

Twenty-five and counting: San Francisco Center for the Book celebrates its past and future in artists' books

I spoke with Jennie Hinchcliff, Exhibitions and Events Manager at the San Francisco Center for the Book (SFCB) as they celebrate their 25th anniversary. SFCB was established by Mary Austin and Kathleen Burch in 1996, to serve west coast and international book artists. It has a rich history of artists' books production and dissemination. We spoke about the new exhibition Hinchcliff had just installed and how it links back to the first exhibition at SFCB in the 90s. We considered some of the recent highlights of SFCB and its creative studio space where many artists create hand printed books.

Hinchcliff explains: "San Francisco Center for the Book's first formal exhibition was titled *The Pages of Sin: Beat Era Book Arts* (November 1996) showcasing works by artists and poets from the Bay Area." The exhibition included a performative project called *Poets Pulling Prints* (PPP), matching master printers with poets to create printed broadsides of their work for a poetry reading event. "Our Winter 2021 exhibition *Finding Common Ground* celebrates that same undeniable spirit of collaboration which has been a guiding principle for SFCB since our very first exhibition. The idea of "finding common ground" – that intersection of discovery and encouragement, in the shape of an idea or "aha!" moment – is what SFCB has always been about. We always aim to push or extend the public's idea of what a book can be, and consider how a viewer/reader perceives artists' books when engaging with them in our space. It is important to me that our exhibitions represent and encourage a diverse range of artists while asking conceptually interesting or thought provoking questions for visitors to consider."

The most memorable exhibition for Hinchcliff, "If I had to choose, I'd say that 2020's (pandemic) exhibition cycle was definitely memorable – a year of silver linings, unexpected situations, and perception shift. I feel extremely fortunate we were able to move our exhibition programmes/events online, which meant we were able to share the work of artists and printers with an even wider audience than usual." SFCB swiftly reconfigured during the shelter in place call in the USA, to offer online experiences. Many artists in the UK (myself included) enjoyed the weekly 'studio visits' with artists, bookbinders and papermakers giving virtual tours of their working spaces and sharing their practices. Some recent highlights have included the touring exhibition *Reclamation: Artists' Books on the Environment*, curated by the book art expert Betty Bright and Jeff Thomas (Executive Director of SFCB). Hinchcliff says she was "truly honoured to work with Betty Bright. She is one of the most knowledgeable, generous individuals in the book arts field and assisting with the execution and production of *Reclamation* was an incredibly rewarding process. In 2020, the exhibition *POETRY IS NOT A LUXURY* travelled here from the Center for Book Arts in New York. It was a pleasure to work with exhibition curator Maymanah Farhat in order to bring her vision of the exhibition to San Francisco; I learned a great deal about the artists in the exhibition, thanks to her knowledge and expertise."

SFCB has a strong focus of hands-on, practical making of artists' books and has a multitude of Vandercooks and Kelsey tabletop presses overseen by SFCB Studio Director Chad Johnson "who is committed to sharing his knowledge of these presses and their history and instructing students in their proper use so that each machine can continue to press on. We also recently added a Risograph machine into the mix so we're looking forward to seeing what gets made on this". I asked how many artists' books might have been produced at SFCB over 25 years; "A difficult question! What I can say is that over the course of an average year (2020 being the exception) we have 300+ in person workshops in artists' books, bookbinding, letterpress printing and related arts. So that's approximately 7500 classes over twenty-five years. We also have an annual imprint project (Small Plates) in which

three invited artists create editions of work to be sold as fundraisers for SFCB. So potentially thousands!”

Hinchcliff is already busy planning for 2022, “I’m very excited for our line-up which includes: *Possibilities: When Artists’ Books Were Young* curated by Kathleen Walkup, a member’s exhibition from the Guild of Bookworkers, and a retrospective of bookbinder and printmaker Timothy Ely’s work. The online workshops initiated during the pandemic were very successful, so we’ll go forward with online and in person workshops. And I can promise we’re putting together a vibrant and exciting roster of events from old favourites to new surprises!”.

To see what’s in store for 2022, visit: www.sfcg.org