

2020 Libris Awards

Essay by Des Cowley

What is it about the idea of the book that continues to fascinate us? To what extent do its tactile and sensory properties – paper, print, binding, illustration, design – foreground it as an object deserving of our attention? In these digital times, when a seemingly unlimited stream of words comes our way via a myriad of devices, we can be thankful that artists continue to play a vital role in questioning the place of the book in our culture in the 21st century. Books, after all, can function as objects of beauty, long-cherished, but equally they can function as vehicles that challenge how we think or view the world.

Artspace Mackay has been, and continues to be, an important voice in this ongoing dialogue between the artist and the book since inaugurating the Libris Awards in 2006. To say that artists' books, and the Libris awards, have put Mackay on the map is an understatement. I made my first visit ever to Mackay in 2004 to attend the initial Focus on Artists' Books forum, convened by my 2020 co-judge Robert Heather, then Director of Artspace Mackay. I returned on several occasions and have continued to follow the Libris Awards assiduously as part of my own professional development in the field of artists' books.

Certainly, in the first decade of this century, the state of Queensland punched above its weight when it came to artists' books. The State Library of Queensland actively collected artists' books, and Noreen Grahame's galleries + editions organised a series of artist book fairs that were integral to the development of artists' books in this country. Artspace Mackay, via a series of forums and the Libris Awards, provided, and continues to provide, critical impetus both at a regional and national level. A glance at past winners and finalists of the Libris Awards is to be appraised of the breadth of talent, and the magnitude of production, in the field of artists' books in this country. If we used no other measuring stick other than past Libris Awards, it would be possible to develop a canon of significant book artists in this country. Such a canon would include Deanna Hitti, Clyde McGill, Angela Cavalieri, Bruno Leti, George Matoulas, Gracia Haby & Louise Jennison, Peter Lyssiotis, Deirdre Brollo, Wim de Vos, Jan Davis, Dianne Fogwell, Lyn Ashby, Deborah Klein, Tim Mosely, Glen Skien, amongst others. In other words, the calibre of entrants received by the Libris Awards attests to Artspace Mackay's capacity to attract the very best work of artists currently making books.

The entrants for the 2020 Libris Awards again prove no exception. From 120 works, my co-judge Robert Heather and I engaged in the complex process of whittling the field down to sixty finalists. This was by no means an easy task, and it is certainly the case that many fine works failed to make the cut. But in looking over our final list, I am struck by the diversity and vitality of the form itself. The very idea of the book, it seems, is far from being exhausted. These artists have demonstrated that the book can be interrogated, stretched, pushed to its very limit. At the same time, they are intent on creating works that reflect the beauty and mystery inherent in the form itself.

Materiality has always been fundamental to the physical book, whether the papyrus of scrolls, the parchment of manuscripts, or the gathered leaves of a book made from paper or other materials. Artists have long relished the challenge of working with assorted materials, a tradition highlighted in the 2020 finalists. Bernard Appassamy's Joseph's letter draws on the form of a palm-leaf book to

reference Grapheme-colour synaesthesia. Mandy Gunn weaves a paper text into a scroll in her Book of book and scroll of scrolls. Rhi Johnson's Curiosities offers us a cabinet of curiosities exploring the female form and biology; while Jenna Lee transforms a book on Captain James Cook into paper vessels that evoke those her ancestors made, in the process challenging the omnipresent narrative of Cook's story. Carolyn McKenzie-Craig's Termite texts uses a block of concrete to explore the connections between termites and capitalism.

A number of artists have chosen to explore issues or recent events central to our place within a global eco-system: bushfires, the environment, climate change; while others delve into personal stories, using the format of the book as a means to deal with loss or grief. Central to these works is a unity of form and idea.

Aside from such narrative considerations, these books offer their own aesthetic pleasures, whether in terms of quality of execution, innovative design or construction. I could cite, by way of example, Martin King's exquisite relief etchings of birds; Jazmina Cininas's use of milk cartons and embroidery thread; Peter Lyssiotis's bold photomontages; or Michael Phillips's colour field woodblock prints. These and other artists draw upon a wide range of techniques, from traditional printmaking through to digital, photographic and mixed media, presenting the results as unique states, limited editions, or multiples. The 2020 Libris Awards finalists provide further evidence, should we need it, that the medium of the book, in the hands of artists, remains boundless.

For many of us, 2020 has turned out to be a year of uncertainty. Julie Barratt's The isolation files addresses this head-on, with surprising immediacy. Having travelled to Finland as an artist in residence in early March, she found herself stranded there, unable to return to Australia, as the COVID-19 story unfolded. Her work was created in direct response to these events, becoming 'a diversion from the ever-escalating feelings of panic, of being 'stuck', of fear of family members becoming sick'.

It is testament to Artspace Mackay's commitment to the Libris Awards that, in these uncertain times, the gallery and staff committed to the realisation of the 2020 awards and accompanying exhibition, ensuring that those artists' book finalists selected by my fellow judge Robert Heather and I are available to be viewed online as well as during the Libris Awards exhibition at Artspace Mackay.