

MIRIAM SCHAER: SHARING WHAT YOU KNOW

How did you begin? Did you come to books from fiber arts?

I took a book class in my last year at the Philadelphia College of Art, where I earned a BFA. I was in the school's fiber arts program. Later on, PCA turned into the University of the Arts and developed a big book arts program. That didn't exist when I attended. But even though Book Arts was just a small class in the printmaking department, it spoke to me.

As soon as I graduated, I packed up and moved to Manhattan, where I found a teeny apartment in Chelsea. It was so small that books, which can be folded and easily stored, began to make a lot of sense. I was still working with fibers, but spending more and more time making accordion folds, concertinas and stab bindings.

In 1980, two years after moving to New York, I discovered the Center for Book Arts (CBA). I'm really a product of the Center, and what I learned there. In its original home on Bleeker Street, I studied folded structures with Hedi Kyle, a seminal influence in book arts, and bookbinding with Pamela Moore (who, it was rumored, later joined the C.I.A. as a Chinese specialist).

After a while, struggling to make a living, I dropped away from the Center. Stan, my boyfriend, now husband, suggested I try mechanicals (which really dates me) because mechanicals were the waitressing of graphic design. I did mechanicals for a while and gradually moved up to graphic design, a field I worked in for several years. But before long, I was back at the Center of Book Arts, where I studied with Tim Ely, widely known for his extraordinary drawings and bookbinding skills. Tim proved to be a wonderful mentor, helping me develop important technical skills without ever trying to impose his own vision.

He also taught me to be freer about technique. I would say things like, "Gee, can I take these cords and glue them inside the first signature to make a cover?" And Tim would answer, "Sure, why not?" It was liberating to hear someone at his level say there are many ways to do things, and that it's important to be able to experiment, even play, with different techniques to see what works best.

I also studied privately with Tim until he moved back to Portland, Oregon. Later, I studied privately with Jeff Peachy, an exceptional book conservator and artist, who also develops high quality knives and bookbinding tools.

What did you learn from Jeff?

Leather. I wanted to work with leather because I was afraid of it. Jeff got me past that obstacle. Now, I understand enough about the properties of leather to feel comfortable about using it or not, depending on what each work requires.

I ask because your covers have the feel and texture of leather without being leather. It's the way you treat your materials.

I think that's right, and that some of that comes from another important part of my education. I tell students that while I took my first book arts class in 1978, it wasn't until 1992 that I felt I had developed the technical skills to do the work I always saw in my mind's eye. Another thing which was really seminal in my education is for two years I volunteered one day a week for two years at the Watson Library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art under the tutelage of Mindy Dubansky, and Mindy has remained an incredible supporter. I called it my Book Art Finishing School, where she helped me tidy up my edges and make things cleaner and helped me get into what I wanted to do. I tell my students that I took my first book arts class in 1978 and studied on and off, and it wasn't until 1992-1994 that I had the technical ability to do the work that I always saw in my mind's eye that I could do it where the craft never got in the way. There are some people who are just really gifted craft people and I am in awe of them. But for me craft is something I had to work at and learn.

So, in a way, you had 12-14 years of apprenticeship, which used to be the norm in Europe, where you had to apprentice at least 5-10 years with a master before going out on your own?

I was learning book arts along with other things. For example, I know about offset printing because of my graphic design work. I've always felt everything you do informs your art, and that it's vital to stay open to everything. All my jobs allowed me to learn something new. That's what's wonderful about teaching

Since about 1993, I guess you've felt in control of your art?

In 1993, Ed Hutchins decided I needed to teach, even though I'd never taught anyone or anything before. Ed is a wonderful book artist, publisher and educator. One day, he said, "Mimi, you need to teach."

"I don't know how to teach," I said. "I can't do that." "Oh, posh," said Ed. In what seemed like a flash, he found me a teaching job, an artist-in-the-schools residency in a Westchester, New York, elementary school. After getting the job, I called Ed and said, "This is great, now what?" "Come up and see me," he said.

Ed was living in Verplanck, New York, so I took the train out, and Ed made us made a wonderful lunch. Afterwards, we spent the afternoon sitting at his kitchen table making little books and talking about how simple book structures fit into education and can work in a classroom. That afternoon

was the beginning of my teaching career.

Brian Hannon, a former CBA director, also helped me shift into teaching gear. One day, after exhibiting *Eve's Meditation*, a book of mine shaped like a large snake, Brian said, "Everyone's going nuts about this book. You've got to do a class." And so I did; and after a while, and many more classes, I began to gain a little confidence.

In 1996, I cut back on design work and began to focus more on teaching. I still do occasional design projects, in no small part to maintain my Quark and other computer skills, which I've also been using to develop artist books. While many of my works are sculptural, one-of-a-kind pieces, I've been thinking more about doing small editions of books. In recent years, I've also been involved in performance pieces and installations. And through my relationship with the Lower East Side Print Shop, I've been able to gain some experience in printmaking, another area I'll be working in more.

I've also begun working more with poets and writers. In the past, I tended to use found text and altered song lyrics, or written my own texts, but that can have its limitations. At the moment, I'm collaborating with Mary Florio, a New Jersey-based poet whose work I love, on a book project I've long had in mind. Mary sent me a text I think is very exciting. I had something fairly silly in mind, and what she sent has some of that, but also poignancy and passion.

I'm also working on something I've been calling the Glove Project, using hundreds of lost gloves I've collected and been given from people from around the country, Canada and England. I plan to sew the gloves together into an enormous, extended book structure.

I've made a few of these so-called snake books. *Eve's Meditation*, which was in the Women of the Book show you curated, was the first. It's 43 inches long. My next, the *Tallis of Lost Prayers*, is more than 10 feet long, with all the pages hand cut and heart shaped. I'll probably be measuring the Glove Project in feet as well.

Projects like this bring out my compulsive streak. A few years ago, I started working with hostess aprons. That turned into a 20-piece series called *Rules of Engagement* in which the aprons became canvasses for transferred portraits of idealized women accompanied by hand-embroidered quotes from Sun Tsu's *The Art of War*. The first apron in the series reads, "Good warriors take their stand on ground they cannot lose." Two other aprons read, "Victory cannot be made" and "Strike few with many." The interplay between the aprons' domesticity, the women's faces, and the military epigrams creates an interesting effect. The series was only shown once in its entirety, in Western Wyoming Community College, in Rock Springs. Since then, several aprons have been acquired by women artists who have

children, and appreciate Sun Tsu's advice. I think it really funny.

I thought I was done with aprons but aprons keep coming to me because people I know collect them. So I guess I'll be doing another series.

If you hadn't come upon the Center for Book Arts, would your life have taken another direction?

I might have, it's hard to say. Things and people come into your life, and can shift it into an entirely different direction.

Ted Cronin was that kind of person. Ted was an artist, designer and event planner who founded and operated a Manhattan book arts gallery during the 1980s. He approached me at a time when I was doing a lot of design work, and seriously thinking about not making books anymore. Ted had heard about me through Ric Haynes, a painter and book artist who was pushing the form about as far as it would stretch. Before long, Ted was trudging up the four flights of stairs to my apartment in the East Village. Right from the start, he was encouraging and enthusiastic. He told me he loved my work and it was important to continue with it. Ted included me in some of the first shows he mounted in his Chelsea gallery, which was in the middle of the Plant District. Visitors had to walk through wreaths of flowers and stands of tall bamboo to reach the gallery.

Ted included me in an alphabet book show and, in 1990, though I was still working very traditionally, gave me a two-person show with Sally Alatalo, another book artist. It was the first time anyone with a gallery had demonstrated such belief in my work, and me. I worked around the clock to finish new pieces for the show, and rearranged my schedule to clear a window free of design assignments and deadlines, so I could focus on the new works. The show was a big moment for me, and helped me start to know myself as an artist.

So things were happening in NYC in the early '90s to make it possible to be a book artist?

For me they were. In 1992, I had my first solo show at the HarperCollins Gallery. It was a great venue, with ground-floor picture windows right on East 53 Street, just off Fifth Avenue, in a fabulous building. Esther K. Smith, design director of Purgatory Pie Press, had suggested I meet with the gallery's curator, Donna Slawsky, who was also chief librarian for HarperCollins Publishing. I carried several books to the meeting in a shopping bag and showed them to Donna. It was all very informal.

After my show, other book artists thought they might also like to have a show there. They all but overwhelmed Donna with proposals. Other key venues for book arts at the time included Steve Clay's gallery at Granary Books, and the Gramercy Park apartment of the late Tony Zwicker, an

important dealer and collector. A few galleries downtown were also open to showing books.

Ted and Ed Hutchins both saw a potential in you to nurture, whether it involved which road to take, or which shows to select you?

The Center for Book Arts, after it moved from Bleecker St. to Broadway, had an attractive exhibition space that sometimes included artists outside the book arts community. Many felt the Center was a necessary exhibition stop, because interesting shows always seemed to go on.

I think it was also because the Center was close to SoHo, where so many galleries were, and had an interesting and vital publication, which it does not have at the present. That's a good point, because the Lower East Side Print Shop, another organization that's been very important to me, has a great newsletter, complete with information about their classes, artist news, photos of current work, etc. In 1988, I received one of the Print Shop's Special Editions grants, which were meant to introduce artists to printmaking. Through the grant, I was able to explore printmaking.

Susan Rostow, the Print Shop's master printer, had urged me to apply. Before starting to work, I thought I would be able to do etchings with chine-collé, since I'd been doing lots of collages. Susan took one look at my prototypes and said, "That's nice, but this print should be produced as a silkscreen." That's how little I knew about printmaking.

We did an edition of 35 five-screen prints about ladies doing laundry. The image called for a life-size burn mark from an iron, which I scorched into every print using a real iron. It took forever, but changed my life, because that print was selected to appear in a major show called "Crossing Over Changing Places," sponsored by the U.S.I.A. and Arts America, that traveled all over Europe. Being in the show enabled me to work in Spain with the show's curators, and teach at the University of Castilla La Mancha in Cuenca, and in Madrid at Galleria Brita Prinz.

Hadn't you done prints before?

I took one printmaking course at art school and was horrible at it, because I didn't have the craft. I have to work especially hard to get the technical end of things. It wasn't until 1989 that I felt I'd acquired enough technical skills to really take on printmaking.

The Lower East Side Print Shop receives grants from lots of organizations, has a Web site, www.printshop.org, and has been very supportive. Its director, Dusica Kirjakovic, a gifted artist and printmaker from Belgrade, intuitively understands the potential of the Print Shop, in part because of her awareness of Eastern European printmaking

traditions. Its Special Editions program, which Dusica helped revive, has become an important, and sought after, opportunity for artists.

You do one-of-a-kind books, and get into shows because your work is exquisite and whimsical. But I expect it's hard to sell except to collectors, and they are very labor intensive. Most artists must have other jobs. The satisfaction of doing unique works probably serves as half your recompense. What seems to have evolved are one- and two-day workshops in which artists can learn new bookmaking techniques. Are workshops a viable way for artists to make a living, or must they become permanent members of a teaching faculty?

Well, I get a kick out of workshops. I love going places, and I've never been affiliated with just one institution, though I have long-term relationships with several, including the Center for Book Arts, Pyramid Atlantic, and the Lower East Side Print Shop, all of which I teach at. I think of myself a wandering art girl. "Teach book arts and see the world. Who knew?" my husband jokes.

Thanks to book arts, I really have been able to travel. I teach and give workshops in a variety of venues, from pre-school to post-grad. I do Artist-in-the-School programs, and teach at art centers and universities. The trick is to not spend so much time and energy teaching, that you have no time or energy left for your own work.

Burn-out is always a concern, especially if you're teaching in public schools, because you'll usually have 30 kids, and sometimes three to five classes a day depending on the grant. And if kids are not getting it, it's not their fault, it's mine for not being clear. After all, book structure isn't brain surgery. Any semi-conscious person should be able to follow a lesson. As a result, my teaching informs my art, because it has helped me be clearer and more articulate about what I'm trying to do. And when I'm not giving workshops, I love taking classes and studying with other people, because in addition to the course content I also learn how they teach.

Now is a remarkable time for book artists because the book arts community seems to be expanding and reaching many who see themselves as painters, sculptors, and other types of artists. I've always felt the book arts community is a generous one. People are willing to share information, an attitude I think comes out of the workshop tradition, and the style of continuing education with people outside the mainstream academic community.

The book arts community did not begin in a university environment. It started in the Center for Book Arts in New York, founded by Richard Minsky, and in the book arts centers that followed its example. In these centers, everything was about sharing information. I don't worry

about people stealing ideas from me because I'm always getting a lot back.

Can all these workshop techniques coalesce into a structured curriculum the way it has in several universities, leading to a degree, such as at Camberwell, the University of the Arts, the University of Alabama, the Iowa Center for the Book, etc.?

It's worked for me. I've continued my studies through programs such as Writing for the Arts with Arlene Raven, a well known art critic, and a course on marketing at the Lower East Side Print Shop. And while I've never been part of the mainstream academic system, I have taught at universities. Workshops seem to me the heart of the book arts community, and a principal reason for the generous nature of most of its participants.

I have a problem with "book arts" terminology because I see a chasm between artists who make books and book artists in the traditional sense, in terms of paper, binding, printing, etc. I see that difference between art and craft that reaches beyond techniques to the ecology of the book. Do you have any thoughts about this?

The master printer and fine binder are facilitators who do a different type of work than artists who are making books by themselves as art works or sculptures. The two groups have a lot to learn from each other.

Good book artists do more than devise engaging structures. There has to be content in the structure. For example, there are thousands of flag books, but the one that stays in my mind is Susan King's *Women and Cars* because it so beautifully integrates content and structure, and because the structure doesn't overwhelm the content. Content is what makes the piece.

There's a broad variety of work around right now, and that's exciting. People need places to show their work, especially in the beginning of careers. It's critical to help them know what the next step will be.

What do you think about the influence of the Internet on the book arts community?

There is a strong book arts presence on the Web, including the invaluable Book Arts Listserv and its archives. Jim Wintner, the publisher of Colophon Page (www.colophon.com), put my work on the Internet early on. It's made my work more visible and led to a lot of inquiries, especially from graduate students around the world who are studying book arts and would like to know more about me and book arts for research papers and presentations. It's a way of beginning a conversation.

Are students making art differently now or, in their

themes and variations, just reinventing the wheel?

When I teach simple book structures or do staff development for teachers, I always show slides of artists who make books so the students can see the contexts in which books are made, and that book arts are not isolated but have a history and tradition based in current and past generations of artists. It's important we know our history, and how we fit in into the art community as well as the book community.

At the moment, text is in. Text is in paintings, text is in photography, text is on garments, text is on the body.

