



Made with Meaning

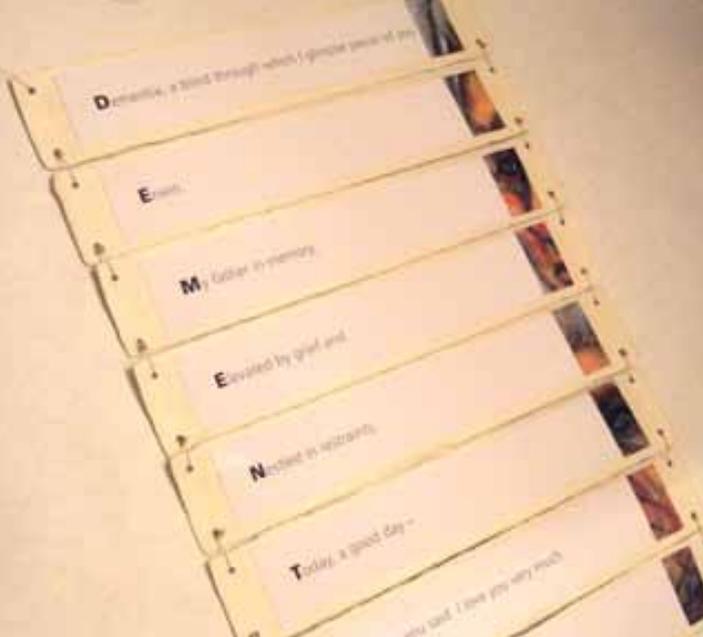
Content and Structure in the Book Arts by Maureen Piggins

Content has always been a driving force for me in bookmaking, whether derived from existing personal work in other media or in response to curated themes. When I began making artist books in 2009, it was to consolidate work I had done concerning my mother's death from breast cancer – drawing, painting and writing that collectively found form in a 64-page, double-sided accordion book. Entitled *Echo*, the book could be displayed three ways, each representing a different aspect of grieving. It was this structure infused with meaning that led me to fall in love with the genre and continue to explore book arts more fully. I now draw upon a multi-media approach which usually incorporates some form of drawing, painting and writing with a more experimental view to format and structure. What remains integral, however, is that every element be related to content.

Both *Dementia* and *The Mica Hypothesis* were created in response to themed artist calls from the Doverodde Book Arts Festival in Doverodde, Hurup Thy, Denmark. The annual festival, held every spring at the permanent Book Arts Center of the Limfjordscenteret, features an exhibition, guided nature walks, and a chance to meet book artists through talks and artist stalls.

Dementia responded to the 2011 Doverodde topic “In the air” and combines existing work with new writing in a format conceived specifically for the theme. I tend to draw upon existing work when creating artist books, and find that I naturally interpret themes through this lens. I had been developing drawings of my father at the time and found that the theme resonated with one piece in particular. My father suffered from vascular dementia, and in the last years of his life I grieved for what had been lost while

(Above) *Dementia* (centre), Doverodde Book Arts Festival, 2011. Hand bound giclée on archival paper, Japanese paper, waxed string, metal loops and eyelets, 53 cm high x 30.5 cm wide. Original poetry and art.



also trying to accept the “new” person my father had become. Now, after his death, I was attempting to capture his likeness but was struggling to achieve this. The subject matter was intangible, as was the process: I waffled between depicting him before and during illness, and succeeded only when I stopped trying to illustrate either one. When I look at the piece now, I can see my father – not quite the old dad I knew, but with the same familiarity that had been mostly lost to illness.

I chose the format of a hanging blind as a symbol for both the debilitating effects of dementia on personality and memory, and as my attempt to “see” my father behind this condition – a fragmented picture of what was hidden by illness. The blind itself is formed by eight double-sided strips, one side featuring the drawing of my father, while each strip on the other side contains one line of a poem, each beginning with one of the letters in the word dementia. The poem begins, “Dementia, a blind through which I see pieces of you...”

Beside each line is a portion of another painted portrait, cut into pieces and arranged vertically at the end of each strip. The large drawing was reproduced as an archival giclée, cut into eight strips and mounted on thicker Japanese paper which was then punched, grommetted and threaded. This act of deconstructing, reassembling and rearranging also evokes the effects of the disease. A prominent early



From top left: *Dementia* – back side of the strips.

The Mica Hypothesis, hand bound, unique book, five hand-split mica panels, inkjet on mica paper, original painted central panel (acrylic), 10.16 cm high x 7.62 cm wide x 1.27 cm deep (closed).

Echo, hand bound, 64 pages, double-sided French fold accordion, giclée on Hahnemuhle paper, 12.7 cm high x 10.8 cm wide x 3.8 cm deep (closed); 275 cm long (extended). Archival quality, open edition.

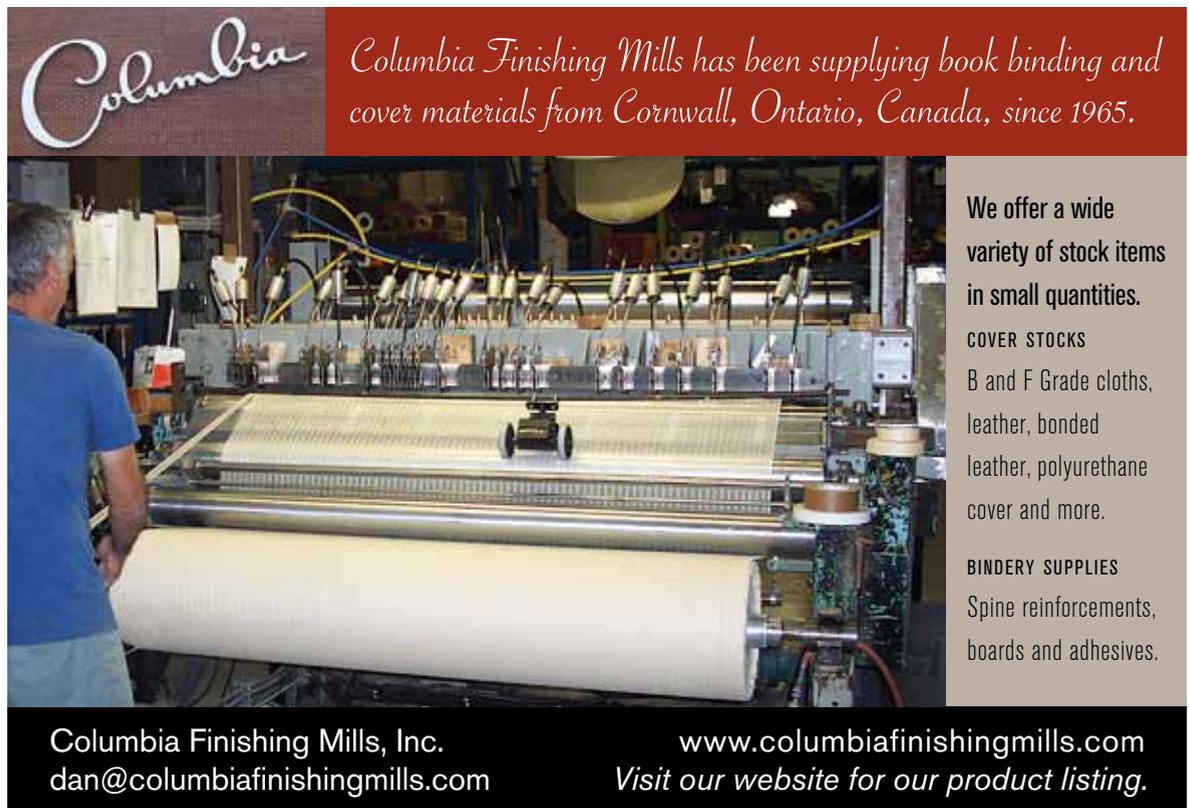
feature of my dad's condition was the capacity to retain social etiquette and conversation, while so many other things were lost to him; some aspects of his personality were exaggerated, while others were submerged. Identity, memory, grief and time were uncertain; they were "in the air."

The Mica Hypothesis was created solely in response to the 2009 Doverodde theme, "Island," and was not based on pre-existing work. For this topic, I drew upon a personal interest in evolution and used mica to explore an origin of life theory by National Science Foundation scientist Helen Hansma. This also involved research about Akilia Island, Greenland (the largest island, thought to hold evidence of the earliest life on Earth) as well as a study into the nature of mica and biochemistry. For this piece, unlike my other work, I began by choosing a material and then discovered content that related to the theme.

One of the things I appreciate about the Doverodde calls is that the basic themes are very

loosely defined. This allows for a wealth of interpretation that I feel results in a more interesting show overall. I try to look for exhibitions that support this openness of content and have been able to find some wonderful international venues for work. Australia has a vibrant artist book scene and has been the site of three exhibitions for *Echo*. New York has a fairly new gallery in Brooklyn and it was here that I was able to show *The Mica Hypothesis* in Central Booking's Art & Science gallery. I believe that richness of content can allow for this kind of flexibility in exhibition opportunities and ultimately results in work that is rewarding on many levels. I see artists' books as a way to bring meaning to format and to explore structural possibilities not available in other media – but in the end, they must also tell a story.

Doverodde Book Arts Festival and Symposium 2012,
May 17–August 5, Doverodde, Hurup Thy, Denmark.
www.bookarts-doverodde.dk/
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