

BOOK ARTISTRY (FROM THE EAST BAY MONTHLY 2008)

Interviews with Lisa Rappoport and Mary Laird by Ralph Dranow

In her Oakland studio, Lisa Rappoport practices the craft of letterpress printing, which goes back to the 15th century, the invention of movable metal type and the Gutenberg printing press. "Because most of our world is slick and technological, we long for a process that works by hand," says Rappoport, 54, a quietly animated woman with soulful brown eyes. "It's a little like making your own bread-it's more wonderful, more yours. It's a way to continue a tradition that's over 500 years old."

Calmly, as if she has all the time in the world, Rappoport uses a cast-iron platen press with curved spokes that's more than 100 years old; all the parts are original except for the rubber rollers and foot treadle. She spreads oil-based black ink on the ink disk and hooks up the motor to distribute the ink evenly among the rollers, its subtle fragrance wafting through the studio. Then she puts a heavy, white, textured postcard against the paper guides and places sheets of paper underneath the tympan, a sheet of heavily oiled paper covering the platen. This is to create the impression, the depth with which the type is pressed into the page. She pumps the foot treadle, prints the card, then uses a magnifying glass to check the inking. After adjusting the margins of the text, she's ready to print, one card at a time. For print runs under 500, she prefers using the foot treadle rather than the motor, so she can feel more involved.

The final result: 450 postcards on classy white paper, friendly to the touch, adorned with elegant letterpress printing that advertises *Burning Daylight*, a limited edition book of poems by Stephen Kessler, which she designed.

Rappoport fits into the East Bay's impressive history of letterpress artists that includes the well-known David Lance Goines, who founded Saint Hieronymous Press in Berkeley in 1968. Over the past 40 years, Goines has designed more than 200 eye-catching posters, printing many of them by letterpress lithography. His posters celebrate such local institutions as Chez Panisse, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the San Francisco Symphony and Cody's Books. Another respected Berkeley letterpress artist is Peter Rutledge Koch, who has been designing and printing books, broadsides and portfolios since 1974. His work includes limited editions of ancient Greek philosophers, various poets, and the images of famous wood engravers and photographers. Also in Berkeley is four-year-old Twig & Fig Paperie, whose customized letterpress stationery and special event cards feature richly textured paper from around the world in a wide palette of colors.

Rappoport of Littoral Press and Mary Laird of *Quelquefois Press* are two prominent book artists who live and work in the East Bay. Their books are in dozens of libraries and special collections, such as U.C. Berkeley's Bancroft Library, the Library of Congress and the National Gallery in the nation's capital. Much of what Laird and Rappoport do is not that different from what was done six centuries ago. Why in this age of computers and desktop publishing are so many people pursuing this slow, ancient craft?

"I love the process of letterpress printing. It's very meditative, slow, exacting," says Laird, 60, who is tall and thin, with a warm manner and an easy laugh. For 15 years, Laird and her then-husband, Walter Hamady, published 93 editions of books, primarily poets they loved, as *Perishable Press Limited*. They collaborated on printing, making paper, setting type, designing

and binding. After her divorce in 1988, Laird moved from Madison, Wisconsin to Berkeley and revived her passion for book arts.

"You can really sink into the poems as you set them letter-by-letter. The poem takes over. It's usually in your fingers," says Laird, who's made 17 books under the imprint of Quelquefois Press. "It's a modern-day equivalent of a monk doing calligraphy in a cloister. I like poetry and the beauty and elegant power of the word. It's a delicious marriage." Laird has taught at San Francisco State University, Naropa University, San Francisco Center for the Book, and privately, in her own studio. She also teaches bookbinding to seventh-graders at Stanley Middle School in Lafayette three months a year.

Of all her books, Laird is proudest of her recently completed *Remember the Light*, which she feels is her most adventurous project. She built leather boxes made of ostrich, goat, deer and elk skins and used an eighth-century-style binding, with linen cords inserted into boards. The book is held together by leather straps and brass rings. Laird hand planed the wood covers from maple and cherry wood, making a bas-relief drawing of her hand on the inside covers. Poems she wrote in 1986 after traveling to Tibet are printed in the book. Accompanying them are chopped-up etchings Laird did based on the 1989 Bay Area earthquake, as well as watercolor paintings and words such as "life", "death", "birth", and mantras from world religions, seven quotations on light, and the peace prayer of Hazrat Inayat Khan, an early 20th-century Sufi master. The book took two years to complete, with seven copies priced at \$9500 apiece.

"I got to play and put things together in a beautiful form, things that were important to me—my poetry, art and spiritual life," Laird says. "When I went to Lebanon in 1972 and later Tibet, I saw all the pain and suffering and hope, the struggle for life. On a small level I wondered, how can I find peace in myself? On a large level, how do we keep the vision of hope alive in the world?"

Formerly a professional photographer, Rappoport has done letterpress printing for the past 10 years, making books, broadsides, baby announcements, bar mitzvah and wedding invitations. She printed a broadside (a single sheet of paper) of a Lawrence Ferlinghetti poem to celebrate the 50th anniversary of City Lights Bookstore. She's also created books of her own poetry and anthologies. In 2003, she printed a tall, narrow, hand-sewn book called *3X4*. It was a whimsical collaboration among Rappoport and three friends, two poets and an artist. Rappoport printed the title on the cover in wood type, which is larger than metal type, and in different sizes and directions to create a playful feel. She selected different types of paper for the cover, text, and endpapers. "Part of my attraction to book arts is getting to work with beautiful papers," she says. She feels letterpress printing helps her "see the skeleton of the poem," thereby enhancing her own writing as well as her understanding of other poets' work. She makes choices with font, color and ornaments that "are all meant to further the poem as it is written rather than imposing some extraneous idea on it." *A Flame in the Heart* is an anthology of writing on love and hate by 17 authors that Rappoport designed in red and black. The red cover is reversible, with a footprint: Lisa Rappoport works at her cast-iron press with a foot treadle. Sense of black underneath: On each page the title is in red, the text in black. The colors balance each other like love-hate tension. Lisa explains. The book is an accordion structure, 17 feet long when unfolded, so different poems that aren't consecutive can be juxtaposed. "The pieces don't stay together where you put them, any more than our emotions stay where you put them," she says.

The 125 copies, priced at \$275 apiece, have sold well, aided by the fame of some of the authors, such as poets Robert Hass and Sharon Olds, and painter Frida Kahlo.

Rappoport credits her success to the supportive Bay Area book arts community and San Francisco Center for the Book, where she and Laird have taught classes and exhibited their work. The center has grown from offering an initial 12 classes a year in 1996 to 300 classes a year attended by some 1,500 students.

Even in this high-tech age, Laird and Rappoport are optimistic about the future of their craft. "A flat computer screen and an index of movies to watch on the TV, all those cell phones and excitements in hurry-hurry mode, fun for awhile perhaps, but not soul-fulfilling," says Laird.

"Holding that book and daydreaming, reading in a tree or hammock, reading in a coffee shop, these are 'ah experiences. Slow and enjoyable. Setting type is slow. Folding the paper is slow. If slow food has made a comeback, let's watch those headlines for slow books!"

Ralph Dranow is a poet, freelance writer and editor who lives in Oakland. He can be contacted at ralphdranow@yahoo.com.