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Full of Themselves: My Artists' Books

Aimee Lee

I am interested in telling the truth as I have seen it.
Gwendolyn Brooks

I make books that refer to themselves, either through visual clues or written narrative. My books often acknowledge their own bodies, which are usually but not always, made of conventional paper. (The word *paper* in this essay refers to conventional paper and to media made from bark and other substances.) Rather than invest fully in the idea that form follows function, I invest in slower and deliberate dialogue with my materials, even before the spark of a book idea ignites.

I first encountered artists' books in a class taught by Nanette Yannuzzi during my final semester at Oberlin College. The course introduced ideas around the book and then exploded them. I was an art major, playing violin, and taking classes across departments, so I was excited to use the framework of a book to create art that did not look particularly bookish – suspended body prints covered in spices that scented an entire hallway, and a hand-sewn doll complete with hair I collected from my head with its organs encased in plastic. With little money for materials, I used whatever I could find at home or in the class supply closet, and I worked on a small scale. The most obvious subject was my life.

After graduation, I worked full-time in orchestra administration while making books with anything at hand, about what felt important at the time. As an undergraduate, that included injustices of racism and sexism and, during my working life, the struggle to balance equanimity with work demands. I washed unused canvas from a painting class in the bathtub and transcribed a Chinese philosophy text onto the wrinkled fabric. First they were vertical scrolls; years later I sliced them and bound the fabric into a different form. I always recycle material from past art into new books, a sensible and ethical way for me to work.



A Reading of Chuang Tzu's "The Inner Chapters"



(2012). *Pen on canvas, 14 leaves, 11 x 9 x 2".*
Center for Book Arts collection.



Knit Sestina. Handmade mulberry paper
(2006). 5.5 x 4.25 x 2". Kohler Art Library,
UW Madison.



Listen to what you've been carrying for a long time
(2006). *Handmade mulberry paper. 6 x 67"*
opened. Private collection.

I administered grants for New York State artists in my second non-profit arts job. I organized and ran panels in varied disciplines for which we processed thousands of applications each year. Watching slides flash by, eight seconds per set of four images, I thought, "I could do that." I had no sense of what graduate school entailed and was rejected from the one program I applied to. Once I focused on what I actually wanted to study, I looked into book arts programs and ruled out most, based on location. I ended up at Columbia College in Chicago.

My first studio class was papermaking. I became immediately enamored. Andrea Peterson encouraged my desire to combine paper and performance by taking a performance class with Joan Dickinson. Melissa Jay Craig taught me formal bookbinding, and as my advisor

helped me manifest ideas more elegantly as I learned more tools and skills. My books started to look more like books, but still addressed my cultural and family inheritance alongside questions about navigating life as a human. I had a better understanding of edition work, but was still drawn to one-of-a-kind books. The biggest shift was in material, now that I could make my own paper, which became more powerful once I began my research in Korea on *hanji* (Korean paper made in traditional ways) in 2008.

Another major change in my bookmaking happened when I started to knit books out of paper in 2006. After assisting Peterson at her Ox-Bow summer papermaking course, I turned 2' x 3' sheets of paper into many hanks of paper "yarn." I took these to Art Farm in Nebraska, where I attempted to knit the paper

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Private Performance: Treehouse (2008).
Intaglio on knit linen paper yarn, 53 × 9.5".

but quit due to painful hand cramps, not realizing that I had to adjust my technique because paper is not elastic. After a week or two, I eased up on tension and tried purling, not knitting, every stitch. This lessened my pain, and I was off to the races.

I was not a skilled knitter, so I made a series of rectangles. Once I had enough, I sewed the panels together so that it was clear that the book functioned as an accordion. I wrote a sestina (a complex, thirty-nine-line poem featuring the intricate repetition of end-words in six stanzas and an envoi) about a friendship implosion that I had recently experienced. The content matched the form, the poem about surviving the loss through repetitive sewing, knitting, and hand work. I made paper in a repurposed wheelbarrow and found an old typewriter to type the words onto my paper, which I sewed onto the knitted pages.

I knitted the next book in one piece with cotton yarn in between the paper pages so that the accordion folds were flexible and obvious. At a Ragdale Foundation residency that followed, I made a third knitted book with a case that could not contain it, about growing up

between languages. Back in New York, I made another about the rape and murder of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, with a black thread that ran from cover to cover. With a scholarship at Manhattan Graphics Center, I printed etched copper plates onto knitted paper yarn, which led to a book about performance. After constructing several more, I produced an edition of four with twined paper covers about a Korean courtesan poet of the sixteenth century.

Alongside these knitted books, I made books with intact pages, integrating content and form more easily because I had developed skills not only in Korean papermaking but paper manipulation. I also fully embraced bark substrates inspired by traditions of *amatl* (a Mexican bark paper) and *kapa* (a Hawaiian paper made from the same cambium layer of the same paper mulberry tree (*kozo*) that makes *hanji*) and many other papers to expand what could serve as cover, page, and thread. I could spin and weave pages, too, and the gaps in each page reflected the invisibility handcuffed to hypervisibility that I had felt since childhood. Experiments with natural dyeing, printing, drawing, bark lace, and sewn dresses could all live inside my books. I continued to explore my curiosities: murder by fire, inexplicable suicide, human fantasies to “return to nature” while refusing to make changes to truly do so, our history with baskets, and things like water that we take for granted.

In 2014, I met Kobayashi Yasuo, a fifth-generation papermaker in Niigata prefecture. Mr. Kobayashi talked about how, in his earlier decades, he tried to force *kozo* to become the paper he wanted or thought his clients would purchase. Over time, he realized that he had it backwards: the goal was actually to ask *kozo* what it wanted to become. I was reminded of something Dorothy Field wrote, about how plants want to become paper, but need the hand of the papermaker to get them there.

This is how I approach my books now. I could impress my ideas upon my materials, making them line up into a book or edition to sell. I prefer to serve my materials, become a trusted partner. I sit with handmade, hand-dyed, hand-manipulated paper, and other objects for years before I can hear what they are trying to say. Because I work in many other media and on multiple long-term projects, my book production speed has slowed. However, every year I put aside time to make a few more, to reconnect with the deep satisfaction that comes from making a book that talks right back to you.

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Two tongues (one is silent) (2007). Handmade kozo and abaca/milkweed paper. Each page: 5 × 3". Oberlin College Art Library Collection.



Do It Over (2008). Spun and knit kozo paper. 4.5 × 5.25 × 2.5". University of Denver Penrose Library Collection.



Lapse relapse (2015). Ink and persimmon dye on kozo and hanji. 8.5 × 13.75 × 1.5" closed, 8.5 × 26.25" open. Oberlin College Art Library collection.

