

Binding the loose leaves of women's history

VISUAL ART

Sufferance: Women's Artists' Books
CQ Gallery, Craft Queensland, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane. Until October 8.

MAKING and collecting artists' books is an underground activity within the visual arts and, as such, it attracts enthusiasts and obsessives.

Artists have always made books but, as self-conscious art objects, artists' books are a 20th-century phenomenon: from the Russian suprematists through the dadaists, to the members of fluxus, from Kasimir Malevich, through Marcel Duchamp to Sol de Witt.

Artists' books may be one-offs or run in small editions. They may have a spine and a traditional book format or be loose-leaf images and/or text running in sequence. Often it's printmakers who find the format impossible to resist: the texture of the paper, the quality of the handmade and the appealing ability to reveal a series of images one by one.

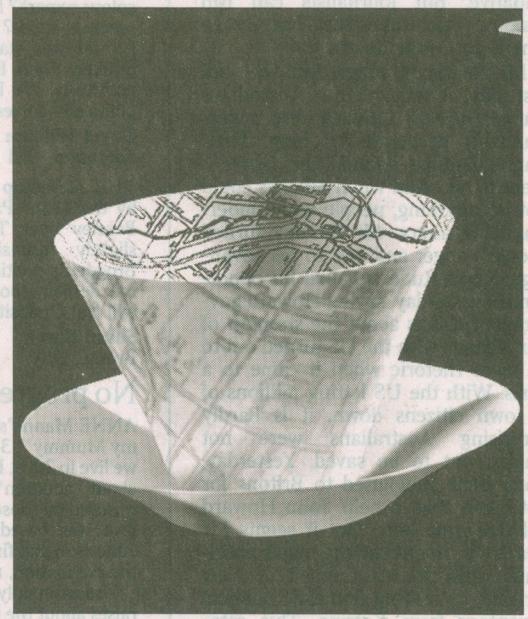
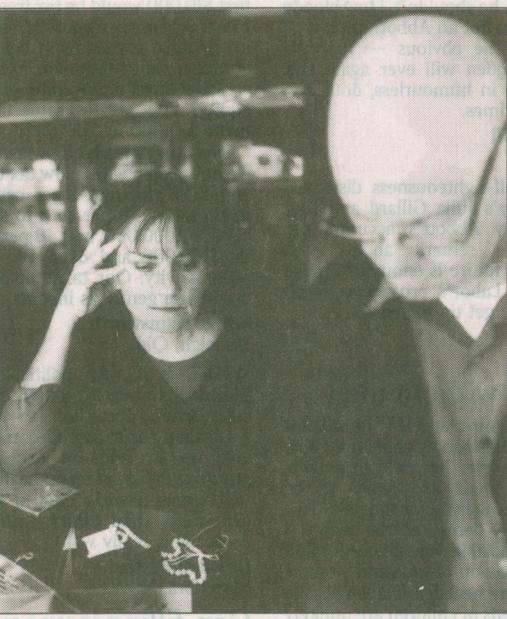
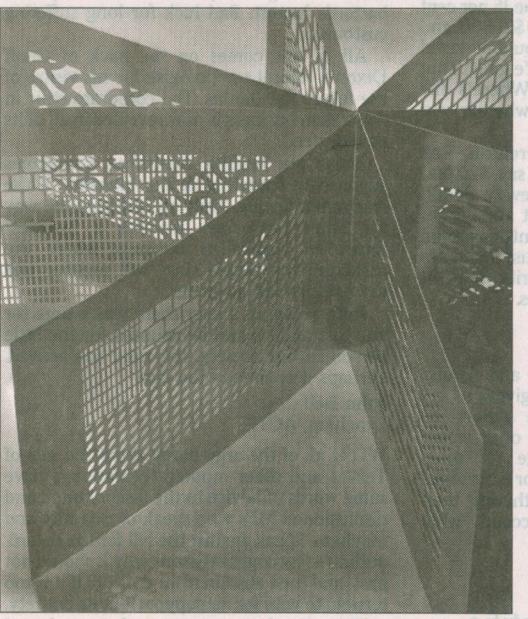
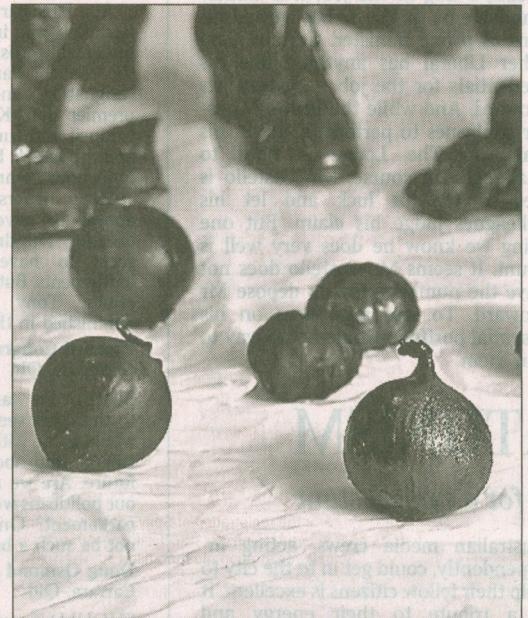
An exhibition of artists' books — celebrating milestones in Queensland history, the centenary of women's suffrage and the 40th year of indigenous people gaining the vote in state elections — may puzzle collectors and makers. None of the artists included are known artists' book makers. Only one, Judy Watson, has previously made an artist's book. And the diversity of the work on show begs the question: what *isn't* an artist's book?

A dramatic curtain made of stockings, embroidered, knotted and 4m in length, is hung from the back wall, draping on to and spread wide on the gallery floor. Next to it is a pair of flags tagged "trust me" and in front is a polling booth, all part of Mona Ryder's idea of an artist's book on the suffragette theme. Then Mel Robson's exquisitely delicate porcelain vessels — one printed with crochet instructions, another a measuring cup, yet another a map, celebrating domesticity and female pursuits — are placed high on a shelf on a side wall. Judith Kentish also conjures up the handmade and private womanly rituals in her work: soft voile fabric with a grid pattern overlaid with knotted and floating threads. This single page is described as an abstract diary.

How are these and the other six works in this collection able to be shoehorned into the definition of the artist's book posed by Helen Cole from the State Library of Queensland, the commissioning body for the exhibition? "An artist's book is first and foremost an artwork, one which references in some way the form of the book as a concept, or specific books," Cole says. She readily admits that some of these works, all of which are part of the SLQ collection, are "gallery pieces, really" and that the reading room (even within the new State Library, under construction on Brisbane's South Bank) may not do them justice.

SLQ has the largest public collection of artists' books in Australia. While its holdings are diverse, the idea behind commissioning the work for this exhibition was not only to boost the collection but to indicate the directions of the new library's public programs. It also drew the selected artists into the library to use Queensland history as a stimulus for contemporary art.

"The idea was to push the notion of what an artist's book can be," says Cole. "Artists' book makers are very nice and cosy people, very supportive of each other. That's fine, but there is very little criticism; I think it leads



Under suffrage: Debra Porch, top centre, with her installation *Magnified Memory*, also top left and right; *Freewheeling* by Barbara Heath and Malcolm Enright, bottom left; Heath and Enright at work; and detail from *A Secret History* by Mel Robson. The works are part of an exhibition of women's artists' books at CQ Gallery

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Helen Cole, State Library of Queensland

to a lack of critical judgment being aired."

Noreen Grahame, director of Grahame Galleries and known internationally as an artist's book expert, says the work in this exhibition "draws a long bow in terms of the artist's book... It has to have a sequence of images or text that comes through, a series of surprises concerning the next image or text that is only available in the book format."

Curator Jacqueline Armistead's emphasis in artist selection and during the commissioning process was firmly on contemporaneity. "Artists were chosen on the basis of their consistency of practice and were invited to reference the book in a way that they felt was appropriate," Armistead says.

With three exceptions — a stainless steel book (with pages punctured by fine lattice patterns inspired by the role of the bicycle in women's emancipation) by Barbara Heath and partner Malcolm Enright; a book of

photographic images placing female cut-outs in public spaces around Brisbane by Kate Dickson; and prints on the theme of "a preponderance of Aboriginal blood" by Watson — she believes that the work in the exhibition is outside the artist's book concept.

Watson's prints use original documents. One is a form, "Report on Application by Half-Caste for Exemption from the Provisions of the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Sale of Opium Acts". Each document is splashed with red like dried blood. The poignancy of letters from appli-

cants for a right to vote and the strength of their treatment give this work enormous cogency. It is the strongest work in the show and the closest to a traditional artist's book.

Nicole Voevodin-Cash's soft-fabric furniture continues the diversity and evokes sensuality and the interior spaces often inhabited by women.

The work commissioned for this exhibition is contemporary artwork of real strength, extending the practice of each artist with thematic use of local history.

Its relationship with the usual artist's book format may be fairly tenuous; however, if this is the flavour of things to come and the State Library genuinely interfaces with Queensland's artistic community, it could become a robust companion to the Queensland Art Gallery on Brisbane's South Bank.

Louise Martin-Chew