



## Of God and small things

**ARTISTS' BOOKS** Karen Hanmer's artist's books and designer bindings spring from a love of tactility allied with a curiosity that spans the inscrutable and the cosmological, says Sarah Bodman

Karen Hanmer lives and works in Chicago, Illinois, but regularly shows across the USA and further afield. Hanmer is an interesting practitioner as her work bridges both artists' books and designer binding – producing small editions of books, larger editions of inexpensive multiples, installations and traditional bindings that respond to authors' works. She defines herself as an artist whose works can sometimes be classified as books, while her intense study of traditional skills has also made her an expert designer bookbinder.

Hanmer moved into books from photography (she had been interested in playing with her father's cameras from an early age) in around 1997, using the book format to solve the problem of the lack of tactility in her photographic work. Hanmer combined several photographs into one piece, adding text to the images and creating 3D structures to contain them. She enjoys exploring narrative, the quality of materials, surface texture and unusual book structures to offer her audience physical engagement and play. Hanmer also works with installation, but most of all appreciates the portable and intimate format of the book, which allows her to show her work to interested parties wherever she is. The act of assembling her books allows her to use her hands, rather than distancing herself from the physical production process by using machines like a computer or camera.

A feature common to all her work is its

inherent inquisitiveness: why do computer programmers love the code they write? What are people seeking when they look into the night sky? How do prime numbers or aviation work? Hanmer takes inspirations from her family's background in engineering; she has a natural interest in how things work and are put together, which comes across in her book structures and binding designs.

A recent example of her fine binding work is Jeff Porter's *Oppenheimer is Watching Me: A Memoir*. Completed in 2009, it was inspired, she explains, 'by the author's vignettes of growing up during the Cold War with both the paranoia of nuclear attack and a landscape filled with playful pop culture atomic references'. It also reflects Hanmer's interest in the beauty and decorative nature of scientific models.

*Celestial Navigation* (2008) and *Star Poems* (2008) have both materialised from her study of the sky at night. She began the project in 2001 after realising that less densely populated areas than her home in suburban Chicago enjoy properly dark nights, enabling a study of the stars. As it occurred to her that people have been gazing at the stars since the beginning of time, Hanmer considered what modern or ancient people might be seeking when they looked at the stars, and also what she would be looking for herself.

Both books can be held in the hand to read the text, but can also be folded in an infinite number of sculptural shapes or

unfolded flat in the manner of historical astronomical charts. The background of each book is a photograph of the Milky Way, and the books are also sometimes shown within an installation of 6 feet high panels of Japanese paper printed with an image of the Milky Way. These panels create a kind of stage for viewing the artist's books, which reaffirms the vastness of their subject matter.

Hanmer is currently working on a new series of artist's books on the subjects of computer history and maths; Charles Babbage, cold-war era computing, prime numbers and pi. She is also co-curating a show on the theme of the night sky that will open in the summer of 2012 at the Evanston Art Center in Evanston, Illinois.

Her books can be seen at present in the following juried shows in the USA: *Open Book* at Eastern Michigan University Gallery, Ypsilanti, MI, until 15 June, and *Quantified Aesthetics* at Minnesota Center For Book Arts Minneapolis, MN, until 20 June.

Hanmer is the curator of *Marking Time*, a travelling exhibition of 50 beautiful designer bindings by members of the Guild of Book Workers, which is touring until 2011. *Marking Time* is currently at Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado, until 25 June and will be at the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County – Main Library, Cincinnati, Ohio, from 5 July – 26 August. There is a fully archived online catalogue, which has information and images of all 50 books, essays and exhibition schedule, at: [www.guildofbookworkers.org/gallery/markingtime/index.html](http://www.guildofbookworkers.org/gallery/markingtime/index.html). The artist's complete catalogue of a calendar for 2010 and beyond can be viewed online at: [www.karenhanmer.com](http://www.karenhanmer.com)

### Images, left to right

*Star Poems* 2008. Inkjet printed artist's book

172 x 146 x 20 mm closed, 445 x 584 mm open

*Celestial Navigation* 2008. Inkjet printed artist's book

172 x 146 x 13 mm closed, 445 x 762 mm open