

Sense and sensibility the novel by Jane Austen, re-interpreted by the artist Cally Barker



At BABE with the Knitting and Sewing School

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The tactile qualities of some of the most recent acquisitions for the Artists Books' Collection held by the Winchester School of Art Library seem to either attract or repel.

As a Librarian working in the visual arts, where the interdisciplinary nature of those subjects has appeal to contemporary artists and students, it is sometimes a surprise that there is a negative response to artists' books that have used an aspect of craft to realise the final work. Maybe the visual arts are still susceptible to the old hierarchies? It is those very elusive and surprising boundaries that offer a challenge when building a collection within an academic institution.

It has been our intention as a specialist art and design library to collect broadly. At an early stage it was not our aim to build a collection of finely printed books, to collect a single type of work, or to establish a rigid collecting policy. Instead the emphasis has been on engaging and inspiring students across disciplines so that the collection encourages both the tradition of book making and the creative possibilities of challenging the book form. So our approach has been directly linked to supporting staff and students not only in relation to graduate and post-graduate courses in Fine Art but also in Graphic Arts and in Textiles, Fashion, and Fibre.

The collection now numbers over 1,200 items including what may be described as "early classics" by (amongst others): Ed Ruscha, Ian Hamilton-Finlay, Susan Hillier, John Dilnot, Steve Wheatley, Helen Douglas and Telfer Stokes. In addition small publishers are an aspect of the collection, including the pioneering Coracle Press. It is recognised that each of these artists, and a range of publishers, has pushed the boundaries through their conceptual approach relating to content, format, circulation, and the ultimate purpose of a book. However they are not associated with craft or specific types of material for example any kind of textiles.

For BABE, the second Bristol Artist's Book Event, held at the Arnolfini earlier this year, the stand for the Winchester School of Art Library Artists' Books Collection served as a showcase; the aim being to encourage potential researchers including artists and students to utilise the collection.

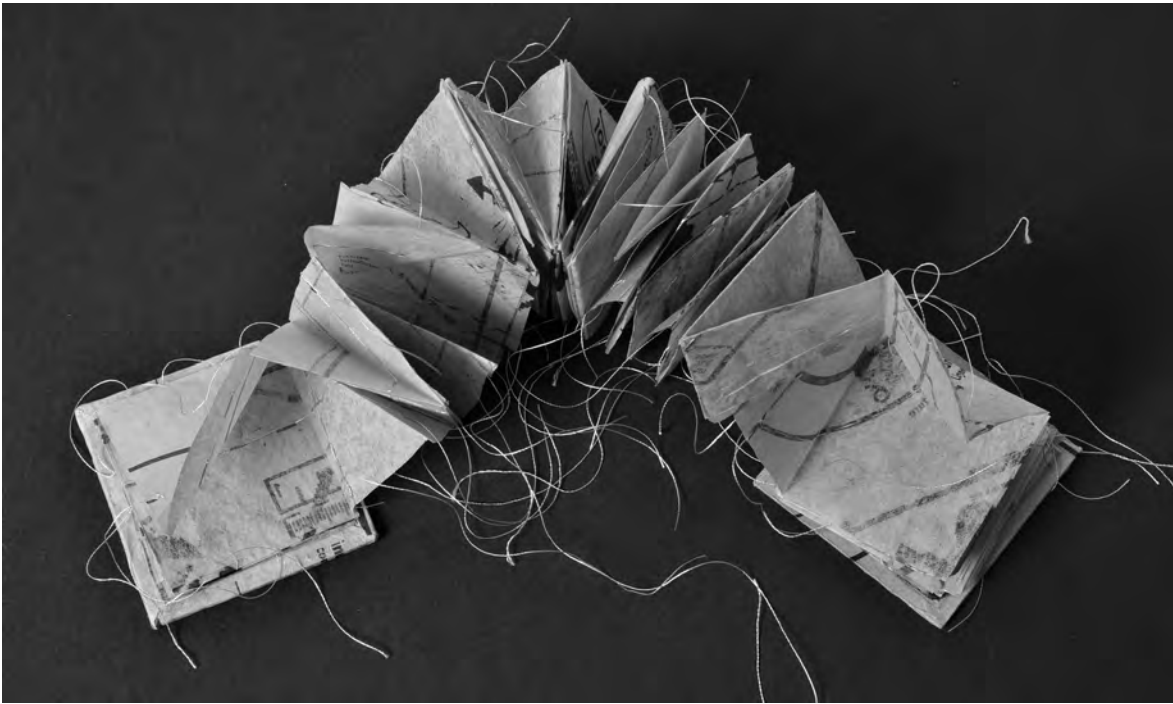
The selection focused specifically on a range of works that highlighted construction, format and materials including textiles.

Textiles do make an appearance in the history of the book form, most notably for example, children's cloth books and albums of textile samples comprising yarns, fabric swatches or embroidery threads. Cloth books for young children are intended to encourage reading but may also be washed if necessary so whilst contributing to learning they are also eminently practical with an element of fun. Textile sample books originally had a business use but have now transformed into desirable and valuable historical objects. The artist Louise Bourgeois frequently uses textiles in her work, and has made a series of books combining fabric and text. A particular example is *ODE A L'OUBLI*, 2004 which comprises a series of textile stitched pages and although this is not the subject of this essay it belongs in part to that tradition. It is undoubtedly a book and makes a distinctive contribution to the work of the artist; it is clearly a response to a lived experience which connects to and through textiles.

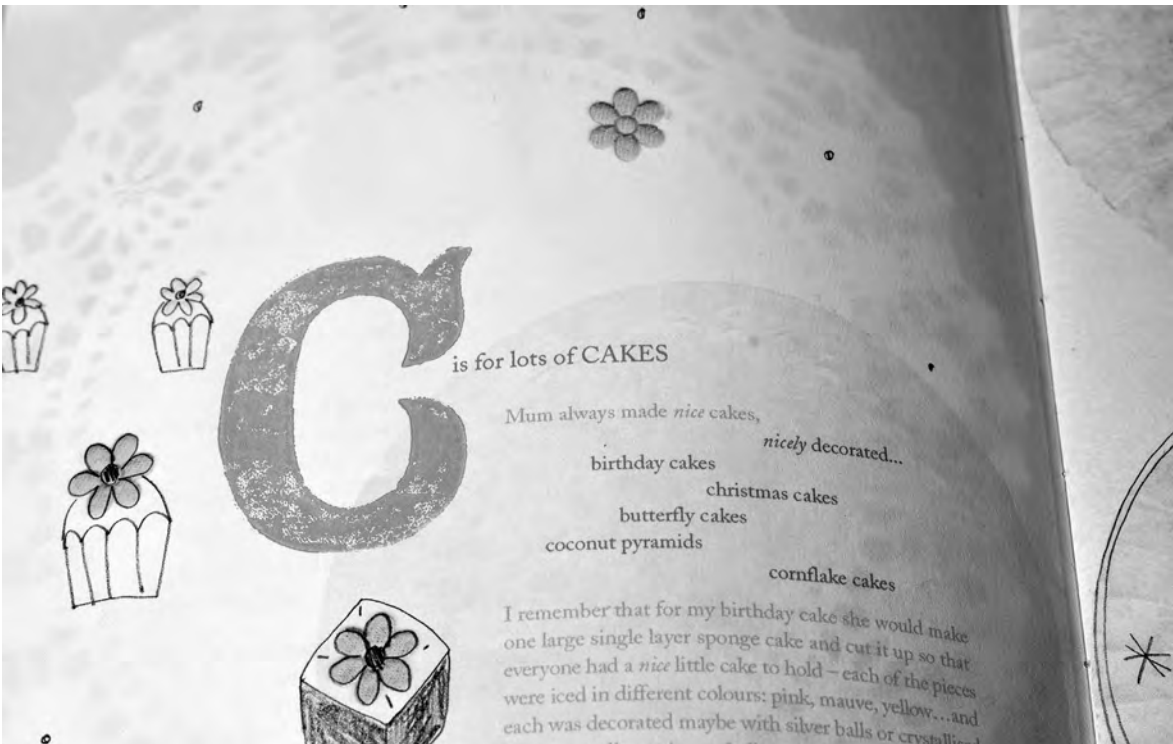
There are many interesting examples of text and textiles working together to make objects including books from both the past and the present. These are interesting antecedents for the artist's book that utilise types of textile either in part or in totality. Textiles may be used to create a direct link between idea and realisation, or suggestively employed to subvert and alter preconceptions.

I will declare an interest in these antecedents, as my professional responsibilities for collections include not only the Artists' Books Collection but also the Knitting Reference Library. This is a distinctive and separate part of the Knitting Collections held by the University of Southampton Library - of which we are part being a specialist library at a separate but linked site. My interest has inspired me to develop an awareness of related resources and the potential links between the two collections. It is accepted that this may appear a rather false attempt to make connections but the creative possibilities of these two resources appear to be of interest to artists, researchers and students.

A recent visit to the London College of Fashion Archive and Special Collections included the discovery of three sample books of knitting that are part of the Women's Home Industries Archive. These are unique sample books that exist in their own right as part of the history of textiles, specifically knitting and that particular organisation.



Transition by Judith Hammond



Tea and Cake by Tamar MacLellan and Philippa Wood



They may also be sources of inspiration for both artists and designers from manifold backgrounds; working with archives has much to offer and the possibilities are innumerable. These sample books comprise hand-written notes and knitted squares of particular stitches using a variety of wool and yarns. The stitches have rather mesmerising names that may offer an artist or perhaps a creative writer a starting point: *bluebell cluster, falling star, asparagus tips, la broderie, Solomon's knots, Norwegian rib, smocked diamond, trailing fern, Grecian plait....*

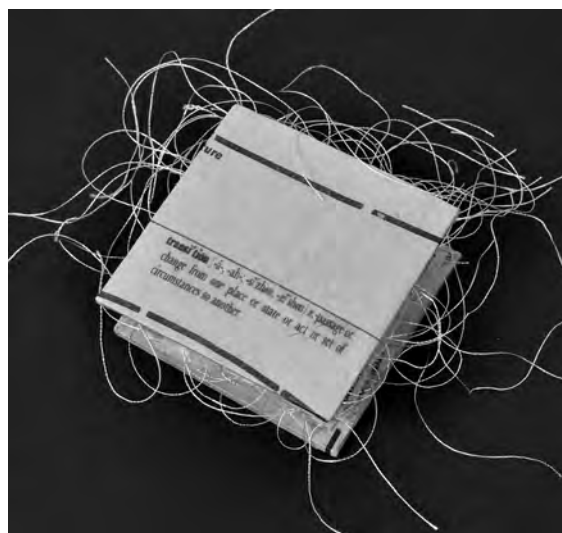
At BABE I detected both a sense of distrust around the crafted display and considerable interest and engagement. Maybe the selection was unexpected and whilst visually distinctive, either appealing or repulsive to the tactile senses of the individual who stopped to take a closer look from out of the passing audience. This seems to apply especially to knitting and sewing! Not only did the display include soft materials which have the inherent tactile qualities that lead a desire to touch and feel (unless you are repulsed) and transparent plastics, but also the harder edges of sharp metals and the solid attributes of wood. As a librarian who has in some respects become a professional collector, I am less interested in tight definitions and rigid boundaries - whilst acknowledging the need for quality and clarity of purpose. It is also challenging to collect what may be considered outside defined norms.

A very small selection of the works displayed follow here, accompanied by brief descriptions:



Sense and sensibility (above) the novel by Jane Austen, re-interpreted by the artist Cally Barker with a knitted cover in the classic cream and orange of Penguin, presented in a calico bag. Maybe Jane would not approve but the Professor of Literature who stopped to look at this work during BABE admired the work and recognised the possible

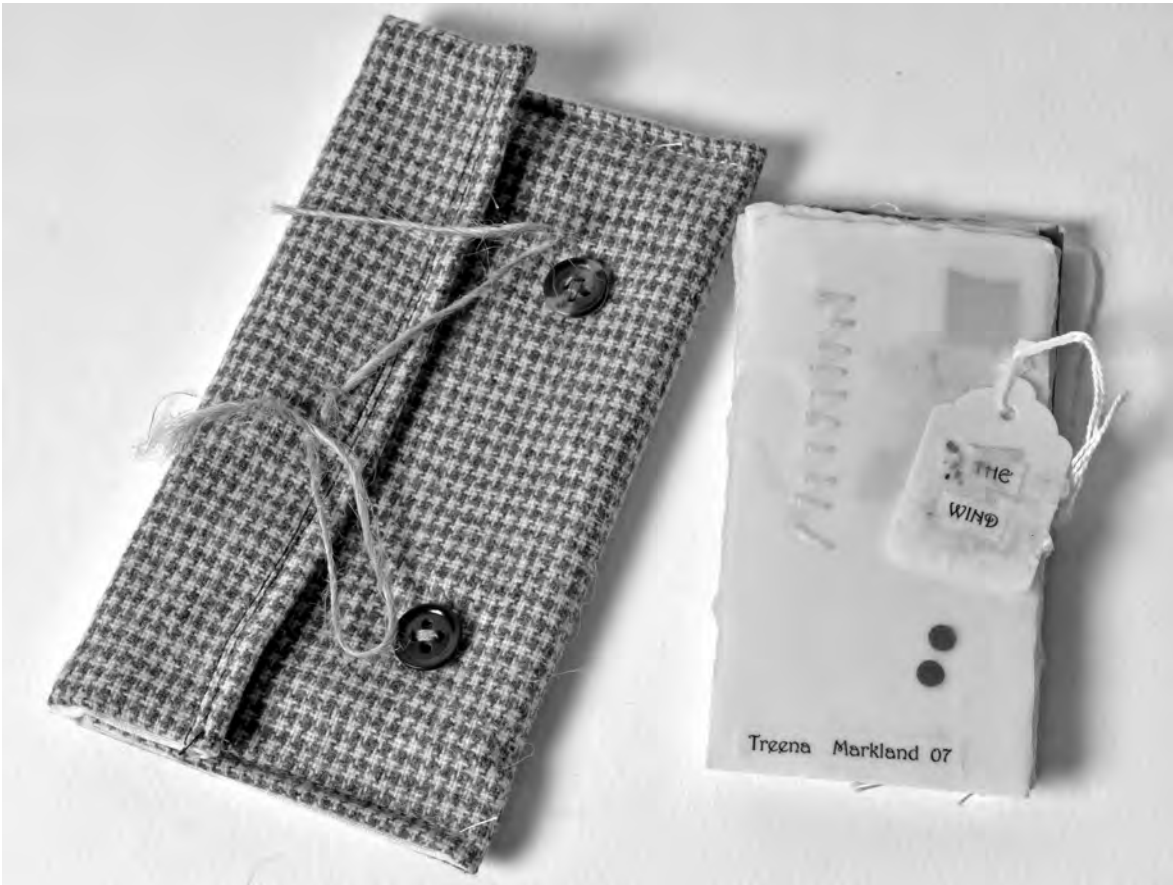
subversion, he clearly wanted that book in its knitted cover. Maybe the allure and repulsion of domesticity come together in this work.



Transition by Judith Hammond (above) comprises photographic images printed onto a dressmaker's pattern, folded and hand-stitched. It is collapsible, delicate, and rustling - clearly showing the dressmaker's instructions, it has been manipulated into a concertina construction retaining the qualities of cut-out paper patterns.



Tea and Cake by Tamar MacLellan and Philippa Wood (above) is a book of recipes with an embroidered linen cover. This clearly makes reference to traditional home-made textiles, the hand-embroidery used to embellish tablecloths, doilies, runners, antimacassars, bedspreads made by anonymous women: maybe your mother, auntie, granny or sister. So much of this work is dismissed and excluded but here aptly combines the hand-sewn with the tradition of tea and cake, itself a contemporary classic.

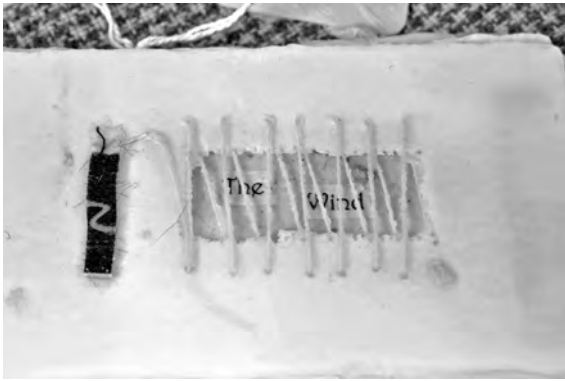


The wind by Treena Markland



Norway knits: ways to keep warm in winter by Imi Maufe





The wind by Treena Markland (above) is a compilation of twenty waxed leaves, enclosing various items presented in a textile pocket. Delicate and ephemeral, yet with a sense of substance provided by the binding and buttoned tweed textile cover. This is an artist who boldly declares that the tactile qualities of the every day are integral to her work; she does not shy away from craft or textiles but instead utilises them to make works that intentionally combine materials with her ideas in order to appeal to the senses.



Norway knits: ways to keep warm in winter by Imi Maufe (above) collects together knitted gloves and uses them as a means to create a collaboration with the owners and knitters. Norway has a strong and distinctive tradition of hand knitting which is today being renewed by contemporary artists. It is also an abiding interest of this artist who presents her work in a variety of ways often working with communities in unexpected locations and with unusual results.

Each of these artists clearly reference textiles to create their work, it is clear that their ideas connect with form and materials.

My observations from BABE are obviously only based on a single weekend, but a distrust of craft as manifested in artists' books is quite prevalent within current criticism and published writing about this area of visual arts practice. The criticism is applied

to this very narrow part of practice although not necessarily to the broader field. It is always useful to consider the artists' intention and their means of realising ideas and interests, which are ably demonstrated by these particular works.

As a collector it is useful to be aware of the challenging, interesting, and variant views held by the community that produces, discusses, shows, and promotes artists' books whilst retaining an ability to continue collecting from that alluring, engaging and lively group of people who together make artists' books of considerable variety.

Artists continue to practice, improvise and challenge preconceptions even though the death of the book has been declared so often by so many. It is therefore heartening to detect that craft, art and design may have something different and interesting to offer regarding the future (and format) of the book and publishing - to imagine that the discipline could make an important contribution to the ongoing debate about the book that includes the "Google generation".

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