conversations. For better or worse (and it has decidedly proven to be both), I have this need to put things out here: travails as well as triumphs, ennui as well as excitement, warts as well as beauty."