

# Of Poetry, Engravings and Books

TOM SMART celebrates the transformative visual language of Alan Stein and his limited edition books from the Church Street Press.

PAINTER, PRINTMAKER and book artist Alan Stein is an artist of many different expressive modes and means. His vibrant, dynamically composed paintings explore how the landscape stimulates memories, while his wood engravings display an elegant lyricism of a well-turned line bracketed by shapes of deeply saturated tones.

These stylistic signatures combine to great advantage in his limited edition pamphlets, chapbooks and books of poetry that he has produced from his Parry Sound-based Church Street Press for well over two decades. In Stein's hands, the marriage of word and image, and of pictorialism and poetry, result in limited edition books that give voice to the poetry of objects as much as they do to the poets' words and the artist's prints.<sup>1</sup>

Process dictates form. While he is setting the type for a particular poem, a word or a metaphor might call up an image in his mind, and lead him to a sketch, born from the linear process of putting letters together in a gate.<sup>2</sup> This simple equation of typesetting stimulating imagism—a kind of sequential automatism—has been the backbone of his bookmaking method since the beginning. Sketches, often just an array of lines, turn into images. They can be literal or allusive, directly linked to the verses, have a personal connotation, or exist on the margins of direct references. These accumulated sketches form a pictorial portfolio specific to the collection of



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An Old Sailor's Portion, engraving.

poems and gradually generate the book project.

Stein's first limited edition book was a collection of poems for children by Barbara Jean Hawkins, *What Do Grasshoppers Chew?* (1990). It includes 28 of his coloured linocuts, one for each poem. Their roughly square or rectangular formats echo the convention of an emblematic device used as a graphic illustration. The images show various interpretive styles, ranging from purely descriptive, direct, literal visualizations of poetic passages to symbolic and stylized cuts.

The elegance of his graphic style on view in this limited edition book, embodying a linear, gestural energy, announced Stein's personal signature in his engraved works. His is an expressive vibrancy that renders natural and figurative motifs into patterns of sinuous waves that animate his subjects. His visual lyricism gives life and energy to descriptions of landscapes and shorelines, windswept clouds, and arrangements of fields and trees that caress the land as if it were a living, breathing thing. Adding to the dynamic compositions, Stein displays an innate sense of compositional patterning in his balancing of darkness and light. When married to his line work, his compositions intensify a scene's action and vitality.

**INSPIRED BY ENGLISH ENGRAVERS**  
These stylistic and compositional hallmarks are all evident from his very earliest engravings,

## The Devil's Artisan.

A Journal of the Printing Arts Twenty Eight 1991



Cover of *The Devil's Artisan* 28 (1991).

among them his cover illustration of a northern Ontario island for *The Devil's Artisan* 28 (1991). It foreshadows much that would follow in his work, especially how he suggests whole worlds and microcosms in single, emblematic engravings. His antecedents include the English engravers Eric Ravilious (1903–1942) and John Buckland Wright (1897–1954). In their prints, Stein found much to emulate in the ways landscapes and figures could be seamlessly interwoven into a unified composition through linear means.

Weather and topography, light and texture, Ravilious's paintings and prints embody a reverent encounter with nature and the rural countryside. In a similar manner, Buckland Wright expresses a deeply human impulse to bridge the gap between the human and natural realms, and to recast nature in anthropomorphic terms using the simple means of cutting lines in wood, inking the blocks, and running them through a press.

The lessons of these artists—painters and printmakers both—served Stein well as he

developed both his engraving and printmaking practices in his book works. In the early 1990s, having established Church Street Press, Stein immersed himself in publishing limited edition books of poems, chapbooks and pamphlets. He is a key figure in the Ontario-based artisanal publishing movement led by Bill Poole and Fred Hagan, and by publishers such as Tim and Elke Inkster's *Porcupine's Quill*, which also published high-quality trade editions of many engraved books produced in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

Stein also attended the annual wayzgoose in Grimsby, Ontario, and contributed regularly to its anthologies of artist-made prints. In 1990 he illustrated and published Barbara Wohleber's *Moirra, an Ancient Celtic Tale*. This chapbook comprises five Stein linocuts printed in single colour with dramatic dark-to-light contrasts, with very minimal use of cross-contour lines to indicate volume, energy and motion. A year later he, along with his wife Charlotte, published a second children's book of verses, entitled *Paddy and Parker: The Print Shop Dogs*, a slim volume bound in

that year's wayzgoose anthology. Stein produced three coloured linocuts to accompany the verses.

#### THE "ISLAND" AS SIGNATURE DEVICE

Stein's 1993 pamphlet *Islands* announced him as much more than just a printer, printmaker or book publisher. In the way he approached his subject matter, and in his use of all the materials comprising the publication, Stein aggregated the various elements of his practice into a kind of visual poetry. His purpose was to combine word with image to amplify the written metaphor on his textured papers and bound in between his sculpted covers. *Islands* is both a poetic object on its own, and also poetic emblemata in the way it is more allusive and abstracted than the previous chapbooks.

Its visual elements comprise a series of Stein's wood engravings that are more interpretive than illustrative, a quality that sets them apart from what came before in his practice. The images—symbolic and stylized islands—are abstracted forms reduced to their essential shapes, which float on animated fields made by the engraving tools scratching the woodblocks. Similarly, the text is set down in this very simple format: a list.

As image and concept, the "island" provided Stein with a signature device that he has returned to repeatedly in his subsequent work. *Islands*, he noted in an artist's statement in the pamphlet, was "one of a series of projects in which I am exploring the landscape of islands." This comment served to foreshadow much that would come in his artistic development, particularly in his engravings and book designs, and it directly served as a statement of artistic intent.

Isolated, self-contained, whole worlds cut off from others: the island motif and metaphor gave much to Stein, not the least of which was a way to explore the concept of home. In addition to living in the town of Parry Sound, he and his wife purchased an island in Georgian Bay at Bayfield Inlet, north of Pointe au Baril, that provided him and his family refuge and solace, as well as a second studio space in which he could explore as fully and deeply as possible a kind of inspirational muse in the form of a striated rocky outcrop surrounded by water.

This format and metaphor figures prominently

in *The Story of Castor* (1994), which includes just one wood engraving. This print, which arguably stands for Stein's creative ecosystem, is a densely engraved aerial view of a boat surrounded by a rolling sea. Yet the water is described in a way that its surface attenuations might also allude to a night sky's constellation. The sensitive black and white negative polarity printing conjures depth, action and energy. In its totality, this print serves as a poetic statement all its own, independent of the textual elements of the book work.

Stein's fascination with islands led him to release, through the Church Street Press also in 1994, a limited edition book also entitled *Islands*. A longer meditation on the subject that does not replicate the 1993 pamphlet, it features texts from diverse historical and contemporary authors treating the subject, and includes 19 wood engravings, 15 of which are hand coloured.

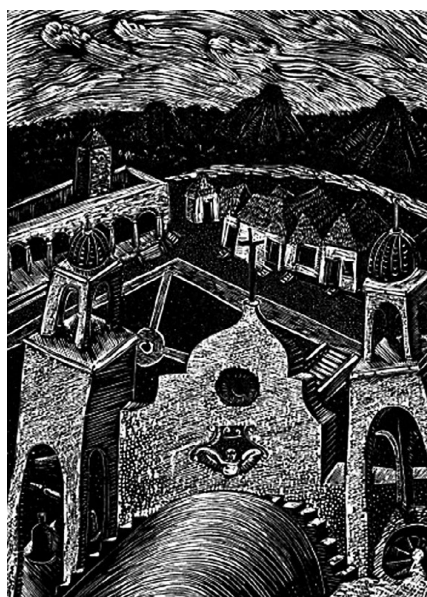
The engravings, providing a parallel text to the written passages, interpret views of lakeshores, islands and other landscape motifs, depicted in a way to emphasize linear striations of mineral veins in rocks, as well



Swimming at Night, engraving (1994).

### September 17th 1882

I got a life preserver and put it on. The boat went into the trough of the sea and would not obey her helm. She rolled heavily for about twenty minutes when she was struck by a heavy sea and foundered and went down with her engines working at about half past eleven. The Asia was making for French River and had horses and lumbermen's supplies for the shanties there. I saw three boats lowered, I was in the first boat. About eight were with us, more got in until the boat was overloaded. The boat was turned over twice, and parties were hanging on to my life-preserver which got displaced and I threw it off. I then left the boat and swam to the captain's boat which was near by and asked Mr. John McDougall to help me in, he said it was little use but gave me his hand, when I got in there were eighteen in the captain's boat and by that time there was a larger



Left: *The Asia*, sample page (1995). Right: *Church Roof*, from *In Mexico* (1996).

as to heighten the visual rhythms set up by the landscapes, built structures and water.

Overall, the interplay of image and text is a complexly constructed visual statement in which the pictures seem to emerge from an array of parallel and overlapping marks. Although Stein labels his engravings “illustrations,” they are not merely direct translations of motifs and descriptors in the texts, but images that riff off the poetry or feeling embodied in the words.

The island theme surfaces again in *The Asia: A Firsthand Account of That Last Fateful Voyage of 1882* (1995), also published as a chapbook in that year's Grimsby wayzgoose anthology. Stein interprets the tragedy of the historical shipwreck of the *Asia* on Georgian Bay in wood engravings showing a boat being heaved on rough waters delineated in high-contrast black and white. The images are set down in an elegant, fluid line through which energy is easily conveyed by the dynamic compositions.

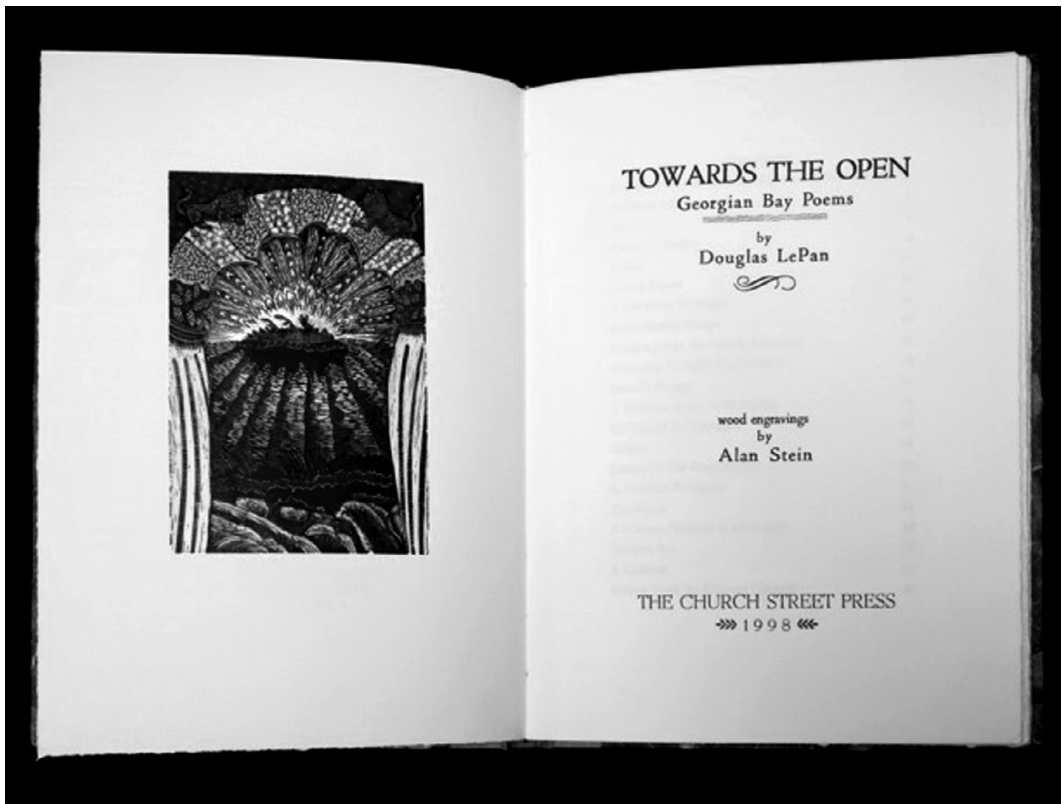
#### INTERPRETING POEMS OF PURDY & LEPAN

By 1996, Stein had produced a significant portfolio of limited edition book works blending prints and poems, and which enfold the binding material and processes to create

books of depth, elegance and sensuality. His confidence in this multi-layered expressive modality led him to take on the significant challenge presented by publishing a volume of Canadian poet Al Purdy's poems entitled *In Mexico*. It comprises 10 wood engravings, a hand-coloured frontispiece with gold-leaf illumination, as well as paper-covered end boards, linocut-printed in red ink on grey grounds.

The book design choices all enhance Purdy's poems, which combine descriptive prose, episodic narratives and travel-based imagery with sensual descriptions of places and customs. The travelogue format of the volume supplies a narrative momentum amplified by Stein's engravings, which embrace several different styles and genres. Interpretative in nature, they are composed around landscapes and built structures. Their decorativeness extends from densely composed, almost abstracted design elements, marks and scratches from which recognizable subjects emerge and recede into the black fields of ink. When matched with the poems, the result is an almost hallucinogenic effect.

Stein has perceptively chosen to give emphasis to a sense of unbalance in the poetic cadences that simulate a surreal accumulation of sights, smells, impressions with bizarre notes grounded



Towards the Open, frontispiece and title page (1998).

in history and (often violent) rituals. As he writes as a gloss to this volume, “This book reflects . . . [my] fascination with the culture, history and people of Mexico. Mexico’s attraction . . . lies in the seductive climate, quality of light, rich colours, unique religious symbolism and architecture, and the contrasts between past and present.” *In Mexico* is Stein’s visual and textual expression of his intention to engage several senses at the same time, and stimulate personal and historical memory in the reader and in himself.

The Church Street Press annually published Stein’s own chapbooks and books of poetry through the mid-1990s, including *Beduér Gastronomique* (1996), a chapbook comprising a recipe for confit de canard. Stein’s engravings that accompany Sheree-Lee Olson’s suite of poems published in *Sailor Girls* (1998) are dynamically composed, positive-polarity black and white engravings of ships and freighters.

The artistic success of a project as multivalent as *In Mexico* prompted Stein to collaborate once

again with a poet to create a similarly sensually rich and complex book project. Canadian poet Douglas LePan accepted Stein’s invitation to work together, and the result is their limited edition book *Towards the Open: Georgian Bay Poems* (1998). A meditation on memory, myth, loss and landscape, *Towards the Open* provided Stein the opportunity to return to his exploration of the island metaphor more fully than before. That LePan’s poems similarly explore this metaphor propelled Stein into a fertile creative territory in which his images could take on the responsibility of being visual emblems of LePan’s verses, allowing both device and text to resonate and amplify each other’s significance.

Indeed, the creative territory opened up by LePan’s meditations allowed Stein to deepen his own interpretations of the island motif. This expansiveness is shown to stunning effect in the volume’s frontispiece—a dazzling hand-coloured and gilded engraving of a Georgian Bay island near Bayfield Inlet at sunset. The effect of Stein’s

unique linear style moves the imagery away from naturalism to a kind of abstraction based in an impulse to simplify the elements of rock, water and trees into radiant devices. While acknowledging their roots in a recognizable subject, they are much more allusive than literal.

In the succeeding poems, Stein delves into the mythopoeic references of the poems, which he interprets with great imagination and energy. His Leviathan about to consume a lighthouse (accompanying “Red Rock Light”) is rendered in a spare and decorative line-based style that allows the negative spaces to become positive forms. The engraving for “Canoe Trip” has a mannered quality that suggests a narrative told through successive episodes along a water journey. Stein’s engraving preceding “Swimming at Night, Bayfield Inlet” blurs the distinctions between land, water and sky by a very light, thin series of strokes that tease the sparsely described pictorial elements from their dark grounds. More a series of scratches than engraved marks, a figure can be discerned in the image field whose crescent-like pose is echoed in the curved striations of veins in rocks, the constellations, and the arcs traced by shooting stars.

The metaphor of memory as the Georgian Bay landscape is the dominant element in the volume’s commingling of text, image and materials. There is also an elegiac tone to the volume, while counterpoints of transfiguration, metamorphosis and transformation engender an overwhelming feeling that comes from the communion of elements with the landscape.

#### ACROSS CANADA & ON TO VENICE

The beauty and deeply redolent conversation between artist and poet, between image and text, between visual emblem and metaphor, and between the materials of the book itself evident in the Purdy and LePan volumes confirmed Stein as an uncommonly gifted book artist. His sensitive attention to the poetry and to the poets’ aesthetics combine to make these two books fine exemplars of artist-poet collaborations. They demonstrate a fluid harmony between engraved and textual images.

The LePan volume led to a second collaboration with Purdy and to the publication in 2000 of his *Home Country: Selected Poems* by Al

Purdy, an autobiographical odyssey based on Purdy’s recollections of riding boxcars around Canada for three years in the 1930s, before he enlisted in the RCAF. The poems are based on episodes and stories that take place in a number of Canadian cities and regions. Stein supplies engraved interpretations of the poems rendered in a number of different styles. They range from naturalistic and rhythmical echoes of a kind of rural lyricism seen in the American Regionalists to dreamscapes, fantasies, symbolic and mystical interpretations, and elegies.

Just as in the LePan volume, the Purdy book conveys a sense of nostalgia based on the dredging of deep memories. The personal and the historical are viewed through the remembered lives and experiences of others. The metaphor of map-making embodies this element of the meaning. “It’s one of the pleasures of life,” writes Purdy in this volume, “that you can slip back in time through another person older than yourself; and through that other, and then, via his or her other, reach back through the centuries.”

Indeed, the themes of transformation and of re-creating oneself after deep loss stand at the core of a third collaboration between Stein and Purdy. In 2009, Stein published Purdy’s poem “Say the Names” as part of the Manitoba-based Library Project. Shirley Brown, the project’s curator, notes in the statement framing the exhibition that the project involved transforming 29 volumes of an old set of encyclopedias. Twenty-nine artists were invited to take one volume of the set and use it in a creative manner by “transforming” it in any way they saw fit.

For Stein, this meant taking the transformative theme literally by publishing one poem, and by taking apart the encyclopedia and repulping its papers to create new sheets on which his book work was printed. He deliberately destroyed one thing to create another; and he published Purdy’s poem about naming and re-naming of rivers. Bound in soft tan rawhide, Stein’s transformed chapbook is entirely congruent in subject, conception, material and method with the exhibition’s overarching theme. It also expressed his personal sense of loss at Purdy’s recent death, and the process of transformation death brings.

In 2007 Stein turned his hand to publishing

a suite of stone lithographs that play off the travels of James McNeill Whistler in Venice in 1880. *In Venice: The Case against Ruskin, and the Events Leading to Whistler's Tour of Venice in 1880* represents a departure for Stein. Rather than work in collaboration with a living author or poet, he drew the book's text from historical testimony against Whistler in the notorious 1878 trial in which the artist pursued his libel suit against the critic John Ruskin, who had defamed him, his paintings and prints. Although Whistler won the case, he was awarded damages of only one farthing. Following the trial, Whistler retreated to Venice to recover his finances and spirit by sketching and making prints of views of the city and its canals.

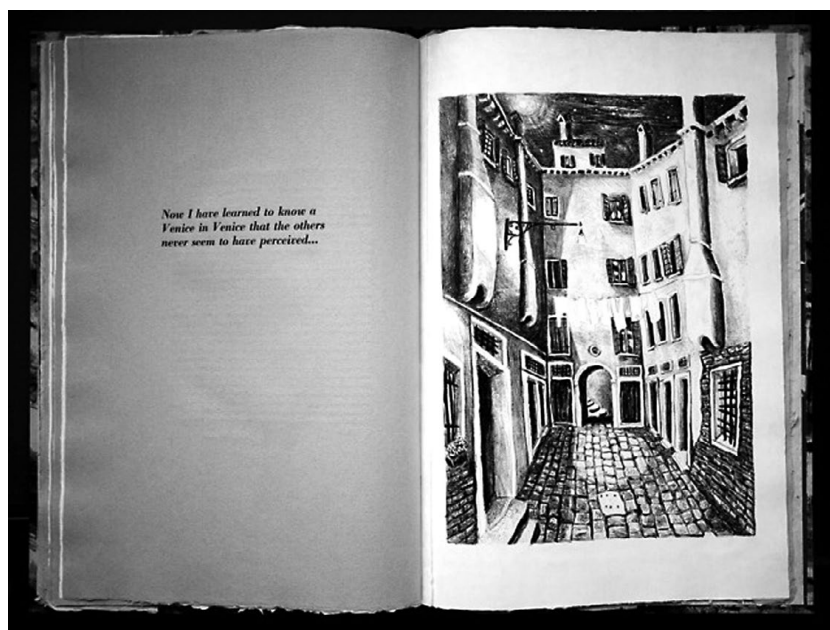
The project that Stein set himself was to follow in Whistler's footsteps in the city and interpret in his own prints the same views that had captured Whistler more than a century earlier. Just as Whistler sought the sanctuary and beauty of Venice to aid in his recovery and the recalibration of his career, so Stein also sought in Venice a similar recuperative space following the death of his son. A lamentation, a response to the trauma of deep loss, a homage to Whistler's renaissance as a printmaker, the

volume also traces Stein's own voyage of creative self-discovery and recuperation by meditating on a landscape that had been artistically and spiritually transformative to a fellow artist.

#### COLLABORATIONS WITH PAGE & CRUMMEY

*In Venice* led Stein to work with poet P.K. Page in 2009 on a limited edition series of her glosas—a complex poetic form that incorporates another poet's work into her own poems, and which all the while echoes the antecedent's voice and mood. Stein met Page through an introduction from Purdy. After discussing a possible collaboration, Page and Stein settled on the Church Street Press publishing eight new glosas. Stein set to work on interpreting the volume of poems, and he also made engravings for each.

The engravings are printed on Iwami Japanese paper and are bound into the volume adjacent to the accompanying poem. The imagery, however, is based on an allusive, even tangential reading of the verses, and takes into account what the volume's introductory essayist, Zailig Pollock, describes as the dominant theme of the collection: "a world of exile transformed through art into a human habitation."



*In Venice, page spread (2009).*



*Images from Viewfinder (2014):  
top, frontispiece; bottom, engraving.*

Stein blended a highly personal reading of each glosa with iconic visual images from popular culture—a man falling from the World Trade Center on September 11, for example—and crafted them into a symbolic portfolio of engravings that reflect a similarly complex structure as the glosa poem itself: the incorporation of a very different visual language into his own imagery, which then echoes the idea and mood of the original piece.

The result is a unique collaboration between poet and printmaker in which the form and structure in the work of one is reflected in that of the other, and all in aid of creating a hybrid artistic form in a bound volume. Exile and inhabitant: the tension between these two relationships powers the script and the portfolio. The engraving preceding “Each Mortal Thing” alludes to a falling human set against an office tower, whereas that accompanying “How to Write a Poem” is more representational than most others in the book—an interior scene gives way to a windswept Georgian Bay landscape seen out the window.

Stein’s masterful engraving for “Coal and Roses” comprising a Georgian Bay nocturne is delineated using a very fine burin. The marks are combinations of representational images and almost abstract energy fields. The night sky is scratched with traces of comets that are reflected in the water below. Symbolism, fantasy, even surrealism (“The Blue Guitar” is interpreted in a Chagall-like manner)—all these modes apply to Stein’s translation of Page’s work into prints. Just as the poetic form relies on a blending of form and voice, so do Stein’s engravings mix mode and motif to provide an elegant visualization of the poems’ structure and complex hybridity.

Stein’s latest artist’s book, published in October 2014, is *Viewfinder*, a collaborative project with Newfoundland-based author and poet Michael Crummey. Similar to his previous projects, *Viewfinder* explores the theme of light and dark in poems and in wood engravings frequently incorporating an island motif. The central metaphor of analyzing an old photograph for the memories and associations that are unlocked in the looking and imagining, *Viewfinder* is informed by the subtle melancholy that emanates from remembering the past—personal and shared. The stage for the action may be outport





Coal + Roses Alan Stein

Coal and Roses, engraving.

Newfoundland, but it is a convenient metaphor for the landscape as the locus of memories.

While the photograph's realistic depiction of a family tableau is the agent of Crummey's journey of remembering, Stein chose the mode of the fantastic to interpret the poetry. In this he also introduced the character of an elderly bearded man as an iconographic device, perhaps an autobiographical engraved avatar. This figure appears in the book in several guises: a bearded harlequin-turned-fisherman, a lighthouse keeper, a birder, an old sailor and a dream figure. Blue-grey papers on which the texts and images are printed reinforce the sombre mood of the writing.

Stein's engravings all interpret a landscape trope—an island. As a portfolio they show his extraordinary capacity for suggesting entire worlds through delicate, lyrical compositions that are symbolic of times and people long past and dimly recalled. *Viewfinder* is an elegy to what is lost to the passing decades, the ageing of the body, and the dwindling of the mind's ability to recover deep memories separating truth from fiction, and even to know the difference between the two.

To look back over the corpus of Stein's limited edition books published by the Church Street

Press is to see the manner in which he and the poets and authors with whom he collaborated worked in concert to find the rich congruencies between word and image, poetic metaphor and multivalent emblem; to find the right manner in which material and texture are able to reflect, echo and amplify mood and emotion; to find the perfect blending of line and cadence, all in the pursuit of a near-seamless synesthesia that can be captured between the covers of a book. Stein's books are object poems of transformation.

1. For a complete list of Church Street Press publications, refer to Alan Stein, "The Church Street Press, 1989–2014: A Checklist," *DA: A Journal of the Printing Arts*, No. 74 (Spring/Summer 2014), 39–47. This checklist provides complete bibliographic citations of the titles mentioned in this essay.
2. Alan Stein, personal communication, July 2014.

~ Tom Smart is deputy director and curator of the Art Gallery of Sudbury/ Galerie d'art de Sudbury, and a contributing editor for *Devil's Artisan*.