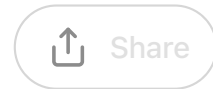


Book Arts of Houston



ROBERT BOYD

APR 26, 2023 · PAID



[The Printing Museum](#) closed in its old, very cramped location last year and moved to a new building in Midtown. It has just reopened, and they are celebrating their new space with an interesting exhibit, [Book Arts of Houston](#), curated by [Erica Reed Lee](#). I've never thought very hard about book arts until I saw this exhibit and discussed it with Lee. To me, a book is primarily a vehicle for what it contains—a novel, poems, graphics, or prose of some other sort. While I can appreciate a beautifully-made book as the product of craftsmanship that has been honed by book-makers for over a millennium, a book's contents still strike me as the reason that book exists. Given that I've read dozens of books electronically, as well as listening to a few via audiobooks, my attachment to printed paper books is slight, but it is there. When I look at the packed bookshelves in my apartment, not to mention the piles of books laying around and boxes of comics, magazines and zines, I feel pleasure. Indeed a problem for artlovers/book lovers like myself is that bookshelves take up wall space that I could use to hang pictures.

But starting in the 20th century, artists began producing books as unique artworks or as limited editions. The physical book *was* the artwork. In order to create such an object, an artist has to think of a book as a physical object. As someone who worked in book publishing for years, I think of the parts of a book as title page, small title, indicia, forward, afterward, index, etc. In short, I tend to think in terms of content. But someone physically manufacturing a book has to think about signatures (how the pages in a book are gathered), binding (case binding, Coptic binding, perfect binding, saddle stitch, etc.), and so forth.

All of this is to lead into the contents of Book Arts of Houston. These are small artworks, so the entire exhibit is in one room. Some books are on the wall and some are in vitrines.

Unlike most gallery shows, some of these books are meant to be handled by viewers. The publications held against the wall with a black band can be flipped through, as if one were browsing in a book store. All the other items on display should be treated just as one typically treats objects in a museum—look, but don't touch. That was frustrating in a few cases, as in the ten Bayou Books—displayed as a pile of boxes.

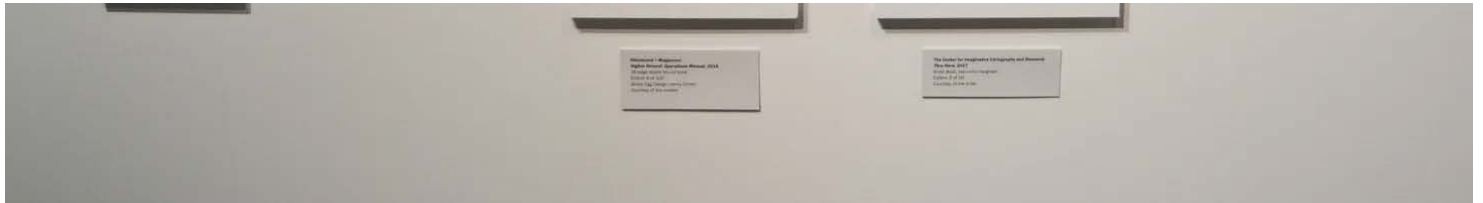




Bayou Books

I was extremely curious about what was contained in each box. Lee told me that the [Hirsch library at the MHAH](#) has a complete set of Bayou Books that patrons can open and look at. The books were originally produced to accompany [Perspectives exhibits at the CAMH from 1991 to 1993](#). Among these ten books were several by Houston-based artists, including the late [Bert Long](#) and [Robin Utterback](#), as well as a book by [Manual \(the collaborative art of Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill\)](#). But without knowing what is in their boxes, it's hard to judge them as books or as artworks.





Some of the works on display are zines. Zines are something I have long experience with—I made my first zines in 1975 while I was in junior high. But discussing zines with Lee gave me an interesting perspective. [I think of the heyday of zines was the 1980s and 90s—before the internet came along.](#) They acted as very specialized magazines at that point. Let's say I was a young punk rock fan and I had just seen Culturcide at the Axiom (I have no idea if Culturcide ever played at the Axiom, but for the purpose of this illustration, let's pretend that they did). I'm excited and want to let everyone else know how great it was, so I produce a zine. In short, my punk zine is like a magazine—it has news and criticism. Sure, my modest zine, produced at my local Kinkos, is qualitatively different from a slick, professional magazine like *Rolling Stone*, but it occupies a similar niche—providing info of interest to fellow members of your subculture; in short, it's for fellow fans.

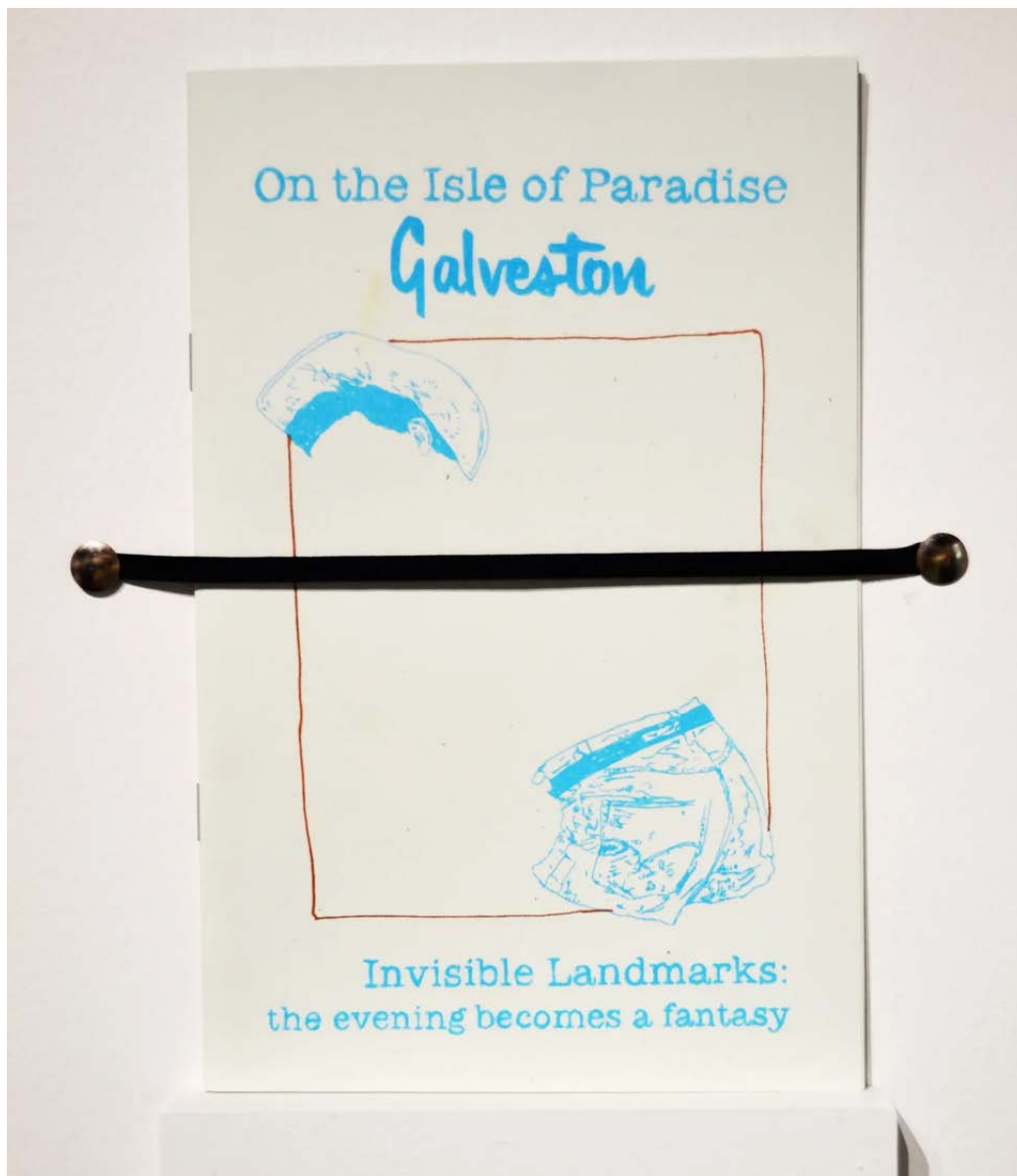


But once the internet came along, making a zine about the obscure band you are a fan of was no longer the best way to get the word out. After all, you can do the same for free on Blogger or Wordpress or some other social media. At that point, making a zine became about that object you were producing. Hence the inclusion of a wall of zines in this exhibit. This isn't to say that zines no longer convey information, [Sarah Welch](#)'s *Endless Monsoon* series was a story that [Welch](#) wanted to tell, and specifically wanted to tell on paper. You

can see her zines all have green in them—it's [Welch](#)'s trademark color.



Adding color to zines used to be very difficult because color photocopying was quite expensive. But in the 1980s, the Riso Kagaku Corporation released the Risograph machine. This machine allows one to produce layers of color on your photocopies. It has a very distinctive look, that is shown off very well in *Let's Get Acquainted*, a zine by [Gaby Hurtado-Ramos](#). Although I made a distinction between pre-internet zines and the present world of zines, this zine seems halfway in between. Hurtado-Ramos both created a beautiful, expressive object and also conveyed the information she wanted to get across. [Ian Gerson](#) also has a riso zine, *invisible landmarks*, in the show.





Good by MToni Beauchamp and Mel Chin, 2000

Good, designed by [Mel Chin](#) and edited by [Toni Beauchamp](#), is more of a traditional book. It was not made by hand by a book artist. It is a collection of essays dealing with Houston, published in 2000. Among its contributors are some of the arts and academic royalty of Houston; [Walter Hopps](#), [Susie Kalil](#), [James Harithas](#), [Stephen Fox](#), [Stephen Klineberg](#), [Sarah Cortez](#), etc. Also included with the traditionally printed book edition of *Good* is a hand-made one-off edition. It is a wooden box containing the pages of the book. The box has a hinged cover. The cover is like a small screen door with the word “good” written on it. Chin made sure the word “good” on his handmade version has an identical design to the one printed on the book. So while the printed book edition was mass-produced, the *Good* box is a one-of-a-kind art book.





Geoffrey Wainwright, *Friday Night at the Coliseum*, originally published in 1971,
this edition published in 2020

Another more-or-less standard book on display is a flexibound copy of *Friday Night at the Coliseum* by [Geoffrey Wainwright](#). (Flexibinding is a high-quality paperback binding that is better than perfect binding—it allows the book to open flat.) Wainwright designs his own books and really sweats the production, but a printer and binder produce the physical contents. *Friday Night at the Coliseum* was originally published in 1971, but this edition, self-published by [Wainwright](#), is nicer—the printing is better. (This book is a classic document of a relatively forgotten subculture in Houston—Wainwright’s photos make you want to go watch some wrestling.)





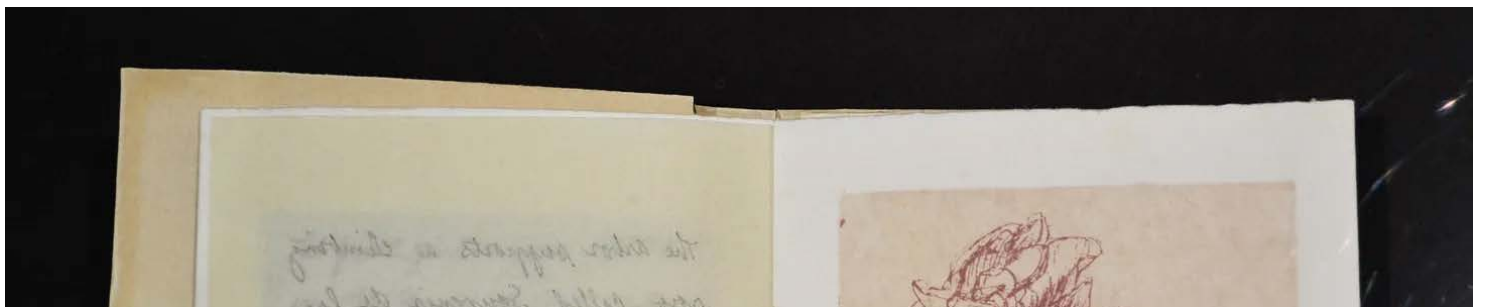
Michael Patrick O'Brien, *Introduction*, 2018

Introduction by [Michael Patrick O'Brien](#) is a thick (566 pages) perfect-bound paperback printed on demand. Each page is divided into two sections—the bottom half is black and the top half blank except for a word or phrase on each facing page. As an object that is a book, *Introduction* is substantial; but as a text, it's fairly minimal. O'Brien has produced several minimal books like *Introduction*. These intrigue me because their format initially leads one to think that they are packed with text and information. Instead, you get a minimal design that is carried through the book.



Penny Cerling, three views of *Furio Valentino*, 1984-1986

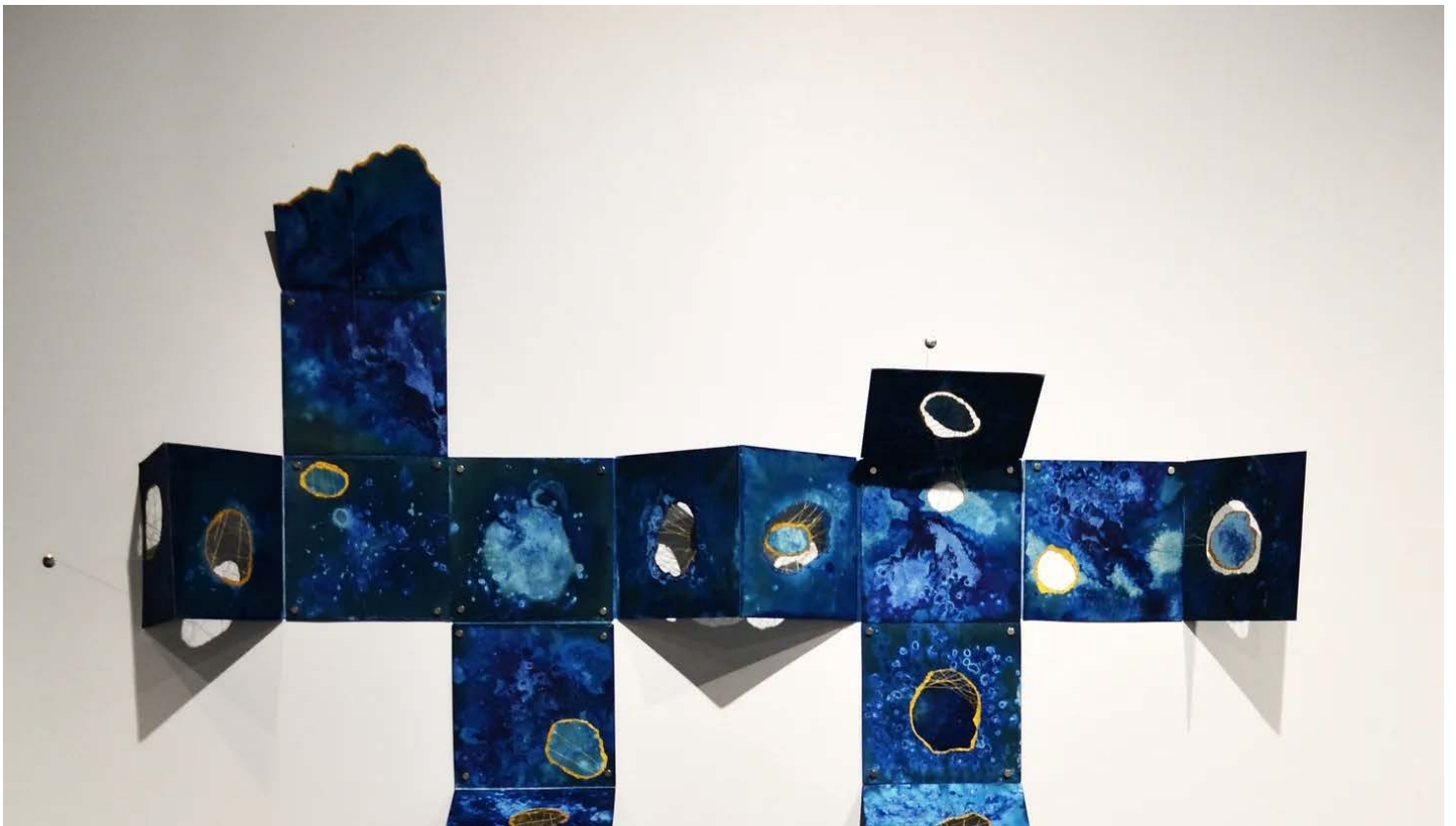
The other books in the show are more hand-made art objects. [Penny Cerling](#) is a monument of the Houston art scene. She worked at [Little Egypt](#) print studio in the 1980s, *Furio Valentino* is an accordion folded etching made while during her Little Egypt days.





Suzanne Mann, *Drawing in Cycles/Moving in Circles*, 1999

Suzanne Mann is another older artist. She has book made of etchings called *Drawing in Cycles/Moving in Circles*.





Caroline Roberts, *Garden of Forking Paths #1*, 2023

One of the coolest “books” in the exhibit is *Garden of Forking Paths #1* by [Caroline Roberts](#). She specializes in cyanotypes, and *Garden of Forking Paths #1* is made of cyanotypes arranged in a non-linear path as one complex object, with holes and gold rayon thread. The title comes from [the famous Jorge Luis Borges story](#), which contains this line (translated by Andrew Hurley): “Ts’ui Pen must have at one point remarked, ‘I shall retire to write a book,’ and at another point, ‘I shall retire to construct a labyrinth.’” The book and the labyrinth are one and the same.





Charis Ammon, *Rhythm*, 2017

[Charis Ammon](#) is an excellent Houston painter of mundane urban scenes. *Rhythm* is a hand-made one-of-a-kind book of ink drawings . Owning this book is like owning an exhibit of Ammon's work in a lovely portable package.



Lynn Williams
Chinese Thread Book
Lokta paper with a mu-
folded pockets.
Courtesy of the artist



Janet Reynolds, *Security Circles*, 2022

[Janet Reynolds](#) is the only artist in this exhibit (that I could determine) who identifies herself as a book artist. She describes her work on her website as “visual narratives.” The narrative of *Security Circles* is obscure, because the circles are abstract—they appear to be wall-paper-like patterns. But *Security Circles* is an accordion book, which implies that it is meant to be “read” in a certain order, which could imply a kind of narrative, if we define a narrative as things arranged in a certain order for the viewer.

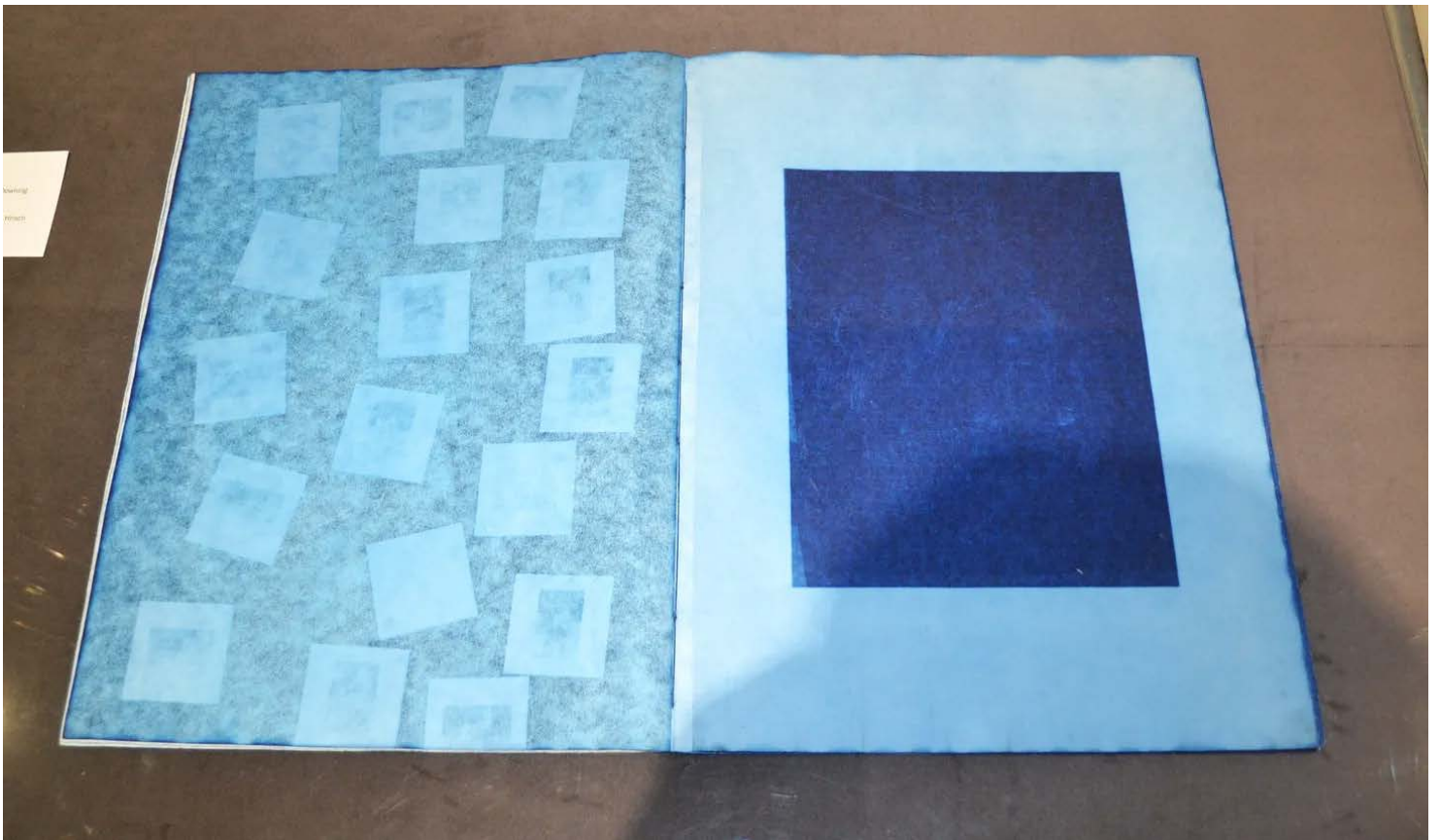


Jessica C. Gonzalez
 Cierpo y Alma, 2023
 Handmade paper book with hair, plantain leaf,
 and other organic materials
 Courtesy of the artist



Jessica Carolina González, *Cuerpo y Alma*, 2022

Cuerpo y Alma is Spanish for “Body and Soul”, and is a hand-made book made of hair, plantain leaf, and other organic material. In a sense, the content of the book is what it is made of. The artist, [Jessica Carolina González](#), is an interdisciplinary artist whose work references her Central American background. *Cuerpo y Alma* has a grungy feeling, like it was formed of the earth itself.



Keliy Anderson-Staley, *Raw Materials in Peace and War*, 2021

Great Houston Book Artwork by [Keliy Anderson-Staley](#), *Raw Materials in Peace and War*

Great Houston photographer [Kelly Anderson-Staley](#)'s piece *Kaw Materials in Peace and War* is a Coptic-bound collection of cyanotypes.



Lynn Williams, *Chinese Thread Book*, 2017

[Lynn Williams](#)' *Chinese Thread Book* appears at first glance to be composed of flattened origami flowers, but I suspect that if you unfolded them, they would make three-dimensional objects of some sort.





Missy Bosch, untitled, 2018

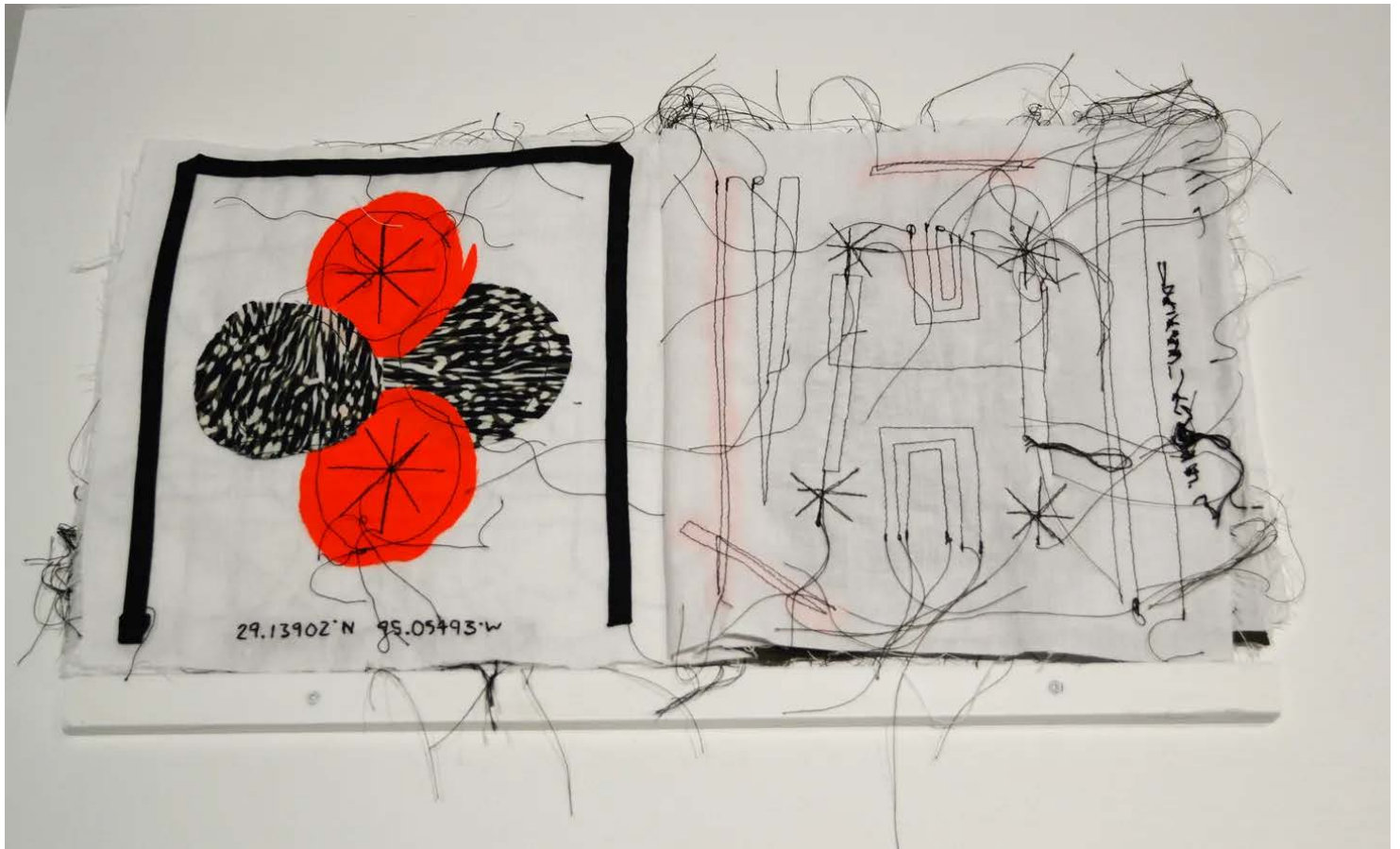
When I was a little kid, I was watching an old western on TV, and the villain had a gun hidden in a bible: he had cut out a gun-shaped hole in the pages. I was very impressed with this act of movie villainy. [Missy Bosch](#)'s untitled piece is similar. This isn't a book—it is a box pretending to be a book.



Ping Lau, left: Facing Mirror, 2001; right: It's All About Money, 2009

Ping Lau has two items in the exhibit, both excellent. Facing Mirror is an accordion-fold book on silvery paper featuring Chinese calligraphy. The text is translated into English on translucent pages sewn in between the folds. It's All About Monet is part of an edition of

10. Each page is part of a piece of paper money paired with a quote about money. Both of these works are excellent examples of book art, but I have no idea who Ping Lau is. I would like to know more.



Adrienne Simmons, *Chop It While It's Hot*, 2023

[Adrienne Simmons](#), who according [to her Instagram](#), is an MFA student at UH, and created a book made of fabric and thread called *Chop It While It's Hot*. This book really shows the process by which it was made—the finished work is somewhat shaggy with threads hanging off of it.

When a curator looks create an exhibit from artists in one place working in one specialized medium, she in essence writes an art history. This art history winds a path through Houston in a way that intersects with ones idea of Houston's art history—a subject I am fascinated by, as regular readers of this newsletter must know. But although this art history overlaps in some ways with the history of, say, painting in Houston, it diverges in some

ways. I was intrigued to see Penny Cerling and Suzanne Mann in the show. I think they get overlooked when thinking about the history of art in Houston because 1) they're women, and 2) their work is kind of unassuming. Unlike their male peers, they didn't make gargantuan, "heroic" artworks.

And book art is an artform of small artworks, meant to be physically handled by their viewers. One is tempted to classify this art as female, judging by the preponderance of women in the exhibit. The question that this poses is this where these women artists go because other paths aren't open to them? Or am I just reading too much into Book Arts of Houston?

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