

The Spectacle of Paper

LUMI CONSTANTIN interviews GINA PAGE at this spring's exhibition by members of the B.C. chapter of the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild: Paper, Art, and the Book.

BETWEEN MARCH 27 and May 8, 2014, fourteen members of the B.C. chapter of the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild exhibited their work at the Craft Council of British Columbia Gallery on Granville Island in Vancouver. The exhibition was not a vast space with clinical glass cases as one might expect, but more of a cozy affair, where visitors were invited to get up close and intimate with the eclectic objects on display.

The artifacts included exquisite examples of bookbinding, handmade paper and letterpress printing along with various types of paper surface decoration. The exhibitors were multi-talented artists, poets and designers who relish crafting a medium for their work outside the digital realm. Their experiments with paper allow them to express themselves through new textures and shapes, and to incorporate unexpected elements such as dyes, lichens or bark with calligraphic or watercolour embellishments.

The interpretation of paper in this exhibition was remote from the smooth, perfect, nondescript white surface with which we're most familiar, or the uniform, systematic stacked

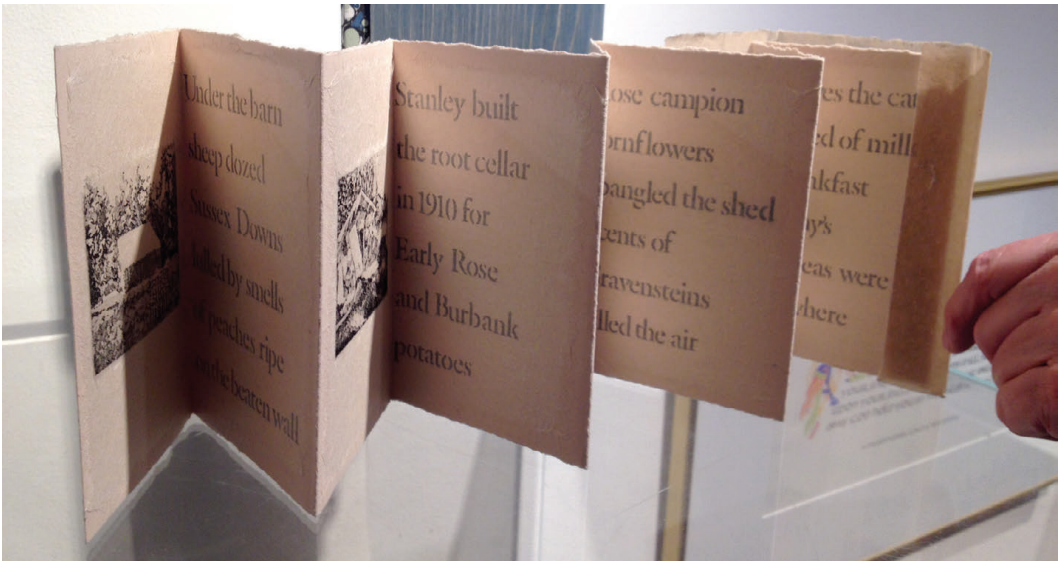
paper of the books on our shelves. This paper had personality, history, an evolution unique for each fibre, and a clear purpose, because these wonderful creations did not come into the world to be filled with meaning; they themselves are the meaning, or at least a layer of it. In many cases, the personality of paper went hand in hand with the written word, to create a fascinating work that can only delight the viewer.

The process of creating such complex works is, to be expected, quite arduous and time-consuming, but also rewarding, as it often happens. The artist becomes a scientist, a designer, a writer, an innovator, intimately involved in every step of creating the paper, the text, the illustration, to finally attain their vision. Yet an outsider finds it hard to grasp the complex process that goes into manufacturing these wonders, in some cases quite minute.

Gina Page, a member of the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild and a director of the Alcuin Society, recently took time to tell *Amphora* about her work with paper, its inspiration and layers of meaning. A lifelong resident of B.C., Gina credits the natural world of



Etchings are among the many elements Gina Page draws on to create her artist's books.



The text pages of Page's Farm Galiano Island (2009).

her home province with inspiring her work. Her books can be found in the special collections of both Canadian and American libraries. Since 1991 she has been a member of Malaspina Printmakers co-operative on Granville Island, where she has explored various etching processes. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

What characterizes you as an artist?

I am so in tune with the natural world that I often don't see things in their usual category, as we are encouraged to see them by the society—but I guess this is something I have in common with all creative people.

What is the role of paper in your projects?

Paper is very important to me. I don't always use handmade paper, but if it's appropriate and I can do it, I like to make the paper myself. I use a lot of Japanese paper—handmade *washi*, *kozo*, a diaphanous paper (you can see through the different layers). It's a theme that runs through my work: layers of meaning, ambiguity, and the idea of things that are right in front of you, but because you're not looking, you don't see them. Layers is a theme in my poetry as well.

You wear so many hats when you work on your projects: you write the text, create the illustrations, the paper. Do you feel more connected to the image or to the word?

I have asked myself many times, if I had to choose to be a much better poet or a much better visual artist, what would it be? The answer is that I prefer the poetic side, because of the power of the word.

Do you consider word to be more suggestive than image?

They are both very compelling, but the things I tend to express visually are quiet in a way. It's not that they are unimportant, but they are things you have to sit with for a while. On the other hand, words capture people's attention in such a vivid way that you can influence people more easily with words.

So in your work would you say that the visual is supporting the verbal?

Ideally the images and the words stand alone, on their own. One is not subordinate to the other. When I combine them, they should mutually support each other. In my books



The images of Page's Farm Galiano Island (2009).

words come first, and then I create the etchings. To me they tell a story all on their own. The etchings can be interpreted in so many ways. You could come up with very different meanings for the images than I had intended.

What technique are you using for the illustrations?

I am very fond of aquatint. In more conventional etching the plate is covered in acid-resisting ground, and if you want to make an image, you cut through this waxy ground. In aquatint the whole plate is covered in powdered rosin, which results in more tonal effects, and thus, more layers.

One of your most representative works is *Meditation on a Canterbury Bell Stem*. What is the story behind that?

I was weeding in the garden and I found this Canterbury bell. I thought I should draw it, write about it, do something about it. It was already dry. I was inspired by the bell that is hollow inside, so I imagined if I was a tiny mouse, I could go inside. Here it is just a small thing, but it is an entire universe all in itself. So for the longest time I had this long dry

stem on my mantelpiece with wonderful holes, which made me think of something vague.

I didn't know why it had such an effect on me until I read Earle Birney's essay about uncovering the significance of the events and developing an ability to tap into what they are trying to say (see "Creativity through Fiction," in *The Creative Writer* [1966]). He spoke about how he got stuck on something but he didn't put it back on the shelf. He kept writing till he figured out what the thing was trying to say to him.

I thought, *I'm just going to write phrase after phrase*, and I kept writing. Suddenly I realized there was a curvy part that reminded me of the twisty columns of Rome, so when I went to finish the sentence, there was such a combination of sacred and profane. It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it. Then I found some photos of those pillars and experimented with their design for my images. I guess I could have made other associations, but that was the one that came to me, that made sense: the combination of the husk so dried out, so beautiful and voluptuous at the same time. The idea of opposites, life and death, and the idea that things do not end with death.

This is a fantastic peek into the creative process, with its hurdles and epiphanies. It is incredible that after all this exploration, you

managed to create a poem that fits the format of the accordion fold perfectly.

[Gina laughs.] First the poem was much, much longer. Then I divided it into four sections, but it was still too long, so I went through it and tried to make it fit the size of the paper and the stencil I am using. This is where art meets function—the limitations of space and size. However, later I found a sketchbook and I brought some wonderful paper from Thailand and I covered all the pages and did the long version. I used the same etchings and pulled together what I could find.

So you stencil the text by hand?

I don't own a letterpress, but I wanted to do text. It is not easy to print on handmade paper. I tried hand lettering in the beginning, but the paper was very absorbent and it did not look good. The ink I am using is a very stiff oil-based stencil paint.

This sounds very labour-intensive.

Indeed, you cannot do it when you are tired. And you can only do a page at a time, because if you make just a tiny mistake, if the letters are slightly too close or too far, it becomes very obvious.

What happened after you finished the poem?

I made the paper. The whole thing was so organic, I couldn't imagine it done with bought paper. There are four separate pieces joined together. It had to be big enough. The paper is made of cedar bark, fir and abaca [manila hemp]. Then I made the etchings. On paper, first I applied the stencil for the text, because once you make a mistake you cannot correct it, so you don't want to glue the images on before that is done. Then I glued the parts together and the etchings in the end.

This is so exquisite, it cannot be reproduced at the push of a button. How many copies are out there?

It is an edition of five. Yosef Wosk bought one of them.

What comes next?

Right now I'm working on another book, a poem about Chinese lanterns. I am at the stage where I am experimenting with the paper, the ink, the colours.

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~ Lumi Constantin handles public relations for the Alcuin Society, overseeing events and communications including the Alcuin Society blog, <http://alcuinsociety.com/blog>.



Meditation on a Canterbury Bell Stem, by Gina Page.