



Life's Journey

Artist books from
Queensland collections

*Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland
6 May – 17 June 2012*

*Co-curated by Emma Bain and
Anna Thurgood*

*A Redland Art Gallery exhibition presented
in partnership with Artspace Mackay*

The depth of artist books collections in Queensland is little publicised and much under-appreciated. It is no small achievement that the State Library of Queensland has the largest collection of artist books in Australia, with a selection of its holding on permanent rotating display and online. Artspace Mackay also claims “one of the most comprehensive collections of artists’ books” in the country; it is certainly the largest regional collection focused on this area¹. The compelling influence on the development of such a strong local interest in this area, a niche within the visual arts niche, can be found in the presence in Brisbane of Noreen Grahame, an international expert in prints and artist books, who returned to Queensland from Europe in 1987. Initially popularised in the United States in the 1960s, prints and the associated medium were all the rage in Europe during Grahame’s sojourn there in the 1970s and 1980s, and fitted neatly into new conceptual modes of art practice. Grahame’s establishment of grahame galleries + editions in 1987 has coincided with an exponential growth in the knowledge and development of the artists’ book as a medium in its own right in Queensland and Australia.¹¹

An artist’s book is an extension of the artist’s journey, an opportunity to tell a story in a visual or narrative serial form. While definitions have proven contentious, and the State Library of Queensland waded into this in a commissioned exhibition of artist

books in 2005 that extended the medium into a highly conceptual understanding of the form¹¹, it is generally understood that the artists’ book, “...has to have a sequence of images or text that comes through, a series of surprises concerning the next image or text that is only available in the book format.”^{IV}

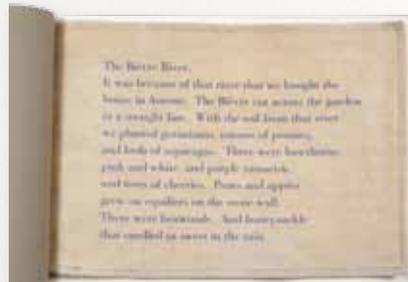
Life’s Journey: Artist books from Queensland collections, curated by Redland Art Gallery Director Emma Bain and Artspace Mackay Acting Director Anna Thurgood, is a significant initiative that builds on the depth of collections and the strengths of the medium. Interestingly, their choice of theme has been on the personal and individual within the genre, a selection of artist narratives with memoir-like threads. The exhibition is curated largely from the State Library and Artspace Mackay’s collections, but also draws on that of The Studio West End, established in 1998 and run by artists Adele Outteridge and Wim de Vos, and the collection housed by grahame galleries + editions centre for the artist’s book.

The artists’ book, as a form of artistic expression, lends itself to humility. As objects they are often highly crafted, generally one-offs, and with a combination of imagery and sometimes text, tell a story that unfolds with the turning of the pages. The maxim, “truth is stranger than fiction”, is a significant reality in contemporary life – certainly in this artistic genre.

The form lends itself to narratives that may take unexpectedly funny twists, as in the case of Sheree Kinlyside’s *20 questions my mother asked my sister, (what’s in a mother’s mind?)* (2010) or tragic, as in David King’s *Raw deal*, (1997) that describes the circumstances leading to the death of his daughter Alexandra, aged four.

Also dealing with childhood, this time the artist’s memory, is the lyrical *Ode à la Bièvre* (2007) by French-American artist Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010). Representing a tribute to the river that cut across Bourgeois’s childhood garden, it details – in words, fabric and photographs – a distillation of childhood memory. The use of fabric – its colour and pattern – appears inimitably French, locates the viewer into an earlier century and speaks to her family’s business – the location of the river was important for the washing of tapestries. The book format provides us with a tangible understanding of this part of her life.

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Canvassing relationships and daily events is Caitlin Sheedy's *The 199* (2009). This book comprises a series of connected watercolours documenting Sheedy's daily bus journey to and from work at Brisbane's City Hall. With its particular bus-driven view it is an experience you have shared or you haven't – but the viewer becomes vicariously a part of her journey. Philip Zimmermann's *High tension* (1993) literally puts the book format under contemporary pressure, exploding the rectangle into five sides. The opening spread features a train hurtling at the reader; the text reads, "Your heart pounds". The second half offers trade-off like solutions: "You think: if I went to confession, everything would be ok". This book speaks to the superstitions and fears endemic to humanity, but within our increasingly pressure-cooker existence.

Judy Watson's *under the act* (2007) is a tour de force, personal, political and powerful. Drawn from Watson's grandmother Grace Isaacson's file in the Queensland State Archives, along with family letters and photographs, it details Isaacson's efforts as an Aboriginal person to gain permission from

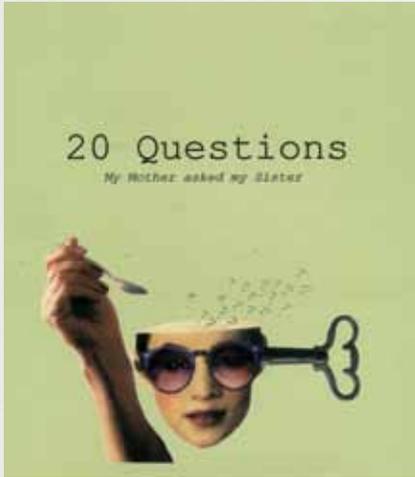
the "Protector of Aboriginals" to marry. The pages are splashed with grainy red marks, with the language of the time defining Aboriginal people in terms – like "full blood" and "half caste" – that we find shocking today. As Watson suggested prior, "...this material from the archives already has a latent power, I didn't want to change this very much. Its leakage onto the printed page is enough."^v

Another theme dealt with in a number of these books and pertinent to contemporary debate is immigration and travel. Jonathan Tse's *Portrait of an Australian* (2007), presented in passport form stamped "IMMIGRANT" on the cover, narrates in a few words and many images, the journey that his family traversed. Their separation from their family in Hong Kong, their adaption to life in Australia, the learning of English, being "the first pair of Chinese" at school, the return of Hong Kong to Chinese hands, and the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party (at the time the book was made), is as effective an antidote to racism as you could experience.

In this area too is a 'book' that opens to be a paper boat. *Nauru* (2007) was made by a group of artists headed by Sarah Bowen as part of the Codex Event. Named after the off-shore detention centre used by Australia (2001–2007) the book uses the paper balloon as a metaphor for the journey of asylum seekers across boundaries. The paper boat's fragility evokes the hazards and risks of their journeys in search of freedom.

This exhibition seeks out universal truths in individual journeys. The ordinary is as significant as the extraordinary, as is visible in Adele Outteridge's *Tea bag book* (2006). The use of 1280 used and dried teabags bound together note the strength and beauty of the paper from which tea bags are made, but also celebrate the connections between people made many times daily over the ubiquitous cup of tea. Artist books make those often invisible connections and secure them tightly into the viewer's psyche.

Louise Martin-Chew
March 2012



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Captions

- Cover Philip Zimmermann, *High tension* (detail) 1993, three colour offset lithography prepared on computer. grahame galleries + editions, centre for the artist's book collection. Courtesy of grahame galleries + editions, centre for the artist's book. Photography by Carl Warner.
- 1 Louise Bourgeois, *Ode à la Bièvre* (detail) 2007, reproduction from original fabric work and digital photographs. grahame galleries + editions, centre for the artist's book collection. Courtesy of grahame galleries + editions, centre for the artist's book. Photography by Carl Warner.
 - 2 Judy Watson, *under the act* (detail) 2007, etching with chine collé. grahame galleries + editions, centre for the artist's book collection. Courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, centre for the artist's book. Photography by Carl Warner.
 - 3 Sheree Kinlyside, *20 questions my mother asked my sister (what's in a mother's mind?)* (detail) 2010, Reg Rag Press, 2010. Limited edition of 25 copies, inkjet printer and pigment ink on Indian handmade rag paper; covers on Magnani paper; Japanese stab binding. Australian Library of Art, State Library of Queensland Collection. Courtesy of the artist and the State Library of Queensland.
 - 4 Caitlin Sheedy, *The 199* (detail) 2009, ink, gouache and watercolour on Arches watercolour paper. Australian Library of Art, State Library of Queensland Collection. Courtesy of the artist and the State Library of Queensland.
 - 5 Adele Outteridge, *Teabag book* (detail) 2006, teabags and linen thread. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist and The Studio West End.

Footnotes

- I Artspace Mackay has developed a biennial *Focus on Artists Books* conference to complement and celebrate their collection, and holds the *Libris Awards*, also biennially. Both events will be hosted in 2013.
- II Grahame held her first major exhibition of artists' books in 1991. Australia's first Artists' Books Fair was also organized by Grahame and held at the State Library of Queensland in 1994. Fairs were held irregularly until 2007 when the fifth was held at the Dell Gallery, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Themed artists' books exhibitions have followed. grahame galleries + editions, located in Milton, was flooded in January 2011. While no artworks were damaged, Grahame's activities were affected by the need to rebuild and restore her home and gallery. Her artists' books exhibition, *Lessons in History Volume II – Democracy*, originally planned for 2011, will be held in September 2012.
- III This exhibition was *Sufferance: Women's Artists' Books*, CQ Gallery, Craft Queensland (now Artisan), 2005.
- IV Noreen Grahame, quoted in 'Binding the loose leaves of women's history' by Louise Martin-Chew, *The Australian* newspaper, Tuesday September 6, 2005.
- V Judy Watson, Artist's Talk on her first artist's book, *a preponderance of aboriginal blood*, for *Sufferance* exhibition, Craft Queensland, 10 September 2005.

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland
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Cleveland Q 4163

Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm
Sunday 9am – 2pm
Admission free

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Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland City Council, dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiuliana