

Online Exclusive

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Susan Hensel: Book Art from a Literary Mind

Book artist Susan Hensel is inspired by many things but it is clear that all roads lead back to literature. Her books take many forms — from ordinary to lavish books; unbound books; hand-sewn books made from handmade paper; even boxes which contain pages to be read. Some of her books are outside the realm of traditional books ... complex sculptures that take hours to experience. Hensel started her career in art as a ceramic artist, and her exhibition history covers more than 30 years.

TCR: How did you first become interested in and get involved in working with paper?



SH: In the mid to late 1970's, smack in the middle of my life as a potter working in porcelain, I discovered hand papermaking. I figured everyone needs a hobby, so I practiced once a week for a time and periodically I took local workshops. Pulling sheets of paper and painting in pulp were soothing activities, rhythmic in the same way as a potter's wheel.

My work in clay continued, but became more expressive, less functional. I began to collage papers to the surfaces. I then returned to hand papermaking, taking a more advanced course so I could integrate the crafts of clay and paper more thoroughly.

Eventually, I was shown how to bind a book. My world changed at that moment! I had always spent all my disposable income on books. They were the most powerful objects I could imagine ... and now, I had the beginning skills to join that powerful stream! I did one more Ann Arbor Art Fair, quit the circuit, and never looked back.

TCR: How have you pursued your career?

SH: After I quit art fairs in 1986, I traveled to study papermaking and books for several years, gradually seeking competitions and galleries to show my work. I still show in competitive environments, but more and more seek and achieve solo shows in city and college galleries. I also have shown at the Pyramid Atlantic Book Fair, the biennial fair devoted to the book and paper arts in Washington, D.C. I also routinely contact collectors and collections regarding new work available for sale.

TCR: Would you describe yourself as a paper sculptor or a book artist?

SH: I describe myself more frequently as a narrative artist or a narrative sculptor. The story rules the output. While most of my works are intimate, small, handheld artist's books, sometimes the story needs to be much larger ... presented as a freestanding sculpture or even as a whole room installation with sound, scent, lights and motion. It is my responsibility as an artist to find the best way to lead people into the story. I always tell open-ended stories with universal themes, leaving much room for people to respond or tell their own story.

TCR: Who are the customers for your work? What is your strategy for reaching them?

SH: My primary market is collecting libraries. I regularly send them postcards of new work and keep them updated on my exhibition schedule. I send catalogs and alert them to Web site updates. I respond to all e-mail inquiries about my artwork and a rather high number eventually turn into show opportunities. Clients need to feel that they know you personally. Since I rarely meet my clients, I must create a relationship through alternative means:

- I make sure that potential clients (and anyone is a potential client) feel like they know me. My name, face and Web address are on every piece of public relations information that goes out and my Web page tells my story.
- My biographies and artist statements also tell my story, tailored to fit the recipient. I continue to write and rewrite these important pieces.
- Press clippings are also very important, especially reviews. When you have been written about by an "expert," it validates your client's fledgling belief in your worth as an artist. I make sure collectors get copies of these.
- I send a presentation book, individualized for that show, for every major show that I do. It has the title of the show, my current vitae, biography and artist's statement, and press clippings.
- I continue to seek magazine and trade book venues to show my work. I have reached many, many people that way.
- I photograph everything. I send press releases with visuals on almost every show I do to local, regional and national contacts.
- I accept all speaking engagements.
- I teach, even when I am not teaching a class. People need continual instruction on the value and professionalism of the arts.

TCR: How do you make the bulk of your living from this art?

SH: The bulk of my business is direct sales to collecting libraries, paid teaching gigs at various colleges,

local and area workshops and seasonal sales of blank journals and cards.

TCR: Have there been major turning points in your career as an artist?

SH: I spent the last two years as part of an alternative space called The Art Apartment, a laboratory for new and experimental art. We worked with video, performance art and installation and once a year put on a very lucrative artists' book show. It was an intense, wonderful experience. We gained national, regional and local attention, a great press book and put on challenging shows. This experience confirmed and strengthened the knowledge that artists need to take charge of their careers and create exhibition and sales opportunities. It also taught me that no matter where I might relocate my studio, I will have a space dedicated to artists' experimentation.

TCR: Do you see any business challenges specific to artists who work in paper/books? How have you overcome these?

SH: Clay was much easier to sell. People can always imagine drinking out of a mug, but many people could not imagine reading a handmade book or writing in a handmade blank book!

I researched all art magazines, following reviews and advertising, noting galleries that showed compatible work and noting galleries that had a book sideline. I began collecting the addresses of collecting libraries and followed the careers of book people whose work I admired. And, networked! I kept in touch with everyone I met at conferences and workshops. I sent slides to authors, professors, open calls and slide libraries.

I researched the history of artists' books in this country and learned many things that affect their marketing success. Some of the difficulties arise from the amorphous nature of the book field ... artists making one of a kind books, fine press people making wonderful copies of Mark Twain, democratic multiples run off on 1950's-era mimeograph machines and sold for pennies, dada and fluxus pamphlets and mail art freely distributed, limited-edition artists books related to the print tradition, book sculptures, blank journals ... all of these have fallen under the heading of book arts! To complicate matters more, I learned that in the heyday of the 60's and 70's, many book artists won grant money allowing them to lower the prices of their books. Further, all artists' books, on some level, relate to trade books and trade book prices are often expected! Yikes!

The task has been to analyze each project's costs in relation to what the market can bear and in relation to the aesthetic requirements of the piece. Can the piece be made as a limited edition, increasing its distribution? What papers and print processes can be used? What binding process? Can handmade paper be used, doubling the price, or can a less expensive paper be used without harming artistic content? How large will the edition be ... based on expected sales or on my ability to afford the materials to complete the edition?

TCR: What has been the most difficult thing you have encountered in your work?

SH: Sometimes the work itself is psychologically overwhelming. Most of the pieces involve either searing personal experience or years of research. Reading a year of holocaust literature and presenting "Kristallnacht: The Bystanders" — a huge installation — was a shattering experience. It was successful, but so difficult to live in the process and to live with the knowledge as it accumulated.





TCR: How has the Internet affected your business?

SH: The Internet has given me a constant platform. I can always refer people to my site. The work is available to see 24 hours a day. It is a primary promotional tool, although direct sales are not high. Recently at the Pyramid Atlantic Book Fair, most people who came to my booth knew my work from my Web site and came to seek me out.

TCR: What is the next step for you?

SH: Among my short-term goals, I am working on a CD-ROM catalog that will be mailed to a list of collecting libraries. I am also binding a limited hard-backed catalog for established clients or “hot” contacts. I also plan to start a quarterly e-mail/ Internet newsletter and plan to begin meeting with librarians to make sales in person. My long-term goal is to relocate my studio for better space and richer cultural community

TCR: What is your show schedule and where is your work available?

SH: In March, I’ll be at “A Way with Words” at the Appalachian Center for Craft in Smithville, Tenn. In April, I’m curating and showing in “A Reader’s Art 3” at the Lansing Art Gallery in Lansing, Mich. In July, I’ll be at “A Way with Words” in Las Vegas, Nev. From April 7 to May 17, I’ll be exhibiting at the Thomasville Cultural Center in Thomasville, Ga. Also, I can always be contacted directly for sales.

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