

Books to Hold or Let Go

Caren Florance, Ampersand Duck

Books to Hold or Let Go is a group bookbinding show, a multi-faceted response to a single gathering of pages. It consists of one text with multiple responses, both traditional and alternative. There are participants from all over the map – but every binding has a local work inside it.

The textual heart of these bindings is a selection of poems by one of Australia's best-loved poets, Rosemary Dobson, who lives in Canberra. The selection is a thematic meander through a lifetime's work and preoccupations, beginning with Dobson's wonderful piece on creative process (... *the poem that exists / will never equal the poem that does not exist*¹), and then inviting the reader to *swing back the gate*² and enter to read, until at last we *hold the best of all since done / and let the rest slip through*³. Amidst the pages are two exquisite wood engravings by printmaker Rosalind Atkins that act as portals leading us to and from Dobson's work. The book was designed and printed by Canberra private press *Ampersand Duck*, using letterpress printing processes and aided by a grant from the ACT Government. The resulting book, *Poems to Hold or Let Go*, is shown in entirety around the walls of the gallery, and also in its original edition binding which, by necessity, is simple and functional, allowing it to be reproduced – by hand – 200 times.



All the other presentations of the book in this exhibition are indicative of each individual binder's style and tastes. The book sheets (the book pages, folded but un-sewn) were offered by the printer firstly to members of the ACT Bookbinding Guild and then further afield, and the design brief was left wide open for personal interpretation. Participants range from amateur and professional craft binders through to artists who do not identify as bookbinders but who regularly incorporate the book form into their artistic practice.

The idea of offering fine press book sheets for binders to reinterpret is not a new idea; on the contrary, it is an old and honoured tradition, but over the past twenty years there have been few opportunities for Australian binders to work with hand-printed books. Private presses are now few, and those that survive are finding new ways to do so, either by incorporating new technologies or by directing their work to an overseas market, where letterpress and fine printing is thriving. *Ampersand Duck* is a new venture, but is committed to working and interacting as much as possible with the Australian – and particularly the local – creative community.

Binding books by hand is also an art that is becoming lost – and yet, at the same time, found. While commercial books have become slick and rationalised and their production fully automated, the practice of making books by hand is shape-shifting.



It is difficult in a brief essay like this to feature all the individual works, and there are many more connections to be made that can be left to the viewer. All the bindings are featured in more detail at the [Ampersand Duck website](#), including many statements by the binders themselves. However, these works are best seen in the round where it is easy to appreciate how the form of the book survives as a desirable object in the face of encroaching technology.

Footnotes

- 1 Dobson, R. 2008, 'Over the Frontier', *Poems to Hold or Let Go*, Canberra, Ampersand Duck, p. 1
- 2 Dobson, R. 'Chance Met', *Poems to Hold or Let Go*, p. 5
- 3 Dobson, R. 'Divining Colander', *Poems to Hold or Let Go*, p. 49

Images (previous page): **Elke Ahokas**, carolingian binding, oiled Victorian Coobah (*Acacia salicina*) slabs, text sewn onto hemp cords using waxed linen thread, translucent paper endpapers. (this page): **Sue Anderson**, simplified binding of embossed black leather boards and acrylic, black goatskin and white sheepskin spine, grey goatskin details, Japanese Kozo endpapers; **Genevieve Swiffe**, artist's book binding, open-sewn Magnani Vergata book block accompanied by an Asian-stab binding of hand-printed Gampi silk paper and horse hair, housed in a simple conservation folder. Photos: Caren Florance.

As a movement, traditional craft bookbinding in Australia is slowing down, mostly due to limited teaching facilities, scarce equipment and little opportunity, although most states have an active and dedicated local Guild that does its best to keep the craft alive. At the other end of the spectrum, artists' books have developed into a bookbinding genre all their own, and it is blooming and thriving worldwide, perhaps as a 'rage against the machines', a reaction against the coldness of digitalisation and commercial shortcuts.

Both forms, traditional craft and artistic bookbinding, celebrate the touch of the maker and the tactile quality of manipulating a variety of materials by hand. Many of the volumes in this exhibition use leather that has been dyed, air-brushed, hand-tooled or blocked with metallic foils, or even found, in the form of a pair of white gloves. Others use unusual materials like wood, polycarbonate, papers and horsehair. Some binders lose themselves in their binding skills and the chance to showcase them; other binders connect their bindings sensitively to the book and its thematic preoccupations. All have been painstakingly laboured over, and the connection between hand, mind, eye and above all, time, is obvious.

There is a broad range of ideas featured in this exhibition: some respond to the title of the book, others to the text and/or images. Sometimes there are thematic threads through the array of books: a sensitivity to the notion of touch; a connection to wood that echoes the wood engravings by Rosalind Atkins; a play on dichotomies such as soft or hard, light or dark, *hold or let go*.



Books to Hold or Let Go
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