

Carolyn Fraser, writer and printer

At her Idlewild Press studio in the Nicholas Building, Carolyn Fraser combines old letterpress printing techniques with computer technology to produce books of her own fiction as well as custom stationery. Her books are collected by several major libraries here and overseas, including the Library of Congress.

What is letterpress? Letterpress printing is a relief technique in which type or metal plates are impressed into paper. This impression allows the letterforms a sculptural, luminescent quality — letterpress printers aim for a page that sparkles and breathes.

How did you come to this craft? In a roundabout way. I moved to the US in 1994 with a suitcase, planning to be gone a year. Eleven years later, I returned to Melbourne with a 20-foot container load of press equipment. I completed a master's degree at Columbia University, and started taking classes at the New York Centre for Book Arts. I worked at the San Francisco Centre for the Book and was an apprentice at Yolla Bolly Press in Covelo, California. At a certain point, I realised that letterpress wasn't just a hobby: it was how I spent the best part of my time.

Why would you set type letter by letter when offset or digital printing is so cheaply available? Aesthetics is the easy answer: I love the look and feel of the things I make. But it's only part of the answer. During the year my equipment was in storage, I realised how important printing is in my life: it's like getting eight hours of sleep. It's both a necessary and deeply satisfying activity to me. Without it, I lose the strongest connection I have between my head and my hands.

How did you end up in the Nicholas Building? I had a wonderful studio in Cleveland in an old typewriter-ribbon factory. Looking north, I had a view of a sliver of Lake Erie. Despite freezing in winter and sweltering in summer, I thought I'd never find so good a space again. I was wrong. I love my view, which is a complicated one of rooftops and neon and sky. I feel enormously lucky here. I also love that so many of my neighbours are artisans.

What are you currently working on? Day to day, I print custom stationery: business cards, invitations, social stationery. I love

mail myself, so it's a pleasure to work on these special items for individuals. I have a new book in mind, a subscription series of short fiction, and a photographic installation project that will incorporate letterpress.

How does printing a book differ from producing someone's business card? Making a book is much like building a house: many small decisions both contingent and dependent. It's a form that allows for a sequential unfolding of ideas and concepts; that has rhythm and movement that can be controlled and directed like music or breath. Printing books this way is slow, ruminative and meditative. At this speed, I'm able to uncover processes and solutions that would be lost to me working any faster: a consideration of the extra space between a

final w and a beginning y, the rhythm of images interspersed within text. It's a fantastic way to learn how to edit one's own writing.

How did you come to assemble the equipment and tools needed for this work? Almost all of my equipment was bought or found or salvaged during the time I lived in the US. These objects have a history of use and function, and I'm fascinated by the tiny snippets of history they embody: the fact that a certain Tom Ross lost an oft-filled molar, wadded it in a tissue and stuffed it in a box that once contained gauge pins. I inherited this tooth when I bought a guillotine and a small toy press from his widow. I love to imagine the world in which this equipment was previously used and loved. This is also the reason I love the Nicholas

Building. Its history hasn't been completely whitewashed by an endless series of renovations or refurbishments.

What is the role of technology in your creative process? My work is a marriage between new and old technologies. My Chandler & Price platen is 82 years old. My Apple Mac is six years old, but it's a lot worse for wear. Both are integral to my work. Someone once said that once technology is commercially obsolete, artists are able to co-opt technologies for their own ends. This is certainly true for letterpress. However, printing for me isn't just a tool or a technique in the service of the work: it's the conduit through which I discover what my work really is and how best to bring it into being.

INTERVIEW: SIMON CATERSON
PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

