

Timothy Ely:
The Drumleaf Binding

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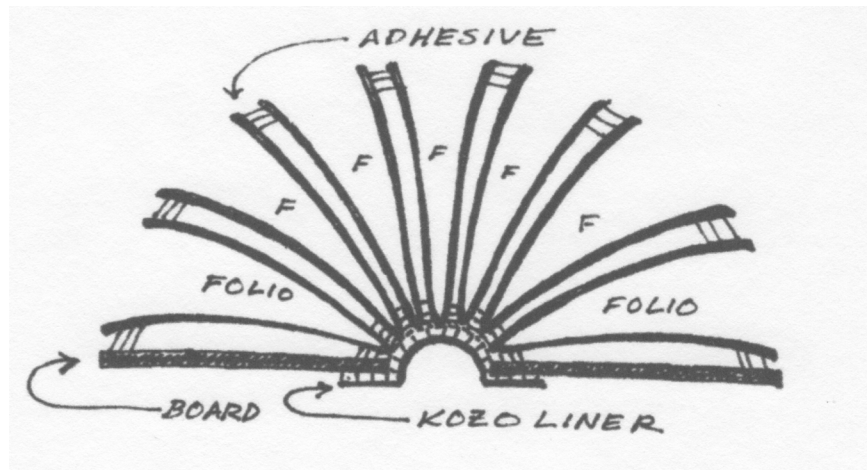
Timothy Ely began creating books in the 1950s but pursued bookbinding more formally in graduate school in the 1970s. Upon completion of his Master of Fine Art degree, Ely moved to England, where he studied method and technique. His work can be found in numerous public and private collections. He now lives and works in Washington State.

What I enjoyed most about Tim Ely's presentation was its seamless intersection of art, bookbinding and invention. Tim began by presenting a selection of his beautiful, evocative, mysterious work, with its apt, alchemical imagery, and its sense of "concealments, things buried, and secret codes." Tim talked about maintaining a historical consciousness in his work, and of finding both visual inspiration and tangible materials naturally occurring on the planet. He tracked his work's progression from full leather bindings textured with sand or bones to equally rich and varied imagery created with multiple thin layers of paint.

A number of factors led to Tim's development of the Drumleaf binding. He spoke of studying vellum binding in England, and how in one instance the vellum was drummed to boards to minimize cockling and pull. He also spoke of the need to be able to carry his intricate compositions outward from the gutter, and to have a flat surface for his paintings. Working on only one side of a folio also allows him to add pinholes and small, precise knife cuts to his palette. Since the Drumleaf binding is made of heavyweight paper, such as Arches Cover, Tim was able to work with a progression of only six to eight folios and still have quite a substantial structure. He was also able to extend the page surface into the idea of a hypercube, carrying designs from one exposed folio to the next by means of incorporated edge decoration.

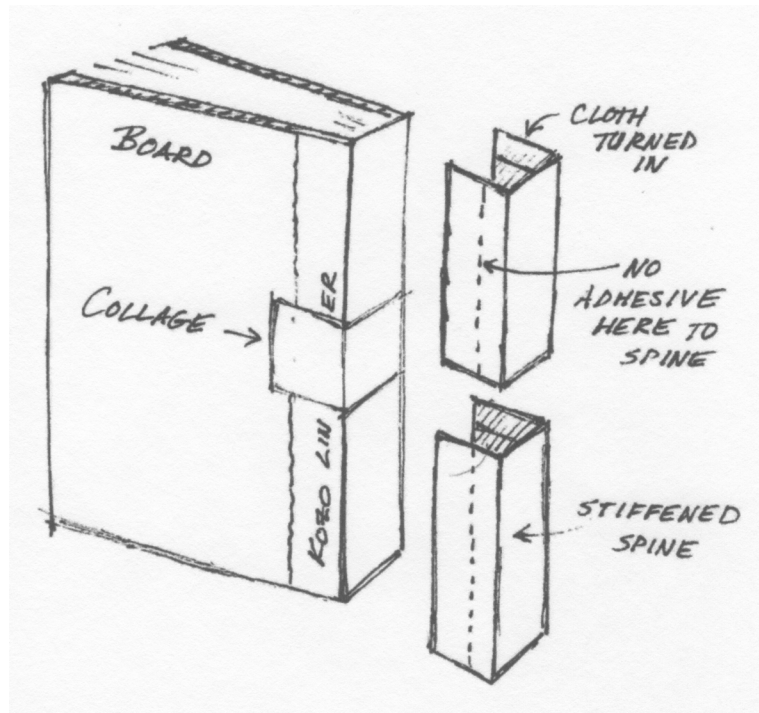
"Drumming" is, simply, to stretch a membrane tightly over a surface, adhering it to the substrate only at the sides, like the surface of a banjo or the head of a drum. The Drumleaf binding itself is deceptively simple. Single heavyweight folios, together with appropriately heavy end sheets and fairly lightweight boards, are stacked in succession, put into a finishing press with the folio spine folds facing up, and knocked up square. The spine receives an initial coat of PVA and a second coat when dry. It is then backed with a liner of kozo paper, which is carried over onto the boards.

When fully dry, the book is removed from the press and drummed together between the folios, first at the spine edge, and then at the fore edge. Tim had his own tools for this process, selected and designed to speed things along and minimize the moisture applied to the paper. He used a small foam roller to pick up an even amount of PVA-methylcellulose mixture, then tapped a plastic drywall spatula onto the roller to coat it with a thin, uniform amount of glue. The spatula was inserted between the folios at the spine edge and dragged outward for a short distance. Another, smaller, drywall spatula was modified by adding a piece of square plastic bar stock to the spatula's edge, allowing Tim to precisely place the small amount of adhesive needed between the folios at the fore edge. This, too, was tapped onto the roller to pick up the glue. Working first from the front of the book, then flipping it over to the back after each application of glue, Tim had the text block finished in a very short time.



The book was then placed between the jaws of a slightly modified Black and Decker workbench, clamped tightly, and trimmed at the head, tail and fore edge with a French paring knife used as a plow. Tim planned to have a portion of the spine exposed on this book, so he adhered a small, thin, "Modernist" collage to the spine, overlapping onto the boards.

He then cut two spine stiffeners of Arches cover to the exact width of the spine, one running from the head of the book to just beyond the top of the collage, and the other up from the tail to just cover the bottom of the collage. These were adhered to book cloth of his own making, a patterned 100% cotton backed with interleaving paper. The cloth was trimmed to approximately an inch on either side of the spine liners, and a half-inch was turned in at the head and tail of each spine liner. The pieces were simply glued to the boards, leaving approximately 3/8 inch without glue on either side of the spine, allowing the spine to drop down when the book is opened, much like Gary Frost's "Mexican Hinge."



Because there are no turn-ins over the boards, about an inch of exposed board edge is left at the head and tail, but Tim pointed out that these could easily be painted, stained, or covered before the spine pieces are added. To finish, cover paper is drummed on, butted up to the cloth and drummed to all three edges of the boards, then turned in as usual. The last part of the process is to drum the endpapers down and then, as soon as the glue is dry, as Tim says, “Bob’s your uncle”: the book is ready to be shipped out.

There were a plethora of tips and tricks presented in this workshop; more than I’ve seen in any other, I think. We learned about fermenting flour paste, which will not pull nearly as much as freshly made starch pastes, and that if you shake or stir it regularly, you can keep a batch going in perpetuity, like sourdough starter. We learned about beer paste derived from the ancient Egyptians; one part flour cooked in 10 parts beer, which is great for pasting leather over formed surfaces, though it makes your studio smell “like a frat house on Sunday morning.” A great edge-decorating paste can be made from graphite dissolved in wax and turpentine. Various grounds and sizes were discussed, in order to make a good, toothy surface for painting on paper. And then there were The Tools: the Adhesive Transfer Gun, the Paint Buddy (\$8 at Home Depot) and of course, the many and varied Planetary Collage prototypes Tim obligingly brought along, such as the adjustable-angle finishing press, the adjustable height nipping press, and the magnetic squares for box construction, to name a few. I thoroughly enjoyed Tim Ely’s workshop from start to finish. The fact that I saw the production of a superbly useful book structure for artists was almost secondary.

Written and illustrated by Melissa Jay Craig