

2020 Libris Awards

Essay by Robert Heather

A Centre for Artists' Books

Back in mid-2002, when I commenced as the inaugural Director of Artspace Mackay, I knew very little about the art form we know as artists' books. I was conscious that I needed to learn more and to learn quickly.

The collection of artists' books that belonged to Mackay City Council was being transferred from the library collection into the care of the regional gallery and museum, then under construction, intended to be the heart of the new facility's collection. It had originally been assembled by volunteers and library staff in consultation with Noreen Grahame in Brisbane and the Lyrebird Press in Townsville, and had grown to over 400 books, prints and multiples by the time I commenced. It expanded further with a major donation of books, prints, blocks and ephemera from master printmaker Tate Adams just before the gallery opened.

Not knowing about the collection's subject matter meant that I was on the look-out for somewhere to find out more about this art form which often fell between the boundaries, and which artists seemed so passionate about. So, I started reading Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* (1995) and then looked around for a conference or symposium I could attend to learn about artists' books. Not finding any on the subject alerted me that an opportunity existed to create a new series of events that would help to put a small, newly-opened regional gallery on the international map.

In 2004 we hosted the first Focus on Artists' Books forum at Artspace Mackay. This was the first of a series of annual programs which included a mix of artists' books exhibitions, practical masterclasses and workshops, and a symposium on a range of artists' book-related subjects and themes. With support from funding bodies including Arts Queensland, the Australia Council for the Arts and the Gordon Darling Foundation, this grew over three years to include a cross section of artists, curators, librarians, collectors and writers from around the globe, who all made the annual pilgrimage to the sugar town of Mackay to discuss and make artists' books. During that short period of time Mackay was literally at the centre of the artists' book world once a year, and in 2006 the event brought together speakers from Great Britain, the USA, Germany, South Korea and across Australia.

That year (2006) also saw the launch of the first Libris Awards, then the most prestigious artists' books prize in the country. Its aim was to grow the Artspace Mackay collection via acquisitive awards, and to create opportunities for the gallery to acquire new works from the best artists' books makers in the country. I still recall the excitement amongst staff and volunteers when the books started to arrive and pile up in the collections store at Artspace Mackay for that first award exhibition – the idea had become a reality and one that continues to this day.

The fact that fourteen years later we are able to see a selection of high-quality artists' books on display in Mackay is testament to the enduring popularity of this art form among creators. What is also interesting is that so many of the artists who were involved in those events nearly two decades ago are still making books that can be viewed in this exhibition. Even more exciting is that the national

and international networks that were created in those early days are still active, with artists remaining in regular contact with colleagues, curators and librarians who they first met in Mackay. The discussions that we started there have taken on other forms and continued at forums and events in Melbourne, Brisbane, Gippsland, Armidale and online.

I am especially pleased to see that the popularity of the art form has continued to grow, with many entries in this exhibition coming from young and emerging artists, as well as artists from diverse cultural backgrounds and those wanting to address contemporary political and social issues. Even in the age of digital and social media the 'codex' has proven to be a robust and easily transportable technology that adapts well to creating and displaying engaging artworks.

Trying to define 'what an artists' book is' can still lead to great debates and discussions. During my involvement in this field over the past few decades I have always believed that the book art form needs to be approached in an inclusive way, as a 'broad church' that encompasses all aspects of artists' books. I believe that this has been one of the strengths of the approach that Artspace Mackay has taken as host and organising institution for the Libris Awards and in building its collection. What you see in this exhibition is a cross section of the best artists' books being made in the country at the moment. I commend Director Tracey Heathwood and her team for continuing to engage with new audiences and for continuing to build an enduring legacy, undoubtedly one of the most significant collections of its type in Australia. I would also like to thank Cathy Knezevic for her long-time passion and advocacy for the art form within the Mackay region.

As we head towards the twentieth anniversary of the first Focus on Artists Books event I would hope that there may be an opportunity to develop a National Centre for Artists' Books and Book Arts where artists can come together to explore the art form, to discuss and make books that we will all want to hold, view and read. There are centres for book arts that form the focus of these discussions and arts practice in cities around the world, but so far we don't have one in Australia. Instead we rely upon an informal network of practitioners, enthusiasts and institutions to keep the national dialogue alive and the art form in the public eye through exhibitions, prizes and events like this one.