

salon focus

An ice-axe to break your frozen soul

New York-based neo-conceptualist artist Heide Hatry has had a life-long engagement with printed matter, and a decade's long passion for artist-made books – collecting and making them herself. She's used this knowledge to curate One of a Kind, an exhibition of contemporary unique artist's books, which is coming to Sackville's Owens Art Gallery on Jan. 11. Salon's Mike Landry caught up with Hatry via email to discuss the exhibition and the unique artist's book.

You worked as an international anti-quarian bookseller for 17 years. How did you end up in that field, and why/how did you decide to leave?

I had studied art, and the only thing I wanted to do was to be an artist, but I got married fairly young. We had no money; I couldn't sell artwork, couldn't pay the rent, et cetera. We did, however, have a nice, big library, and we decided we would convert our studio into a used bookstore. The day we opened, we earned our entire monthly rent. We intended to continue only until we could buy back all of our beloved books (from flea markets, where we had bought them in the first place) and have enough money to live for a while, but it was so easy to make money selling books in Germany back then, that it was hard to stop. Along the way, we discovered there are the most amazing books available in the world – books and authors we had never heard of – and incredibly beautiful and interesting books that we thought you could only find in museums. Anyway, it was really the excitement of the material, and the eccentric and interesting way of life booksellers live among it, that kept us at it.

When my marriage ended, the only thing I craved was to do absolutely nothing but make art – I had felt this painfully for many years, but now I felt that it made no sense to spend another minute denying myself.

Was there a particular book or artist that first introduced you to the artist's book world?

Yes, as a rare bookseller I came across the most amazing artist's books, works by Picasso, Matisse, Ernst ... almost any great artist you can think of, but when I saw a *Malerbuch* by Emil Schumacher I was hooked. I had studied bookbinding and book restoration, so it was easy to imagine making something like that myself. I started treating texts I loved, like Celan, Hölderlin, Goethe, et cetera, one page at a time, and after a few months I would have "illustrated" a whole poem or short story.

You refer to the artist's book as a "rather secret aspect of art practice" that you could reveal. Why do you think it's a secret, and why did you want to let the cat out of the bag?

I was talking about unique artist's books, but the same more or less holds true for printed lives d'artiste as well: their beautiful artwork is always hidden between their covers. Because they are either unique or made in small numbers and difficult to display meaningfully, one rarely has a chance to see them in public venues and, of course, hardly knows where they exist privately. It's also a relatively unremunerative, obscure and little collected form of art, so not many artists are willing to devote the time and effort to making them.

Revealing

this extremely interesting but rather hermetic little world isn't exactly going to destroy its charm: you don't suddenly turn people who never cared about books into bibliophiles by showing them that they can also be works of art, and you aren't likely to make art collectors suddenly care about books just because they can be beautiful, captivating or provocative.

You make the point to differentiate the unique artist's book as "an artwork in the form of a book" as opposed to craft or an edition. Why is this distinction important?

The craft of bookmaking is very old, and there has long been a fairly clear idea how books are supposed to be made. I have the feeling that most people who have studied bookbinding are craftspeople repeating operations they've done many, many times, rather than artists engaging their material afresh. Of course, you can see as much in the results. I'd also say it's fairly rare to find artists, at least artists with vital ideas, who are willing to devote time to an apprenticeship in a rather obscure realm of visual practice.

Editions of artist's books can be wonderful, but they are the equivalent of prints. There can be extraordinary work in print media, with values that don't exist in painting or drawing, but it's not unique and it will always have qualities that derive from mechanical reproduction rather than the human hand.

You write "I think of these works as meditations on the book just as much as they are themselves instances of the book." Can you explain this distinction?

In making a unique artist's book, the artist reconceives the book as a concept and as a cultural artifact every time they make one. The artist is always starting from nothing and building it up into something, even though that is existing by a vision or a concept, and even an guiding form. There has to be a reason to make a work of art in the form of a book that isn't inherently part of the process of making a work of art in general. That means that it is infused with thought about the medium in a way that most visual art does not require. In a way, it's a prayerful and respectful activity that, in its best instances, ponders and questions the form of the book as an object with which we live and the place of the book in culture – almost as if the decision to use the book form has to be justified anew every time the artist resorts to it. The book artist also typically spends a lot more time with his or her object than a painter, so the process itself is inherently meditative. In gathering work for the show I was looking not so much for extreme re-configurations of the book, but liminal works that show the extent to which the book can push its own limits and still be relevantly a book or which simply asserted aspects of the book more pointedly than a

book usually has cause to do in its quotidian and utilitarian existence.

I've always found the artist's book to be quite a different book experience than with popular literature, because I don't find I have the same experience as a reader – I don't develop that sense of ownership that comes with popular literature. Where do you suppose my feeling of remove arises and what does it say about the medium?

On the one hand, the answer seems obvious: there are precious few opportunities to interact with unique artist's books, and therefore a sense for them, an appreciation or a connoisseurship almost never develops. The printed *livre d'artiste* just reeks of "precious object." I don't think even the supposed admirers of the *livre d'artiste*, typically get much from the interaction. The artist's book really calls for a special relationship from its reader/viewer.

The deeper answer could be that we just aren't spiritually prepared for a relationship to such work in our time. We want a quick experience from art, and these kinds of works simply are not made to give that. They require leisure and concentration over an extended period of time. Of course, there are simple commercial books that can convey something of the experience I'm talking about without even requiring more than a reader's relationship with the text, but book design is so standardized nowadays, and has been for quite a long time. Kafka's first book, *Betrachtung*, for example, is definitely in the same category of emotional experience as any wonderful artist's book. Kafka had requested that his publisher use the "largest type possible." The reading experience itself is profoundly coloured by its typography. In his review, Robert Musil commented, perhaps not really even registering the effect of the design: "in these deliberate, page-filling sentences ... there is something of the painstaking melancholy of the figure skater as he inscribes his ample loops and figures on the ice."

Many of your own artist's books are owned by private collectors, and many of the books in the show were loaned from private collections. What is the appeal in these works for collectors?

Since the world of unique artist's book collectors is rather small, there are often rather idiosyncratic reasons behind particular collections: one collector might be interested in everything what has to do with a certain theme, like "the human hand," for example, in the Henry Buhl collection (which was just sold at Sotheby's). Some are interested in specific authors, like Leo J. M. Koenders, a collector of unique artist's books relating to James Joyce; others have a more curatorial focus,



Curator/artist Heide Hatry posing in the pig skin-lined room she constructed for her performance *Skin Room*, where she skinned dead pigs to wallpaper a small room in a gallery.

and want to define the collection prior even to its creation, like Julia Vermees, who exhibited her collection of commissioned altered books at the Klingspor-Museum in last year; others collect particular artists or subjects, like most book collectors. The one unifying factor, though, is the book itself, in some sort of broad spiritual sense. All of the collectors of unique artist's books I have encountered are people who respond to the book in a way they respond to nothing else: when you see them pick up a book it is like looking at a medieval acolyte handling a holy object.

This sense of deep quiet and pure communion doesn't exist in any other realm I can think of.

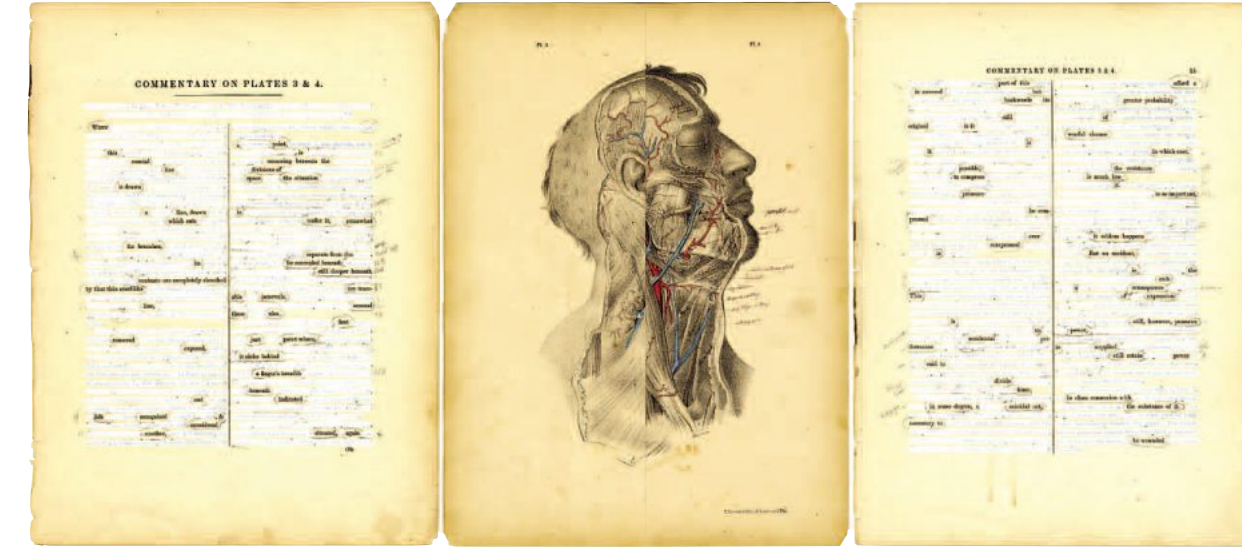
The artists in this show represent a broad range across continents and generations and practices: how did you ever manage to find them all?



Cheryl Schainfeld's 2011 five-page accordian style book, *Bodies, Borders and Boundaries*, with stitched panels, painted dust jacket, acrylic, thread, machine stitching, reverse painting on archival pigment on clear film, vellum, India ink, balsawood and hand-stamped text.



Steven Daiber's 2001 book *Saw Box*, a 19th-century natural history text, illustrated with wood engravings wrapped around White Pine cones, housed in an antique wooden saw box with a handsaw stored in the lid of the box.



Stephen Lipman's 2011 book, *Surgical Pages I* - six pages with board backing and mixed media.

ance is expensive, et cetera. Besides that, I curate just for fun, and I couldn't justify spending more time than I did on the show. That said, I would love to do the ultimate artist's book show some day, from the very beginning up to the present, and including only the books I think are the very best. If a museum wants to support such an undertaking, I'm at its disposal.

What keeps you making art books (or is it a compulsion)?

Something really interesting happens, not only as a creator, but also as a "reader": something additional happens when literature and visual art get connected within a book. It's not only a process of addition, but rather of exponentiation, if you will. But that only works if both the text and the visual part are real works of art. Normally I have the opposite experience: the illustrations tend to make the text weaker.

How does your interest in body-related themes in your art practice relate to your interest in the book. Where does the body overlap with the book?

Many of my books are body-related, often collaged with images of my work or images of my own body. For example: Rilke: *Briefe an eine junge Frau* turned into: *I found dead women in my basement*, for whose images I used photos of sculptures of women I had created out of pig-skin. Others are certainly body-related, at least as regards the content of the book, for example: *Orgasm*. But you could also say that I am interested in the body of the book: I love to alter existing books. I just bought a beautiful 18th-century book bound in

vellum. I will remove all of the pages that are not structurally integral to the book (the insides of each signature), and then I will use the pages that are left, either as blank canvas or more often as inspiration to create new content from what remains.

In writing about these books, you return to the notion that the artists are giving voice to the book. Given that you identify as a feminist artist, I can't help but think of your extensive writing on gender roles. Do the two ideas share a common heritage?

The book does have what might well be viewed as a certain traditionally female character: it is inherently passive, it is demure, patiently awaiting its suitors; it is to be penetrated, entered, understood, it is vulnerable to every abuse. At the same time it is the vessel of beauty, the first teacher, a fount of inspiration, a secret to be unfolded, et cetera. This is all analogy, though, and I think it would be easy enough to create a similar rationale for the essentially male character of the book. My own work and thinking does, of course, always involve the history, politics and ethics of gender, and I tend to see things accordingly. I did speak of the voice of the book with a feminist tinge in mind, because I see it as especially vulnerable at this time in history, and for reasons that disrespect or are willing to ignore its particular values, when we really need to listen to it as an object and not unwittingly consign it to oblivion. I'd say I view it as more of an underdog situation in general than as a specifically feminist problematic, but it's such a charged object that everything we care about most deeply can easily be invoked in relation to it for

Freud, the book as dream object typically meant the mother, for example. In reality, the book always speaks, or has the ability always to speak: we just have to be patient enough to listen.

I find it interesting to read this examination of artist's books as a commentary on gender roles and identity. How was the transition from dealing with these themes through more standard artwork methods, through to the artist's book?

I don't think that there are essential differences between the two modalities in my work except to the extent that the medium of the book sometimes asserts its own demands and draws me in directions I might not otherwise go. By which I mean that I am, curiously, sometimes less self-conscious when working with the book as medium – that could be a valuable realm for self-analysis in a way I wouldn't have thought. I should perhaps also mention that even in my largest-scale and most long-term conceptual projects, I have always incorporated the book either as a cumulative, and I think quite complex and not yet well-understood, conceptual object, or as an aspect of the project with a specific role that only a book could fill – for example, in my *Skin* project, the ostensible "catalogue" entitled *Skin*, which is in fact a crypto-book, served the purpose of creating an air of legitimacy and scholarly support to what was essentially a deception, but a deception designed to address serious questions of gender, identity and aesthetic reception.

In your own practice, you often deal with the themes addressed in the show in more controversial manners. Why did you opt for presenting these books, rather than something more sensational?

Remember that though I also participated in the show, I am basically the curator. If it were an exhibition of my books alone it would be a different matter. In any case, the book isn't exactly a medium that lends itself well to sensation, or to immediate or visceral provocation – although it's a subject of contention, I don't, in general, see my work as sensational, but I definitely do intend to incite strong reactions, so, in that sense, of course, I understand what you mean, and for me, in spite of the fact that it requires a different approach to elicit it, the book-form can be and always has been a life-altering medium.

Given your past curatorial projects, you seem to be drawn to sincerity, devotion and the multifaceted, which are categories artist's books definitely fall into. Why do you return to this kind of work and this artistic temperament?

It's not easy to convince me that most things that artists make are art. I need first to feel something intensely when I experience a work, and then I need it to plague me with a demand to be understood. My motives as a curator are two: I do it for pleasure, and I do it because I want other people to see the art that has made me react most powerfully. I don't

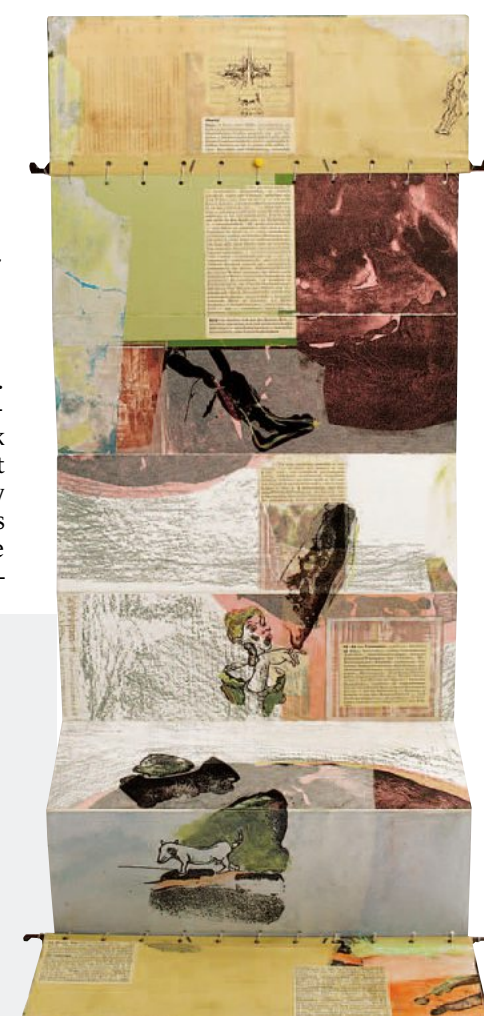


Chie Hasegawa's 2000 book, *Liberalia*, made of paper bound in wrappers and paper clamp.

do it as a job, and I don't have any agenda as to the specific contents of the work I show except what I've already said. If it's work by a woman, so much the better, but that too is secondary. I love artists who are always changing and exploring and who haven't settled on a "brand." I love artists who have been making serious, engaged art over long lives and who couldn't care less if anyone knows who they are. Of course, that makes me want to let everyone know who they are.

The guiding motto for creating this show came to you from Franz Kafka – "a book must be an ice-axe to break the frozen seas of our souls." How do you confront the notion that no matter how many cracks are made in the ice, the hacks must always be coming, less the cold conquer?

You have understood the problem of the book. It cannot always be with us and we always freeze over again. The artist's book is not a very powerful ice-axe; that's not really its purpose. But it does serve the laudable secondary purpose of directing us back to the book, making us think about what it is and what it can be, and why we must revere it. It also reminds us that the visual work of art can be looked at in a different and more con-



Tatjana Bergelt's 2009 book of mixed media collages, und mit dem Wort sich doch sein Recht erstritten / and jet fought with the word one's right.



Inge Bruggeman's 2010 "Out of Memory," with text by Mallarmé, letterpress from wood type with vinyl wall text. From "The Possibility of Being Fully Rewritten - or 5 Ways to Enter (or Exit) the Book."



Aldo Tambellini's book, *War*, made between 2005-11, features seven loose photographs mounted on cardboard housed in an original ammunition box.



One of a Kind installed at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery in Halifax, a smaller version of Hatry's original show. The edit left out things like a too-fragile ship glass book by Carolee Schneemann and Betty Hirst's dried pork flesh-skin book, due to customs regulations. PHOTO: DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY