

*Booknesses: An Inspirational Milestone in the History of South African artists' books*

2017 marks the 21st anniversary of the first exhibition of artists' books held in South Africa. Curated by the private collector Jack Ginsberg and David Paton, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Visual Art at the University of Johannesburg, *Artists' Books in the Ginsberg Collection, with some South African Books from Other Collections*, at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (August-October 1996) introduced the concept of artists' books to many South African artists for the first time.

To celebrate this anniversary and further growth of the book arts in South Africa, this March the University of Johannesburg is hosting *Booknesses* a six-day international colloquium. This will coincide with the exhibition *Booknesses: Artists' Books from the Ginsberg Collection* at the UJ Art Gallery, and a second exhibition *Booknesses: South African Book Arts* showcasing some of the best contemporary artists' books being produced in South Africa today at the FADA gallery.

Jack Ginsberg has been purchasing artists' books since the 1960s, amassing a personally selected collection of thousands of artists' books from around the world, along with numerous reference materials. His is the largest collection of this kind in South Africa and the wider continent, the only other collection being the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt. Ginsberg has a particular interest in printmaking and books and is excited to present his selection of "artists' books using virtually every printmaking technique for editioned books of every shape, structure and substance – think: round, triangular, square, paper, glass, metal, cork, leather, pop-up, leporello and hundreds more, but some unique and featuring a large illustrated catalogue."

In 2006, Ginsberg began a research collaboration with Paton to further promote understanding of artists' books in South Africa. Paton established <http://www.theartistsbook.org.za> as a research resource for artists' books, which includes an online database and bibliography of all the South African artists' books and associated materials from Ginsberg's collection. This is a constantly evolving project disseminating new research findings and information as it is published, and new book examples discovered by Paton. As Paton says of the database, they began to "to construct not only a bespoke database but also a wild bibliographic dream" of a repository that is easily accessible for research whilst promoting works to a wide audience. The database includes visual examples of works by internationally recognised South African artists such as Walter Battiss, Gail Behrmann, William Kentridge; works created by international artists when visiting South Africa such as Robbin Ami Silverberg - a keynote speaker at the colloquium; established national artists, works by regional collectives and books from a younger generation of artists emerging in the discipline in South Africa. Browsing this resource offers an insightful overview of the practice and context of making books in South Africa today, establishing the genre firmly in the historical and contemporary arts arenas. Ginsberg has been generous in sharing his collection and passion with younger artists, meeting with students from many art and design backgrounds, from printmaking to graphic design, architecture and sculpture, to explain context, structure and content in the book format. Alongside Paton's academic research in the field, sharing his findings online and teaching visual artists about books, his and Ginsberg's work has inspired interest and a significant growth in the production of artists' books in South Africa.

I am lucky to be attending the *Booknesses* colloquium which will bring together practitioners, collectors, curators and educators to share their ideas and experiences around the artist's book. Now that South Africa has firmly established its interest in the genre it is time to extend knowledge and connections to and from the wider, international book arts community.

In organising the *Booknesses* events Paton aims "to forge, for the first time in South Africa, a deep dialogue in the local book arts community whilst linking and networking local role-players to key individuals in the international field in order to deepen book arts practices in South Africa." The university is partnering with local, community-based projects Artists Proof Studio, Phumani Paper and Twanano Cooperative in Ivory Park, and will host workshops in papermaking, bookbinding, letterpress printing and artist's book making in the run-up to the colloquium.

I will be reporting back later on the treasures to be found and the new diversity of practice in South Africa. This energy has emerged from the dedication and generosity of Ginsberg and Paton in their huge efforts to share their passion and knowledge, securing an exciting future for generations of book artists to come.

*Booknesses* colloquium, 23rd-25th March 2017, Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture, University of Johannesburg. To access examples of artists' books and links to ongoing practice and research into South African artists' books visit: <http://theartistsbook.org.za>