

THE BUNEFOLDER

an e-journal for the book binder and book artist



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Melissa Jay Craig's That's Life, 2005

Table of Contents

Disciplining a Craft by Clifton Meador	3
Teaching Book Culture by N. Bradley Christie	11
The Book Art of Melissa Jay Craig by Jen Thomas	18
Solving the Production Puzzle: Jigs and Other Tips for Hand Binding Books in Multiples by Priscilla Spitler, Hands On Bookbinding	23
Beautiful Books Digitally by Jamie Runnells	33
One Book, Many Interpretations: The Making of the Exhibition by Lesa Dowd	37
A Review of the Guild of Book Workers 100th Anniversary Exhibition and Exhibition Catalog by Craig Jensen	41
No Longer Innocent: Book Art In America, 1960-1980, a review by Melissa Jay Craig	45
Advertise in the Bonefolder	46
Submission Guidelines	50

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The Book Art of Melissa Jay Craig

By Jen Thomas

Melissa Jay Craig is a book artist whose work easily inhabits both the craft-based world of traditional book arts and the sculptural world of fine art. For reasons unknown to most working within the field of book arts, this feat seems difficult to achieve. Her freestanding book objects are easily at home nestled between other artist's books or displayed as purely sculptural objects on their own. Life-size book forms resembling trees rising up from the ground force viewers to challenge their idea of what a book should look like. Bark becomes spine. Lichens become pages. Trunk becomes book.

18



Anatomically Correct: Filtration, 2003, kozo, abaca, black cotton denim, packed sewing on dyed hemp cords, dyed raw silk endband. 18"H x 6"W x 6"D



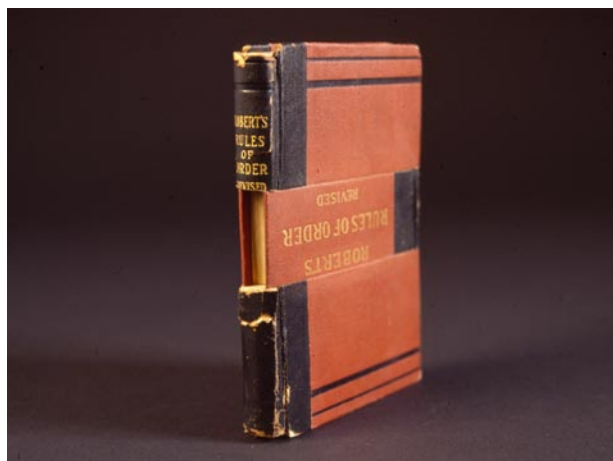
...A Memoir, 2004, kozo, abaca, acrylic stain, walnut dye. Sewn to flax-wrapped hemp cords. 72"H x 16"W x 28"D

Craig's work has slowly evolved into many different forms over the last 30 years. She began her career as a painter in Cleveland, Ohio after briefly attending Cooper School of Art in the seventies. Though she had developed a small collector base, Craig became disillusioned with painting, realizing that collectors looked straight through her painstaking work, choosing paintings simply because they matched their decor. She began to make assemblages in addition to the painting, and also to implement large-scale outdoor "non-commissioned public works" that were installed in the dead of night around the city of Cleveland, with a group of friends known as the Regional Art Terrorists.

In 1986, she moved to Chicago to study at the School of the Art Institute, where she discovered book arts almost by accident. One semester into her painting degree, Craig began experimenting with book art while looking for an affordable, more democratic way to make art that could easily be distributed to a wider audience. By working with the book form, she could also actively engage the viewer with words, images, and 3-dimensional forms.

Though initially drawn to the democratic and economic nature of the book form, Craig soon became completely absorbed in the expressive potential of the book. Its physical form and the processes needed to create it all fascinated her, but she was particularly enthralled by the potential of the book to communicate and express, as well as contain ideas. She translated themes from her paintings into traditional book forms and then began to experiment by altering existing books. This allowed her to play with words and the action

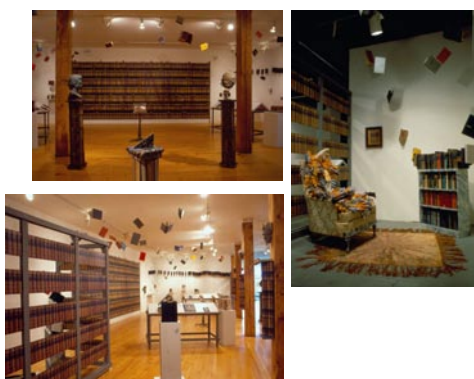
of reading. She soon left the painting department and never looked back.



Altered book, early 1990s

Craig then began to use the books themselves as objects or building blocks, creating installations with them to actively engage the viewer in the act of reading, as well as in the act of moving and absorbing visual information.

It was during this time at the Art Institute that she studied under Ray Martin and Joan Flasch, both of whom encouraged Craig to explore the creative potential within the book form. Soon her pieces evolved from traditional book structures into stylized book objects. She took these book objects a step further and created an installation titled *Library*. Without a universally accepted critical definition of book arts, Craig was free to let her ideas materialize without the limitations that painting had previously presented.



Library, 1991

Though Craig felt free to experiment with the book form, not all those working within the field of book arts recognized her work as artist's books. The critic Clive Philpott once derided Craig's work during his lecture at an artists' book event at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Craig says, "I had some of my altered books there and he

referred to them directly, saying, 'These are NOT books. They are fetishistic objects.' Knowing his particular bias, I felt honored to be included in his condemnation. I do make objects. Books are objects. What makes them fetishistic is their inherent resonance, the ability to communicate on a visceral, nonverbal level. So, like the issue of beauty, I can embrace that description; fetishistic objects carry an implicit communicative power. They can be read."



Maquette, 1990, found dictionary, scale model brick, flexible caulk, drawing.

In the years after leaving the Art Institute, Craig's book forms continued to shift and change, while still remaining "fetishistic objects" and retaining her unmistakable satirical voice. She moved away from installed work to focus on books constructed with found objects. Soon she found herself teaching book arts to a new generation of art students who had never before discovered the form that she had fallen in love with.

Though she had never intended to become a teacher when she began her Master's program at the Art Institute, in 1991 Barbara Lazarus Metz asked Craig to teach a bookbinding class at Artists' Book Works and she agreed. After that she was offered many more teaching opportunities and spent the mid-nineties running between classes at Loyola University, Gallery 37, School of the Art Institute, Artists' Book Works, and the Newberry Library, often all in a single week. She also traveled, teaching workshops at different locations around the country, and managed to continue free-lancing as a set builder for commercial photo and video productions.

Artists' Book Works was enveloped by Columbia College in 1994, becoming Columbia College Chicago's Center for Book and Paper Arts, and Craig continued to teach there. She then slowly relinquished all of her far-flung part-time teaching jobs to focus her energy into helping to grow this new Center, first as Exhibitions Coordinator, then part-time faculty, and finally as a full-time Artist-in-Residence, a position she still holds today.

20

Since joining the Center for Book and Paper, Melissa has created seven courses that are now included in the permanent college curriculum. Her classrooms have become communities in which students can continue to experiment with the book form without limitation and push boundaries in a supportive environment. Her students approach book arts from a variety of disciplines – papermaking, performance, video, sculpture, writing, printmaking, and fine binding – and Craig manages to encourage each of her students to create book and paper art that reflects their personal affinity for these unique and disparate backgrounds. Benjamin Chandler, a former student and educator himself, says, “She has the ability to go to the meaning and heart of what you want to say in your work and help you to say it better. She is enthusiastic about her students’ work.” This sentiment was echoed over and over by former students who offered “It is rare to find a teacher who has the degree of deeply heart felt dedication to the success and well being of her students”, “Melissa is very generous with herself”, and “I loved that she never projected her own agenda or issues onto me, and listened to me fully as my own person and artist.” She has also been able to balance being an inspiring teacher and successful working artist simultaneously, a balance that many artist/educators find extremely difficult to achieve. In 2002, Melissa Jay Craig was awarded the Excellence in Teaching Award at Columbia College, an honor she received by being nominated by both students and fellow faculty.

Though she’s been receiving kudos from former students and faculty for the last several years, Craig has said that it wasn’t easy for her to find a home in academe.

Her artist’s books were considered too sculptural and, well, too wacky for institutions looking for a fine binding instructor or an artist who focused exclusively on multiples.

“I’m difficult to pigeonhole. I’m not exclusively a sculptor, a bookbinder, 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.

I came into the Interdisciplinary Arts Department’s developing book arts MFA program at Columbia College in 1996, and this unique approach allowed me to embrace teaching as well.”



Page spreads from *Manifest, O*, 2006, Kozo, abaca, translucent goatskin vellum, tie-dyed goatskin leather, bamboo, Walnut dye, acrylic stain, Prismcolor drawings. Sewn to hemp cords, dyed lined endbands, modified split-board binding. 18.5”H x 12.5”W x 5”D closed.

Several years ago, Craig’s approach to book arts changed dramatically after learning that she was losing her hearing. She was shocked at the news and stopped making artwork in order to process it; she needed to mentally prepare herself for a future without sound. Audrey Niffenegger, in an act of faith, invited Craig to create a piece for an exhibition she was curating, on the basis of one of her sketches. Melissa revisited the altered book form, arranging them into the expanding rings of a large tree trunk named *DisAfter*. This was the beginning of a new phase of work in which her books took on more forms pulled straight from nature.



DisAfter, 1998, altered books, 68”diameter

When she finally returned to making art, she began to experiment with kozo, a papermaking fiber that she had never used before. Having no formal training in papermaking, Craig spent her first residency at the Ragdale Foundation the following year to experiment with kozo exclusively. She found that this quiet plant fiber could speak so loudly on its own, taking the place of words in her new pieces. Her new books took the form of trunks, empty shells of books with no pages, no words, to reflect her future world without sound.



Forgotten Knowledge, 1999, kozo, edition of 12.

As her hearing had slowly deteriorated, Craig had unconsciously learned to read lips to compensate for the lack of sound. “I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing; I read lips so well that I actually believed that I was hearing”, she says. When she discovered the extent of her hearing loss, the sudden realization that she had learned a whole new form of reading began to heighten her awareness of other forms of reading. Her books then became more far more tactile, compelling viewers to absorb meaning through the smell or touch of plant fiber and the book’s physical form, instead of

the written word strung together in a standard narrative. Craig’s physical limitation seemed to unleash creative possibilities in her new artist’s books.

Craig’s deteriorating hearing also piqued her interest in other forms of entropy occurring in nature. She began to collide the book form with decaying carriers of information found in the environment – seed pods, plants, desiccated tree trunks, and fungi. These often huge sculptural bookworks are at once compelling and repellant, urging viewers to touch, but warning them that nature is fragile and there could be bugs hiding in there! (At least that’s what I always think when I contemplate pulling back one of her brightly colored kozo fungi pages.)

She continued to experiment with kozo, in addition to other plant fibers such as abaca and flax. Craig began molding these fibers onto forms and eventually added color to them with procion dyes. Her tree books grew a host of paper plant life bursting with the color of fungus. She was now thoroughly seduced by paper and eventually acquired her own beater, turning her basement into her own papermaking studio.



That’s Life, 2005, kozo, abaca, walnut dye, procion dye, oak, poplar. Adhesive binding. 30”H x 34”W x 12”D

Craig brought her paper experimentations into the classroom at Columbia and designed a sculptural paper class. The woman who dropped out of papermaking class within the first week while at the Art Institute and waited ten years to try it again had now fully embraced the medium and was intent on sparking that same enthusiasm in her students. (After writing that sentence I'm reminded of my own grad school beginnings, eye-rolling at the thought of having to make my own paper. Now I work almost exclusively with handmade paper. Do all book artists go through this love/hate relationship with paper?) When I asked her the same question, Craig offered, "It is weird... the material just suited me so well that it *demand*ed that I learn it, and it continues to demand that I keep expanding."

As Craig has expanded her work with paper, her artist's books have achieved a level of aesthetic beauty that she had almost deliberately avoided in making earlier pieces. Admittedly afraid of making "beautiful" work, Craig struggled with the new natural forms that her books were taking. She feared that viewers would only see the beauty and then move on without further exploring or engaging with her pieces. It is a struggle that most artists deal with – making work that is aesthetically pleasing, yet thought provoking at the same time. She says she has finally embraced making beautiful things, and lost the accompanying uncertainty about how they'll be perceived.

And for those who are reluctant to call her a book artist, Melissa leaves us this thought, "... Though my art is often called sculpture and often called book art; to me, it is simply my art. It is firmly based in the book, in my fascination with book structures, and in how books function for us; my work would not exist without my strong and multifaceted relationship to books and especially to reading. But in the end, I simply make things that I personally need to see existing in the world." Regardless of what kind of artist she is or isn't, I'm glad that her pieces exist in this world - whatever anyone chooses to call them.

Jen Thomas is a writer, printmaker, and book artist who lives and works in Chicago. When she's not constructing three-dimensional board games about renter's nightmares and painful weddings, she spends her time editioning etchings of trailer parks under her own imprint, Veronica Press. Her writing has appeared in *Punk Planet*, *Afterimage*, and *Blister Packs* - a Love Bunn Press anthology. She can be reached at <jen_thomas@mac.com>, or on the Web at <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jenthomas>>



Ganoderma Bibliatum (Specimen 9), 2007, abaca, adhesive binding, 13"H x 16"W x 11"D