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Karen Hanmer Book Arts: *Since 1997 Answering the Question “What Will I do with My Liberal Arts Degree?”* by Karen Hanmer

My work weaves together themes of history, technology, personal and cultural memory, and the Midwestern landscape. My studio practice is unusually varied, including small editions of artists’ books, larger editions of inexpensive multiples, installation, and design binding.

This work is informed by early years living among places significant to American history, and later watching my engineer father slave over analogue spreadsheets at the kitchen table. I grew up absorbing filmstrips and museum exhibits on “Science” and “Modern Industry Today” that had not been updated since the 1940s. My liberal arts education gave me the tools to draw connections between the arts, sciences, history, popular culture, and current events.

I came to book arts through photography. For years I photographed and worked in the darkroom, but I became increasingly frustrated with how physically removed I felt from the creation of the image.

I began to experiment with ways to feel more involved in the process. I tried coating papers with emulsion, using primitive cameras, photographing myself, and photographing out the window of a moving car.

I became intrigued by non-traditional presentation of what could have been two-dimensional art hung on a wall. I envisioned a project combining multiple photos and text, presented on three-dimensional folding structures. In May of 1997 I spent an afternoon with a friend who showed me the basics of Photoshop, and I began studying with a bookbinder.

With these simple book-like structures, I felt I had found my artistic voice. I believe that feeling physically can be a key to feeling emotionally, and these pieces were tactile not only for me while I was working on them, but also for the viewer. I could combine numerous images into one piece, and add text. I was able to work with time and narrative, and guide the viewer’s navigation through the work. I still can’t

Celestial Navigation. 2008. 17.1 x 14.6 x 1.2 cm closed, 44.5 x 76 cm open. Pigment inkjet prints, paper triangles hinged with book cloth. PHOTO | JERRY MATHIASON

imagine going back to a static row of framed images fixed to a wall.

My *Night Sky* project is a good example of how I work with the same subject matter in a number of different ways, and of my process in researching a topic and turning the research into finished work. I began thinking about the project in 2001 after doing some travelling and realizing that unlike my suburban Chicago neighbourhood, some places actually get dark at night, and the stars are visible – the same stars that people have been looking at since the beginning of time.

I began looking for quotations about the night sky from across the ages: reading books about the history of astronomy, books about exploration, navigation, and space travel, and essays and anthologies of poetry about the night sky. Reading all these books looking for a few eloquent words strung together was incredibly time consuming, so I searched off and on for several years. Eventually I found resources online, and suddenly I had the opposite challenge, too much information – pages and pages of quotes to sift through. I also found high-resolution digital images of relevant historical illustrations.

Meanwhile, I pondered what ancient and modern people might be seeking when they looked to the stars, and what I might be looking for.

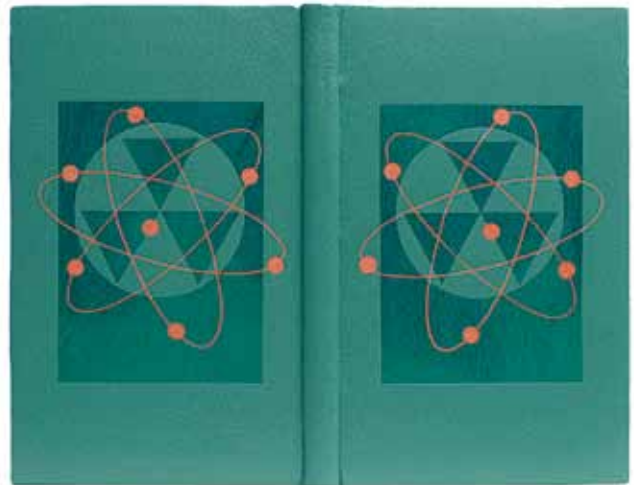
Throughout the process, I made numerous models of what the book might become. I experimented with placement of the text, with which illustrations to use, with the colour of the background, or in what path the book should fold so it could function equally well as a book to be held in the hand and read, as a sculpture, and as a delightful object to play with.

Throughout the process, I'd ask for feedback from whomever I happened to see when I had one of the models with me. It is not unusual for people to manipulate a structure in ways I never imagined. This testing gives me an opportunity to make modifications to the book so I can communicate more clearly with the viewer.

Ultimately, I split the content into two books, both using the same structure of a collection of hinged triangles. The books can be held in the hand and read

page by page like a traditional book. Once removed from their dust jackets, the books can be folded into myriad sculptural shapes, or unfolded flat to reference historical astronomical charts or contemporary NASA composite photos. The background image on each page is a photograph of the Milky Way. Like most of my work, they are inkjet printed.

The first book, *Celestial Navigation*, is an illustrated catalogue of ancient and modern navigational



Oppenheimer Is Watching Me: A Memoir by Jeff Porter, University of Iowa Press, 2007. Binding by Karen Hanmer, 2009. 24 x 15.2 x 2 cm. French technique fine binding: sewn on flattened cords laced into boards, covered in full buffalo. Goatskin backpared onlays and inlaid lines. Goatskin edge-to-edge doublure, with impression from inlaid leather lines visible on suede flyleaves. Hand sewn silk headbands, gilt top edge. Design inspired by author's vignettes of growing up during the Cold War: both the paranoia of nuclear attack and a landscape filled with playful pop culture atomic references.

instruments. On the reverse of each triangular page, the Milky Way image is overlaid with a nineteenth century star chart, and my own text. This poem ends with: "Like the ancient navigators, I look to the sky to find my way back to you. I see your face in the stars." The text is written in an open-ended enough way that the viewer is able to map the narrative to their personal experience.

The companion piece *Star Poems* presents quotations that document responses to the night sky across the ages by philosophers, artists, and poets



From left: *BEAUTE(CODE)*. 2002. 8.2 x 18.4 x 1.2 cm. Text keypunched onto computer cards, “bound” with custom printed rubber band. *Random Passions*. 2008. 17.8 x 10 x .6 cm. Laser prints on “vellum” paper; Pamphlet in case binding covered with velvet finish book cloth, hot stamped title. Couples from romance novel covers traced on translucent paper layer together and multiple new combinations emerge.

from Plato, Byron, and Van Gogh, to more contemporary writers, scientists, and astronauts. This text is paired with seventeenth century mythological images of constellation forms and images of early stargazers.

An inexpensive multiple, *Most Excellent Canopy* opens to reveal an ancient stargazer. Holes are punched in the locations of stars as they appear in the evening sky above North America in late January, the date of the opening reception of the exhibition where I first showed this work. The holes are intended to coax the viewer to hold the piece up to the light. Since the work is about the night sky, I wanted people to make the gesture of looking up.

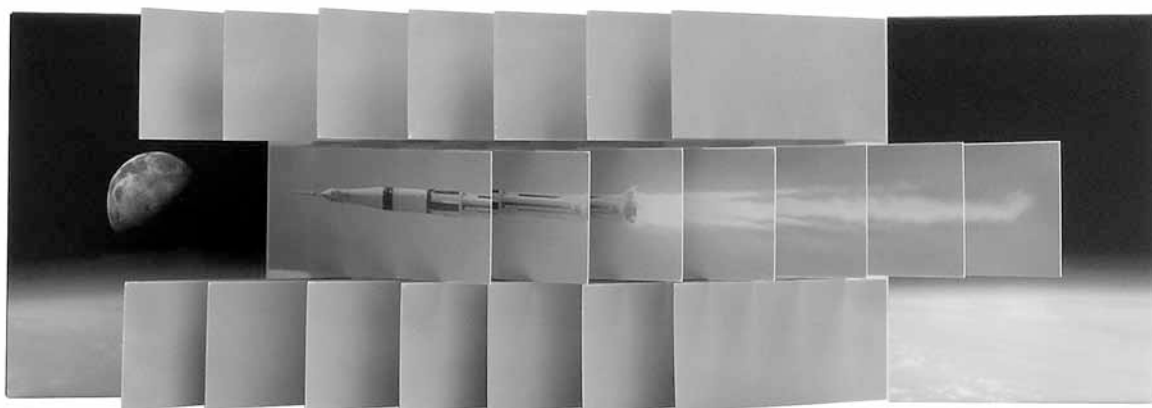
To further immerse the viewer in the experience of the night sky, the gallery was sheathed in floor-to-ceiling Japanese paper panels printed with the same images of the Milky Way, mythological constellation forms, stargazers, and astronomical instruments.

Much of my work links the creative process of the artist with that of the inventor, explorer, or scientist through first person accounts and archival photographs or artefacts. For the *Beautiful Software* project, I made the installation pieces for an exhibit, and later made books with identical content, and identical or similar materials so the work could continue to exist in a hand-held form after the close of the exhibit.

I interviewed software engineers to better understand what they find beautiful or compelling about well-written software and the act of programming. I edited the quotations to 80 characters, the limit on an old-fashioned computer punch card. I inkjet printed the text on 33 x 16 inch (83.8 x 40.6 cm), accurately scaled replicas of punch cards. The holes are hand cut with an x-ACTO knife. I found a company to keypunch the same text onto computer cards for the book version of this piece. Longer quotations are printed onto green bar computer paper. In the installation version, the paper cascades down the gallery wall, as if it were the direct output of a printer. The book version is stab-bound, using the pin-feed holes at the edge of the paper.

Initially I was interested in contemporary book structures and orchestrating the viewer’s interaction with my work: elaborate folds and complex navigation through the books, decks of cards, a board game, a giant “to do” list to be filled in by visitors to an exhibition.

Philadelphia book artist and conservator Hedi Kyle’s flag book structure captured my imagination immediately upon viewing Susan King’s 1983 *Women and Cars*. *Women and Cars* layers autobiographical narrative, vintage photographs, and literary quotations from various sources. I had never seen anything



Top, from left: *Mirage*. 2009. 12.7 x 17.8 x 1.2 cm. Pigment inkjet prints. Drum leaf binding, series of 100, each unique. A journey across a rural Midwestern landscape of both space and time. *Native Soil: poems from South Texas poets*, selected by Naomi Shihab Nye, School by the River Press, San Antonio, 2007. Binding by Karen Hanmer, 2011. 25.4 x 17.8 x .38 cm. "Gebrochene rücken" variation of the Bradel binding, covered in full goatskin. Goatskin hinges and endbands, three watercolour edges, hand-tooled title, design in black, brown, maroon, and gold foils.

Below: *Destination Moon*, 2003. 17.8 x 12.7 x 66 cm open, 17.8 x 12.7 x 1.9 cm closed. Pigment inkjet prints. Flag book. Archival photographs and documents pertaining to the Apollo Manned Space Program contrast John F. Kennedy's "Man on the moon by the end of the decade" speech with Roy Alfred and Marvin Fisher's whimsical song (popularized by Dinah Washington), *Destination Moon*, about a couple's trip to the moon.

like this simple structure that could function as a traditional codex, a sculpture, and a puzzle; that could both reveal and conceal its richly layered content. When reading a flag book page by page, the viewer sees disjointed fragments of image and text. When the spine is pulled fully open, these fragments assemble into a panoramic spread. The spine and covers provide opportunities for additional imagery.

I have made several flag books combining historical photographs and text with additional text from pop culture. I have also used the structure with family photos and images of the Midwestern landscape to explore my mother's immigrant farming family's

connection to the land, and my connection to them.

Meanwhile I became increasingly active with the Guild of Book Workers. My fellow Guild members who worked as binders and conservators led me to develop an appreciation for the more traditional book structures and materials I had initially dismissed as lacking possibilities for my work.

I began to study binding with more enthusiasm, and to see design binding as an additional way to work with material I'm interested in. It is also a welcome opportunity to do something that does not involve heavy use of the computer. I enjoy the challenge of becoming skilled in a craft with a very long

tradition. The tight parameters make for an interesting challenge: a predetermined size and shape, the limited palate of materials, and only the two boards individually and together with the spine to communicate my message.

I realized that to become a better binder and a better instructor, I'd need a deeper understanding of the engineering of the book. This quest has led to additional study, making models of numerous structures, and much written documentation of procedures. I've also learned a lot from teaching. Having to describe rounding, backing, paring, and other basic skills in great detail and troubleshoot the students' difficulties has forced me to look much more carefully at what I am doing and why.

My most recent artists' books reflect my deepening interest in binding, referencing nineteenth century decoration or structure, or even specific notable publications. *The Model Architect: The Panic Of '09* is based on *The Model Architect*, Samuel Sloan's 1852 collection of house plans and instructions to contractors. The new work pairs historical text and illustrations from Sloan's work with contemporary text from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's online *Guide to Avoiding Foreclosure*. The book is bound using the modern drum leaf structure, but is evocative of a mid-nineteenth century binding in its use of materials and decorative elements: leather spine, marbled paper, decorated edges, and gold tooling. In the colophon I note that Sloan's book was published at the mid point of a century marked by cycles of rampant speculation followed by financial collapse. This foreshadows the recent cycle that has wreaked havoc with both the real estate in my neighbourhood, and with the global economy.

Nevermore Again: Poe Exhumed pairs 12 Edgar Allan Poe stories with equally spine-tingling stories from the news: *The Premature Burial* and the struggling economy, *The Balloon Hoax* and the hunt for weapons of mass destruction, *The Black Cat* and the bravado of a recently convicted Illinois governor. I enjoyed the research into historical styles I did for *The Model Architect*, and went even further with *Nevermore, Again*. The typography is based on the



Nevermore Again: Poe Exhumed. 2010. 16.5 x 10.8 x .64 cm. Pigment inkjet prints on Ruscombe Mill pale wove handmade paper. The standard edition is presented in a paper wrapper. The deluxe edition is presented in an early nineteenth century-style publisher's binding with marbled paper by Pamela Smith.

first edition of Poe's first published work, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. Only 12 copies of this modest pamphlet are known to exist of the 50 printed in Boston in 1827. The standard edition of *Nevermore, Again* in its paper wrapper is a facsimile of *Tamerlane* in both size and structure. The deluxe edition is bound in the style of an early nineteenth century publisher's binding.

Recent design bindings also play with the history of the book, finding appropriate texts for the Colonial American scaleboard binding, or updating the Cambridge panel with laser-printed imagery.

Three recent works return to my roots in the sculptural book. They pair text from *Pride and Prejudice* with images of couples cut from romance novel covers, and the titles reference ubiquitous artists' book structures: the carousel book, *Whirlwind Romance*; the Jacob's ladder, *Head over Heels*; and, of course, the tunnel book, *Tunnel of Love*.

Whether I'm researching the nineteenth century economy, poking fun at Benjamin Franklin's prolific inventions, comparing Cold War paranoia to post 9/11 hysteria; or pairing Jane Austen with illustrations of Fabio, I keep milking my B.A. degree for all it's worth, and sometimes even more. •

A complete catalogue of Hanmer's work is online at www.karenhanmer.com.