

Interview with Cathryn Miller in 2017 as part of the Post-Digital Book Arts Project:

<http://pdba.usask.ca>

So I guess we'll just get you to introduce yourself and what you do.

CATHRYN: My name is Cathryn Miller and I'm a book artist: this means I make things that contain text or images in some kind of narrative format. I try to make my books interactive - they don't always look like books, but I think they qualify as books because they have content in a way that a painting or sculpture doesn't have and most of my work is small scale - so it's very personal and direct. Although I do occasionally do very large pieces that you can hang on the wall if you like.

Can you tell us about your favorite memory with a book?

CATHRYN: My favourite memory with a book. Probably it was the first time I was given a book of my very own by my favourite uncle at Christmas when I was six. I'd been able to read basic reading for a couple of years. I have a brother who's nine years older and I wanted to do everything he did. So, I had learned to read, despite my mother's best efforts to stop me.

Really?

CATHRYN: Well my mother was a school teacher and she had taught my brother to read before he went to school and it caused all kinds of problems because he was bored in the classroom when they were teaching reading because he already knew how to do that. So my mother decided that for the sake of my teachers, she wouldn't teach me to read. But, if a child is very determined to learn to read and they go to their older brother and say, "what's this word" - I knew my alphabet, so - "what's this word, and what's this word..." and you start piecing it together. So I had learned to read. And my favourite uncle gave me the first of the Winnie the Pooh books when I was six. And I think he gave me the book "Now We Are Six" which is one of the set of four. And I'm not sure whether he was my favourite uncle because he gave me the book or he gave me the book because he was my favourite uncle. If you follow this distinction there. Anyway, that's probably a really early book memory.

Is that kind of how you got interested in the book arts or is there a story?

Well, I trained as a graphic designer. Took a graphic design course before — between studying fine art and going back to university to study honours english. I'd always been interested in reading, so I'd always been interested in books. But I didn't really become involved in the book arts until I developed a disability which prevented me from weaving — because I was a professional weaver for 25 years. So all that training that I thought was wasted in doing things like page layout and stuff came in handy after all. So I returned to a first love. I've always loved books.

I think we can all agree about that.

So, even though you are an experimental bookmaker, what sorts of traditional bookmaking practices do you incorporate into your work?

CATHRYN: Well I do some Japanese binding. I do some codex standard stitch signatures. So I do some of that traditional binding. I don't do fine art binding so I don't do the big leather covers with the fancy inlays and that kind of thing. Because my books are more about content and I try to make the form of each book fit the content which is why they end up frequently not looking like books. But I do — I'm self trained as a binder — but I *do* do some traditional forms of binding.

Okay. So mostly binding would be the traditional practices.

CATHRYN: Yeah. So I do — one of the little books that I'll show you later is a really simple pamphlet binding. So that would be probably a standard. I use a lot of accordion structures, which is sort of... I think it has become traditional as a binding form.

So narrative then, you were saying that narrative does play a role?

CATHRYN: Yeah, most of my books... I do some books that don't have any words in them but the pictures tell the story, so there's some kind of thing. And there's always some kind of content so there will be a poem or there will be a story told through pictures or there will be social commentary told through interacting with parts of a collection of objects that are put together with book pages as well. There's always some kind of very specific content and I try to make form match whatever the — I try to make it appropriate which is why, as I say, I don't use a sort of traditional book format.

Where do you get inspiration for your stories?

CATHRYN: Oh, how do I stop inspiration for making books? Things just come to me. I have — I managed to get into adulthood without developing the filtering system that most people are trained into in school. Little kids have ideas all the time. They think, what if? or why not? or whatever. I seem to have been able to retain that. There are some nights when I'm not sleeping that I wish I wasn't thinking quite so much but I seem to have an ability to see two different things and see what connections they would make if they were put together. I get... recently I've been getting ideas from these news stories, that just are driving me crazy. So I suddenly started doing political books which really wasn't a focus before.

So are there any particular artists that inspire you or people that you've collaborated with before?

CATHRYN: I've done some collaborations. I've worked, done some work with a local printmaker named Monique Martin. I've never done a collaboration with another book artist. And it's pretty hard to define who my inspirations would be. It's a lot. Everything I've ever seen which has become huge since I now go on Pinterest.

Yeah the internet is an endless source of inspiration.

CATHRYN: Stop looking now! But you have to actually go and do something. Stop looking now.

Can you tell a bit about Byopia Press?

CATHRYN: Okay. Byopia Press started, as I said, I became unable to weave anymore and Byopia Press started when my husband wrote a travel journal and we published it and I did the illustrations and the page layout. And we did side stitch binding for a book. So that was the first book for Byopia Press. And my husband is partner in Byopia Press, but he's largely tech support, copy editor if I'm doing copy, because I don't know anyone who can edit their own copy. The tech support is really important because I do own or lease a fair amount of technology. Most of my work is digital. So I do laser and pigment ink jet printing. I do all in-house printing. And this can require tech support from time to time. And moral support too, David gives me moral support. He says, "there, there dear. I'm sorry that didn't work".

What's a typical day of work like for you?

CATHRYN: Ok. I get up, I check my email and I try not to spend too long dealing with it but some mornings it can take an hour or more. For instance the morning when I spend almost an hour answering questions from a young woman rather like yourselves who's thinking about going into the book arts and has no real support in the immediate location where she is in England. But I've been around the book arts field long enough that I was actually able to put her in touch with some people in England that I know. So that was good. But just generally answering questions like, you know, "what's your day like? How do you organize yourself?" So I do the email thing first, get that out of the way. I work on whatever project I'm currently working on. I try to divide my time so that I'm doing — because my hand strength is limited — I try not to do too much physical work at a stretch. So I'll do, at the most, an hour of, say, cutting or stitching or whatever I'm doing. And then I'll work on whatever current designs I'm working on and then I'll switch back and forth throughout the day on projects.

Can you talk a bit about your process? Like is there anything quirky that you do while you work?

CATHRYN: Oh, quirky while I'm working. I'm not sure what you mean.

Just like a funny habit.

CATHRYN: Oh, I stick my tongue out if I'm concentrating really hard. It's called "overload". Some people do it and some people don't. But if I'm concentrating really hard my tongue — my husband has pictures of me with the tongue. That's the only thing I can think of.

So, we've touched on the digital a little bit, like, it plays a big role in your work. What role would you say the internet has played? How has it changed the book arts?

CATHRYN: Oh the big difference the internet has made is that it connected me with a dealer in the U.S. so I have somebody to market my work because, like most people who make things, I'm really bad at selling. So having an agent is a really good idea. I've made friends in various parts of the world. I have a friend now in Germany who I'm quite close with. And two friends in England and the last time we went to Britain we actually went and visited them. So we met face to face. But it's made the book arts community much more closely linked.

A global village.

So living in Saskatoon, I'm no longer isolated. I no longer feel like I'm floundering around in the wilderness, all by myself because I have all these connections all over the world. Psychologically I think that makes a big difference.

Yeah, it definitely impacts the way you work for sure.

CATHRYN: And it also provide opportunities to exhibit because there are exhibitions that you can apply for, for instance. There are juried shows all over the world that you can enter work in. So, it makes the — as you say — a global village.

So do you think there would be anyway to kind of combine craft book making and the digital to make a digital artist book? Because that's our goal.

CATHRYN: Oh, like books that are completely digital?

Yep.

CATHRYN: People are actually doing that. There are a number of book artist who have produced work that's exclusively for cellphones and iPads. There's not a lot yet but it's certainly starting to happen. And there's those page turning apps that you can get so you can actually pretend it's a real book. So there certainly are people who are investigating that possibility and I find it very intriguing. I'm just not sure I want to learn that much more technology. I learn things when I need them. So if I have an idea and it's best to do it digitally, then I would learn to do that. So that's how I operate. I learn skills as required for whatever project I'm working on.

So how do you feel about Kindles then? Are you opposed to them?

CATHRYN: I think having been a huge consumer of books in my lifetime. I love public libraries because I couldn't afford to own all the books I've read, although I do have quite a large library. And some books are only meant to be read once. I used to consume huge amounts of science fiction and murder mysteries because they help you go to sleep at night. They take you away from whatever's in the daytime and separate it. So reading before bed is a long tradition. And frankly, most of the science fiction I've read and most of the murder mysteries are not really worth re-reading. They're entertainment. So something like a Nook or a Kindle makes perfect sense. I object to the fact that you don't own the book when you

buy it on a Kindle though. Because of Digital Rights Management. You're only renting it. Which means you can't resell it. You can't lend it to a friend unless you lend them the machine. So there are objections to that aspect of the format. But as far as reading the book, I think it's perfectly fine. I read on my iPad. I went to the mini version because having fallen asleep with the larger size and have it fall on my face... when the mini came out, I thought, "Ohhhh I think I need the smaller one".

Less of a rude awakening.

CATHRYN: Well it was actually pretty painful.

Yeah, I've dropped my phone on my face before.

CATHRYN: Well, a full sized iPad weighs a fair amount when it falls on your nose.

How do you think that craft bookmaking could change the way that we currently read? Or do you think it could?

CATHRYN: Things I'm making? Artist books?

Yeah.

CATHRYN: I think it wouldn't change the overall way people read, but I think there are times when it can change the idea of a book at least temporarily. That's what a lot of my books do. They don't look like books, they don't act like books, but you are, in fact, reading. You're doing the process that you would be doing with a normal — a codex. So it does change the perception of what a book can be. And, as you say, I like the idea of some books being digital only. That might be... if it was the right subject matter and format and presentation, that might be the best way to do some books. I do have a fondness for the physical book. You know, the old fashioned, smells of printer's ink, has nice paper. But that's a touchy-feely thing. I think a lot of people enjoy the physical sensation of holding and reading a book. So I think... I don't think that aspect will ever go away. I think people... in fact, there seems to be a return to a physical book so that... I read somewhere on the internet that Kindles book sales are dropping off and more people are buying real books again. "Real books". Physical books again. But I think an artist's book can change the way people perceive the possibilities of a book. And that can change the way they look at anything. Like any art form, if it's doing its job, it should at least, momentarily, change people's perceptions.

Can you tell us about a few of your favorite projects?

CATHRYN: Sure. I'm going to stand up. Do you want to move the camera or do you want me to sit down with the books?

Yeah.

CATHRYN: Okay. I'll take my little pile. Not sure how this is going to work. This is a book [holds up prescription pill bottle]. Conceptually, it's a book. And what it *is* is it's a bottle full of Chinese lucky stars, folding from recycled magazines and it's a commentary on a couple of things. It's a commentary on consumption and the text on the front — there's a prescription label and it says: "Lucky stars. Small. Dispense as required. Refills: make your own." And on the side there are two of those nice little stickers that they put on things. It says, "Take with a grain of salt" and "Allergy alert: may contain traces of tobacco advertising". It's a comment on the fact that most of us have what we need, so we should thank our lucky stars. Because in fact when you look at people around the world, most of us have what we need and we should just practice being grateful. There is another edition of this book that comes in a little box and has a booklet with it that gives more explanation. But this is the low cost edition.

Did you hand fold all of those?

CATHRYN: Yes. Did I mention I'm a little OCD.

From what I've read of your work, I've noticed.

CATHRYN: I have a really big paper cutter, so the strips were cut with a big, you know, blade. A guillotine blade.

How long did that take you?

CATHRYN: I have no idea. I folded them all while watching television. Since I'm not folding stars anymore, I've taken up knitting. So it's like knitting. You don't even think about it. I could probably do — when I'm in practice — I can probably do about one a minute. When the strips are cut. So you can produce a lot fairly quickly if you have a machine to cut the strips first.

That's that one. This is one of my more recent books [holds up book]. I've been experimenting with the idea of people who perceive text differently. So, people with synesthesia who might see letters as colours or smell music or whatever. So, there's the front cover spread and there's a nice little colophon inside. And that's actually the title of the piece which is "Over the Hills". It's the lyrics to a Pete Seeger's song.

So that's digitally printed then?

CATHRYN: Yes. This is done with a laser. And the structure is a Hedi Kyle panel book, which is pretty difficult to show. I'm trying to get all the right sides out.

So you would lay that all out in the computer digitally and then print it and cut it?

CATHRYN: Yes. So it's hand cut afterwards. Anyway, the panels float and it's two-sided. You can see that the structure is two sided. So you get two different views. If I fiddle with it when it's on a flat surface, I can get everything lined up. I've actually been playing with figuring out ways that you can actually tab the ends open and tab the edges of the panel so that they would sit flat. Because I really like the presentation when it's flat and you get - so it's a panorama on the one side, and then the text of the poem on the other, translated into colour. So, I designed an alphabet that was colours. I did a series of three different books using this idea.

Ok. So this a daily traditional book. It's pamphlet bound, and it's called the "ME Ching". So it sort of relates to the lucky stars book. It's Chinese money paper on the outside. So it's a pamphlet and it reads like a normal book and it tells you a little bit about the history of the I Ching and a little bit about some of the ways it's interpreted. Because everybody wants things *now* nowadays — instant gratification, you can't have you parcel shipped to you and have it take three weeks, it has to be express post to get here in three days — so, I've simplified it. So that you have one coin. So there's a Chinese coin in here and instructions on how to do the ME Ching, which is that you flip a coin and basically when you flip a coin to make a decision about something, frequently you know what you want before you look at the coin. You know which side you want to come up. You've already made the decision. So that's how the ME Ching operates.

What next. Some books I do in larger sizes and then I go back and I do little mini versions. So this is Snowy Owl.

Oh I looked at this at the Bruce Peel. It was on a really nice paper.

CATHRYN: The larger size, yeah. This one is Cougar is what it is, which I buy in large sheets, acid free. But it's just printing paper. So it's an original graphic and then an original poem.

So with the original one, did you print that one laserjet too, on that paper?

CATHRYN: That one was pigment ink jet. So it's archival. These are just little — it's nice to have something relatively inexpensive, because people go, "Oh I wish I could own one of your books". Ok well, make a cheap-y for you.

In fact, on my blog, I give books away. So, I've given that one away, to make your own. And I've given this one away [holds up book]. It's called "If". So it's an African proverb and it's full of squashed mosquitoes. So these are just little books. But they are books and they're of some significance and meaning.

This is a project I did with Monique Martin, the printmaker I've mentioned. I'll see if I can open it without throwing everything on the floor. So I had a lot of fun putting the cover together. Those are designer logos. I'm probably infringing all kinds of copyrights. However, I think it's fair use.

They steal from artists all the time.

CATHRYN: They do. And it would qualify as fair use because it's satire. So this one is about uncontrolled consumption in North America and Europe, because we're the affluent people. So it's "Affluenza". Like many things now a days, it comes with a sticker. Have you noticed if you spend enough money now they give you a sticker in your box? So the contents says that there's a paper doll on card stock that you can cut out and stand up. And the contents - the rest of the contents of this stack, is a series of accordions of clothes and shoes and hats and purses that you can cut out and colour. So you get three colours of crayons to go with it. And then the text is a poem printed in the form of a till tape. And it's a poem about poor Affluenza who's drowning in stuff.

So Monique would've?

CATHRYN: There was a posh edition, two copies, where she hand printed all the clothes and the doll. So this is the mini version and I've scanned the prints of all the clothing and put together these accordions with way too many clothes on them. So she did the doll and the clothing design and I did the other graphic design and the poem. And in this case I did the digital reproduction. I'm very proud of the crayon wrappers personally.

Do they match the sticker on the front?

CATHRYN: Yeah. Branding is everything.

And, as I said, lately I've been getting political. About 2007 I did a book called "Tower of Babel", which was a box of cards with slots in them and each card was printed with a saying. Things that are jargon. So they were jargon from advertising, from politics, from journalism, from the military. So things like, "collateral damage". This is a nice way of saying that we've just killed a whole bunch of innocent civilians. So phrases that were misleading. "Downsizing". That means we've put a whole bunch of people out of work. So things that are an attempt to mask something nasty by changing the language. So I did that in about 2007. And last year there was a run for the president of the United States and during the nomination process, I finally couldn't take it anymore. So I did this book [holds up book], which is "Babel 2016" and it's a smaller version of Tower of Babel. So it's made up of cards and you can slot the cards together — you can see it's got little slott-y things cut out at the edge. It's really thin card stock and the slots are fairly loose and they're all at wonky angles, as they were in the first book. And you can't build anything with this. It'll fall down instantly. And it's entirely quotations from Donald Trump. So the colophon reads. "My first Babel-themed artist's book, Tower of Babel, 2008" ... "featured jargon phrases from advertising and the military. This work revisits the theme with quotations from Donald Trump, GOP nominee and candidate in the 2016 American presidential election. Pages may be slotted together to build a tower, or perhaps a wall, that is ultimately doomed to failure. Laser printed on a particularly offensive pink, acid-free cardstock".

So have you made any other works with Donald Trump in mind yet?

CATHRYN: The last book I'll show you has a sort of reference to Donald Trump, although it was actually inspired by our Prime Minister. But it applies to Donald Trump as well.

So this is my most recent artist book. [Holds up book] So it comes in a nice plastic case, and the back says: "to open, remove from plastic case and carefully remove tear strip. Poems may be stored in the case after disassembly. This artist book was inspired by statements made by the Canadian prime minister concerning electoral reform. It is applicable to a wide variety of political promises."

Is that a CD jewel case?

CATHRYN: It's actually a calendar case. So you can in fact display the book, like that. I will attempt to demonstrate how the book opens. Can you actually see this in the camera?

Um. Hold it up.

CATHRYN: Here? Okay, There's a tear strip. (removes tear strip, unfolds flaps of book, and takes out the inner piece, starts unfolding that, removes another tear strip, continues to repeat with multiple pieces that get smaller and smaller) and look: there's nothing! Haha, I've been getting a little political lately. So, those are the books that I brought to show you.

Thank you so much for sharing.

CATHRYN: You're very welcome.

So I guess the final question that we've been asking people is what kind of music do you like listening to when you work?

CATHRYN: Oh um. I listen to CBC. Either one of their channels or I like classical music to work to. I don't like lyrics while I'm working, so I listen to a lot of instrumental stuff, but it ranges: classical, jazz, but while I'm working it focuses on music that doesn't have words, particularly if I am working with text. It's very distracting, so. But it's pretty wide ranging: folk, rock, jazz, classical. Um, not a big fan of rap, though I like some hip hop, but that's mostly words so I don't listen to it while I'm working.

Do you have a favorite song right now? For while you're working?

CATHRYN: No not right now. Depends on the mood. Depends on the day. Like most people. I have different favorite songs at different times.

I know I've cycled through a lot of favorite songs.

CATHRYN: That changes with age though. You'll eventually reach a point when you think: what was I thinking!

Some things are timeless though.

CATHRYN: Yes. Some things are timeless. I still listen to The Beatles. I have a friend I worked with....and he referred to The Beatles as an Act of God.

Ha. I like that. Well I guess that's pretty good. Thank you so much!