

*Tell it to the Bees*: Sarah Bodman talks to Sarah Nicholls about letterpress and linocut, her popular pamphlet series and a recent artist's residency in Chicago

American artist Sarah Nicholls has a long history of working with artists' books and letterpress, having previously run the studio programmes at the Center for Book Arts New York for twelve years. Nicholls currently teaches letterpress at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and artists' books at Parsons School of Design, in addition to working on a variety of freelance print projects. Over the summer she was artist in residence at the Center for Book, Paper, and Print (CBPP) at Columbia College Chicago, where she worked towards a new pamphlet publication for her *Brain Washing from Phone Towers* series, *Tell the Bees*.

Nicholls has a sophisticated eye for pamphlet design through letterpress, linocut and woodcut, and shares it generously through her practice. Her *Brain Washing From Phone Towers* series is beautifully produced by hand in editions which she distributes "at will to a chosen audience". My first encounter with the series was in Spring 2015, when unannounced, a wonderful publication *Prisms and Shamrocks* arrived in the post with a note saying that I had been nominated as a recipient by Nancy Campbell. Since then I have become an avid subscriber, and have had the pleasure of nominating such surprise treats for others to receive. Nicholls describes the series as a means to 'read in private' far away from the hubbub of social media, a quiet space to absorb information on a variety of subject matter. Her publications have covered natural history in the form of physic gardens *Lavender and Evil Things*, to bioluminescent bacteria in *Milky Seas* – a particularly enchanting look at the advantages (and potential future disadvantages) of being luminous - printed in glow in the dark ink. They have explored social and economic themes such as debt forgiveness in *Wipe the Slate* and the history of cryptography and how we can communicate in private in the aforementioned *Prisms and Shamrocks*, which was of course very apt in its arrival by post. For Nicholls it is particularly important that these books do arrive unsolicited, as she says "the rest of your mail is just bills and credit card offers. So it's way better than that." The surprise gifting distribution is part of her making process: "If you send someone something in the mail, hand addressed to them, printed letterpress so it's all nice and special, people read that. That's the truth. And most of the people I send these pamphlets to later reach out and say, 'hey, thank you for sending me that pamphlet. That was nice.' And so for a brief moment in time I get to live in a civilised society."

For those yet to be on the list, Nicholls has begun a subscription series to fund the production and mailing costs of each edition of 150-200 copies. Subscribers get to nominate a recipient for a free year's series as part of the scheme, which is another typically generous touch by Nicholls.

During her summer residency at the Chicago Center for Book, Paper and Print (CBPP) Nicholls utilised their extensive facilities to produce all the printed pages for *Tell the Bees*, and even managed to squeeze in some time researching for another book project at the botanical gardens. Nicholls recommends the CBPP studios as "amazing and fantastic to work in - everything you need is right on hand, and David Jones, the current Director of the Centre, was a great host. While in Chicago, I recommend visiting the Garfield Park Conservatory; it's a beautiful greenhouse, anyone who likes plants will enjoy it."

*Tell the Bees* is now finished, having been folded and bound by Nicholls on her return to New York City. She is currently working towards the completion of a substantial artist's book project called *Glasshouse*, "about the history of greenhouses, Kew Gardens, and the relationship between botanical science and empire. I will have that ready to launch at the CODEX VI Book Fair" (5th - 8th February 2017 at the Craneway Pavilion, Richmond, CA).

"And, of course, the final pamphlet for this year will be going out in the mail in December. Making these is my favourite thing to do. It's the best way to keep in touch with people and make new friend and connections. Everyone knows what a pamphlet is, it's incredibly flexible. Every corner of the self-publishing world has its own version, whether they call it a zine or chapbook, etc. It's small and nimble, portable and easy to digest. Pamphlets can accommodate all kinds of material and are made to be distributed widely. That's why I find them so satisfying."

<http://www.brainwashingfromphonetowers.com>