



COURTESY OF MELISSA JAY CRAIG.

Melissa Jay Craig's *Library* installation, featuring shelves, stacks, flying books, and altered books on display, was exhibited many times between 1990-2007. These photographs were taken at SPACES Gallery in Cleveland, Ohio.

Without Words

Melissa Jay Craig's circuitous path to bookbinding, altered books, and papermaking

Transcendental books that evoke their metaphors without words? For the last two decades I've been following the work of Melissa Jay Craig, who combines traditional book structures with sculptural and iconographic concepts. Book artists come to this discipline from many backgrounds, as followers of this column have seen. Yet when Melissa Jay Craig visited my studio recently, her answers to a few basic questions revealed another dimension in the potential of book art to convey life experiences.

RM: What got you started doing books?

MJC: When I was a kid I was a runaway, about the age of twelve, homeless or

in foster homes, and I spent a lot of time in libraries. I would go into the stacks and pull out a lot of books, so they had an emotional connection as an escape. They represented a lot to me. I read cereal boxes, advertising—I would read anything.

In my teens I was in the Ohio State girls' juvenile institution, and when released, I bounced around a while until I was twenty and ended up in Rapid City, South Dakota, where I worked as a waitress. There was an ad in the local paper for an illustrator for souvenir decals. I made a portfolio and got the job—which wasn't much of a job. But I learned about color separation and the other crafts of the graphic art world. That led to other jobs in the field.

About the age of twenty-five I got a scholarship to the Cooper School of Art in Cleveland and started working with a couple of people putting out an alternative newspaper, *The Cleveland Express*. I also did a comic strip about the angst of living in a rust belt city, under the pseudonym May Midwest. Then I started acting out the comic strip with some friends, doing midnight art installations as the Regional Art Terrorists, a name that wouldn't work the same today. We did that for several years, in the late seventies and early eighties.

RM: How did that turn into books?

MJC: Actually it was deciding to get a degree pretty late in life, in 1985,



ABOVE: Melissa Jay Craig's *Manifest, O* (2006). Made from kozo, abaca, translucent goatskin vellum, and tie-dyed goatskin leather. Over a third of the 264 pages are illustrated with drawings in Prismacolor pencil. This book, said Craig, began with a question: "Could I make a book that would allow you to see what it's like to have only muffled, indistinct, confusing sound, to rely on reading lips?"

TOP RIGHT: *Bad Girl* is an altered book by Melissa Jay Craig. It disappeared from the Joan Flasch Artists' Books Collection in the late 1990s and has not yet been found.

BOTTOM RIGHT: *For Maquette* (1990), Craig rebound a found dictionary in scale model brick and flexible caulk.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MELISSA JAY CRAIG.

though that sounds funny now. I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), and they offered bookbinding with Joan Flasch and Book as Concept with Ray Martin. I went for Book as Concept. That kind of let me channel all these different things into one area—working with imagery and paintings, narrative from comic strips, the metaphors of the installations. Fireworks went off. With Joan I got interested in how book structures worked. I loved the physicality of the book. After Joan died, Barbara Lazarus Metz, who had organized Artists Bookworks (ABW) in Chicago, restructured the bindery and found Heinke Pensky-Adams, who took over the binding instruction, and I learned a variety of traditional structures from her. Over the next few years Barbara put a few of my works in exhibitions at

ABW. When I graduated from SAIC, she hired me to teach bookbinding there. Eventually, ABW merged with another independent not-for-profit, the Paper Press, to become the Columbia College Chicago Center for Book and Paper Arts, and I went with it.

RM: What was the first book that you really thought of as a work of art?

MJC: About three of them happened at the same time. A Xeroxed book in an edition of six titled *Smoking*—I was trying to quit. Another was a drop-spine box titled *Wargame*. Inside were some cut up lithographs I had done of a crouching sort of tortured figure. I added some ball bearings, and when you opened the box the air pressure caused the figure to spin. The third one came about when I got sick and had to go into the hospital for gallblad-

der surgery. I convinced the nurses to save all the artifacts—IV bags, and that sort of thing. I put all the stuff into a book, but my advisor at school was unable to touch it. So I color Xeroxed all the pages, mounted them to Rives BFK, hand-cut each shape, and made an edition with the images.

RM: Then what happened?

MJC: At the end of the 1980s I started doing altered books. They became architectural and sculptural. I did a whole installation titled *Library*. That funneled my experience of libraries as a kid. You could read the entire installation as a text, or take individual altered books and handle them. That installation traveled around.

Around 1996 I learned I was going deaf. I had no idea I wasn't hearing until an audiologist discovered that I



ABOVE: *(S)Edition* was exhibited in its entirety in 2010 at the Morgan Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio.

RIGHT: Craig's *(S)Edition* is a limited bookwork edition of ninety-nine copies and an installation. Seen here is a single copy, made of cast and hand-shaped abaca, embellished with cotton rag.

had been reading lips. I stopped working for a year. Then in 1998 I was offered a residency at the Ragdale Foundation's art colony in Lake Forest, Illinois. The studio was way out in the woods, and I brought two pounds of kozo fiber and some small round-back books. I cooked the kozo and covered the books in it, using them as moulds. From the spines they looked like a row of old vellum bindings, and from the other side they were hollow. Then I made forms that were book shaped, with raised bands. I had to learn papermaking then.

I started sewing the handmade paper as content for the kozo bindings, with rough unflattened sheets of paper that were sculptural. That led to six-foot-tall books, where their presence was the text. I decided that if my relationship with words was going

to change so dramatically, my books would reflect that.

During my early experimental phase with paper, I was teaching book arts at the then newly-created Center for Book and Paper Arts in Chicago; its director was Marilyn Sward, a fantastic (and self-taught) papermaker and advocate for all things paper. She was thrilled that I became interested in papermaking and encouraged me tremendously, making sure I met every paper artist she brought in, prompted me to sit in on many of their classes, and she actually jumped up and down when I used a small grant to purchase my first beater.

All my early colleagues there were fantastically supportive in one way or another: Audrey Niffenegger steadfastly kept after me to apply for that first Ragdale residency, Marilyn and an early summer director, Amanda

Degener, encouraged my pursuit of papermaking, and our second director, Bill Drendel, helped me to keep expanding my knowledge of traditional bookmaking, while never questioning the odd things I was doing with that knowledge. It was an inclusive, important hive of activity in those early years, and I was fortunate to be there during that time.

Working with paper really brought everything home for me, solidified everything I had been doing before with the newer resolution to make things that communicated in non-verbal ways into a whole that has not become stagnant, that always remains fresh. I even have kozo growing in our little Chicago backyard now and will do my first harvest this fall. 🌿

Richard Minsky is a book artist and is the founder of the Center for Book Arts in New York City (1974).