

Oak Knoll Book Fest, 2010

A BOOK FAIR IS OSTENSIBLY an opportunity for the makers of books to show them to the public and for the public to see and buy said books. In the small town of Newcastle, Delaware, there is a gathering once every two years of 40 or so fine press publishers from several countries who assemble under the organization of Bob Fleck of Oak Knoll Books. The gathering offers a rich mix of some of the finest books currently made in North America, the U.K. and Europe. Having heard about this book fest for at least 10 years, I finally decided to attend.

Bob Fleck is the owner of the kind of well-stocked, well-managed bookshop we all wish existed in a town near us, the sort of place you could spend a week in if only they provided beds and the odd cup of coffee. Oak Knoll specializes in books about books and all related subjects, and the business is housed in an interesting historic building of the type quite commonly seen in Europe, but not in your average North American shopping mall. The atmosphere and surroundings definitely enhanced the visit for me: the town's undulating red brick pavements, brick buildings, and the shining, wide Delaware River, which one could easily imagine populated by early settlers' sailing ships.

This year, Mr. Fleck set a cat among the pigeons. Oak Knoll Books has become the distributor of publications from the Center for Book Arts (CBA), NYC, founded in 1974 by Richard Minsky and now administered as a "not-for-profit" organization. CBA programs are cutting-edge, although based on solid bookmaking principles. Traditional printing and book binding are taught, but this is New York and so there is a contemporary look to even the most traditional of texts, achieved using innovative book structures, unusual layout and sometimes unusual shapes. Artists' books push the boundaries, some more successfully than others.

When you have a book fair that has always been known as a fine press book fair, held in what I understand was the birthplace of the Fine

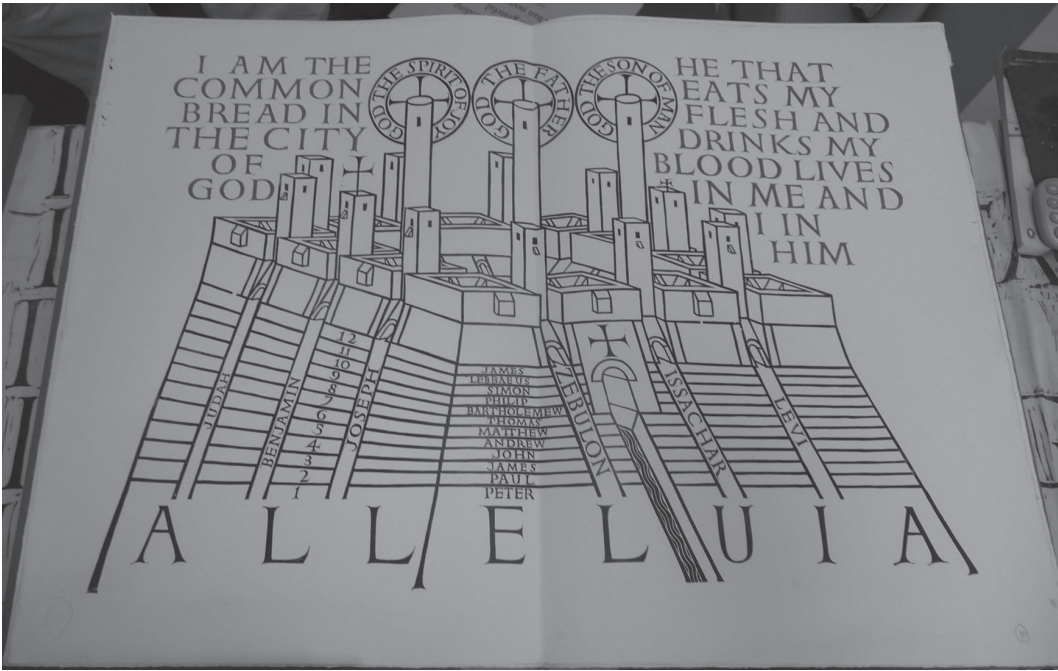
Press Book Association (FPBA), to introduce artists' books into that rarified atmosphere is quite a feat. Not surprisingly, some people are reluctant to accept the worth of books that do not follow the generally accepted pattern of the codex form, or that do not conform to the parameters of fine press books. Artists' books seem to thumb their nose at those cherished ideals of letterform, layout and illustration that make up the fine press book, and which have taken years to refine and polish.

Bob Fleck opened the book fair with a symposium titled "Artists Books—Press Books: Siblings or Distant Cousins?" The panel comprised Jane Siegal of Special Collections, Columbia University; Tim Murray, University of Delaware; Alexander Campos, the Center for Book Arts; Martyn Ould, proprietor of the Old School Press; and Duke Collier and Mark Samuels Lasner, both collectors of fine press books. (Strangely, to me, no book artist was on the panel.)

The symposium led to some lively discussion, but with so many people of independent thought, no real consensus of opinion. Fine press books and artists' books come from different roots, and although there is a certain amount of crossover, they are slightly awkward bedfellows. Additionally, the term "artists' books" is not absolutely defined, and means something different to almost everyone you talk to. Clearly they are as varied as any other category of book, and vary just as much as other books in their materials and execution.

The organizers arranged for Alexander Campos and Sarah Nicholls from the CBA to talk on Saturday morning, followed by the book fair and author signings at the bookshop. The book fair opened at noon in a large ground-floor room of a seniors' centre with a good-sized parking area, very important in an old town. From an exhibitor's viewpoint the accommodation was good, and for the visitor it was accessible, and easy to walk around.

On Saturday evening Bob and Millie Fleck hosted a reception at their home, and this was a great opportunity for the exhibitors to meet and talk. The weather was kind, the hors d'oeuvres delicious and the company exceptional. The following day Martyn Ould



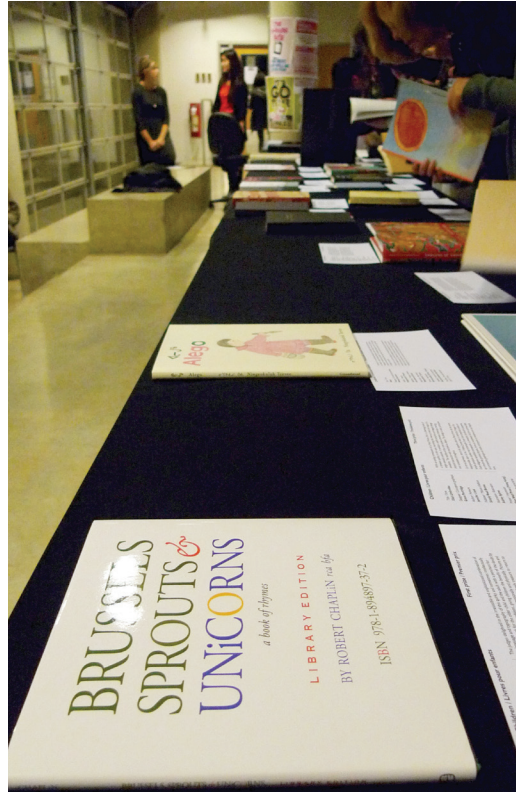
England's Whittington Press offered *A Vision of Order* at the 2010 Oak Knoll Book Fest.
 Photo courtesy of Bob McCamant.

kicked off the proceedings with a talk, followed by the FPBA AGM, then a presentation by San Francisco printer Russell Maret. The book fair reopened at noon, and in the evening there was a “Dutch treat” farewell dinner.

Many beautiful books were on display at the fair, some of which stayed in my mind long after I had packed my bags and taken off. I especially loved the prints from Shanty Bay Press’s new *Circus* book, which was only present in mockup form. The *Little Pierrot* is a deceptively simple image, one of Walter Bachinski’s linocuts. Others that stand out are *A Vision of Order*, from Whittington Press, again in mockup form; *Coincidental Pleasures*, from Warwick Press; and *Breathe*, from Memory Press. There is never enough time to see everything properly when you are on your own, and I often look up the press’s websites both before and after the event, conveniently listed on the Oak Knoll Book Fest site, www.oakknoll.com/fest/all.html.

I live in a small town on the coast of Vancouver Island, a positive paradise, but also somewhat isolated from other printers and publishers and book artists. Hence there is considerable value in meeting with like-minded people and having the opportunity to see and discuss their work, be educated in new techniques (people are very generous), and have my horizons widened. Such an occasion also enables me to show and discuss my own work with other bookmakers and potential customers. Of course, selling books is the main reason for exhibiting, but the collateral benefits are actually of more lasting value to me. Long after that book has sold, you remember conversations with people you met, books you saw and enjoyed, opinions voiced, and a whole kaleidoscope of images stored in your memory. It is creatively stimulating and infinitely enriching.

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 ~ Jan Kellett is proprietor of De Walden Press in Qualicum Beach, BC.



The annual Alcuin awards ceremony in Vancouver attracted writers, designers and collectors including clockwise from the top left: Sian Pairaudeau and Robert Chaplin; MC Richard Hopkins with Charles Mayrs looking on; Jarrett Morrison of Bowler press; Louise Hamilton; Jim Skipp of Skipp Design, with his wife at left and designer Lily Harned at right; Mauve Page; Gabriella Solti; Charles Mayrs.

Above right: The display of Alcuin award-winning books

Centre, right: Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press won first prize in the Prose Fiction category for the design of the Giller Prize-winning novel *The Sentimentalists*.

Michael Carabetta, creative director of Chronicle Books, spoke at this year's awards ceremony in Vancouver, and a number of books from the press were available to buy after his presentation.

More event photos can be viewed on the Alcuin Society's Flickr stream: www.flickr.com/photos/Alcuinsociety

