

# REMEMBERING THE LIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY LAIRD

CONDUCTED BY KYLE SCHLESINGER

*Mary Laird is a book artist, printer, teacher, and actively involved in the Sufi Order of the West. She earned her MFA from University of Wisconsin at Madison where she and Walter Hamady ran the legendary Perishable Press Limited together for 15 years. She has been printing letterpress as Quelquesfois Press since 1969, and has taught at San Francisco State University, Naropa University, San Francisco Center for the Book, and in her Berkeley studio.*

KS: Perhaps I could begin at the beginning, so to speak, by asking about your earliest associations and affinities for books. For example, were there books in the home where you grew up? Did you write or keep scrapbooks as a kid? Who were some of the first writers and artists that enlivened your imagination or got you thinking about books as an exploratory medium? I know, for example, that Robert Duncan and Jonathan Williams treasured their libraries from childhood, and I think that there are traces of that ongoing affinity in their mature work.

ML: When I was growing up in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee, we had a whole room upstairs, dedicated as "library." In it were editions of Dickens, John Burroughs, Cervantes (complete with etchings,) Jane Austen, Thackeray, and Samuel Clements, to name a few. They were all from my paternal grandfather Arthur Gordon's turn of the century collection. One memorable tome on the world religions, published in 1893, featured an etching of Mohammad, which as you know, is forbidden! Arthur Gordon was a student at Cornell in Ithaca, New York, back then, having made his way from Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia. His father, the Honorable David Laird, ran a newspaper on the Island and later negotiated treaties with the First Nations People in the Northwest territories of Canada. So, the books were my legacy—all those leather bound, small print, gold stamped volumes! I always admired my grandfather who taught Greek and Latin at the University in Madison, and took trips to Europe and Greece.

In the attic I also set up all the antiques which were covered with sheets and used to pretend I was crossing the ocean on great boats, with all the aristocracy and educated

folks! We had beautiful turn-of-the-century china and clothes from Paris. It was a child's great fantasy! In junior high I had the opportunity to have the best teacher in my life, William Brueske, an art teacher who inspired me to pursue all I believed in. Period. From silver point to encaustics, ceramics, oil painting, puppetry, mechanical perspective, ice sculpture, silver casting. We did everything. Art history. Practicum. Everything except books. I look back and I smile.

I read a great deal as a child. I was a regular at the library. I associated reading with birds and expanse. Freedom. Escape. Totality. Expression. Vastness. Creativity. I loved Beverly Butler books, romantic and historical. I loved how she could describe everything, even though she was blind. I thought about all our human limitations and how we go beyond them in the all-ness, the nothingness. What is beyond eternity, I used to wonder, when I was eleven. I still have no answer.

When I was almost 19, I met a wonderful bookmaker who set type and wrote beautiful poems and I fell in love. He was also a professor. I was his student. We got married. I learned how to make books, to make paper. I learned so many things. I grew up. We had three children. We printed 93 editions of books together over 15 years. We had differences, but my interests remained: I was still seeking vastness, space . . . the capacity of the human soul to encompass unspeakable things, great, glorious, and all encompassing. Eventually I got divorced and went to graduate school, getting my MFA in printmaking in Madison.

I moved to California in 1988. Around 1990 I bought Andrew Hoyem's proof press, one of them at any rate. I still have it. I don't print many books, nor quickly, but I love the process, the entire process. I love the setting, printing, binding. I love the designing. I love the interaction.

KS: The first book of yours that I remember reading was *The Eggplant Skin Pants*. Was that your first, and could you tell me a little bit about how it was conceived and constructed?

ML: *Eggplant Skin Pants* came out in 1972. I spent 9 months working on pen and ink drawings in my room upstairs at the farm. I wrote the poems sometime between 1967 when we met, and 1971, 2 years after we married. I chose the paper, Hosho, because of its transparency. The way the images came through the paper and created shadows was of interest to me. So I did the whole book except the binding. I suppose that means the design, the setting, and printing. I don't recall sewing the book, rather that we shipped it

off to New York City where it was bound with the wonderful blind stamping on the cover. It was a bit of an adventure for me, as it was the first distributed book I had printed but it was not the first one I did. *An Everyday Celebration* (1969) was my first – a chapbook with horribly cut wood engravings after our trip to Portugal on our honeymoon. If I recollect rightly, there were under fifty copies of that one.

On *Eggplant* I ran into incredible difficulties with the fine lines in the drawings. We had magnesium or zinc plates made of the drawings, which filled in almost right away. Actually the line quality was quite poor on the plates; the delicacy of the drawings was lost in the process. So we had them remade, and had somewhat better clarity, but far short of the drawings. Lesson number 1, do not use crow quill pen point drawings (interesting, because now that would not be a problem with polymer). I had fun making the drawings, especially putting a hat on a bald eagle, and using *Gray's Anatomy* for the drawing about eating abalone. I also discovered that I did not have the capacity to become a medical illustrator!

KS: Did you identify with the artists and artisans you knew when you lived in Wisconsin? Who were they and what were they up to? Did your move to the West Coast have any direct bearing on the evolution of your work?

ML: I recall someone looking at my books and saying, "Oh Perishable Press clone!" It's hard to deny such a statement, since I was Perishable Press with Walter Hamady for 15 years. So, my joint work with him for all those years was just that – joint work. We worked with poets whose writing appealed to us. We made the paper, set and printed the books, and kept most of the bindings simple. He did all the printing except on my authored books, and I did most of the other work. Division of labor.

I was inspired at that time by the work of other grads who took classes in Madison. Kathy Kuehn (Salient Seedling Press) and Pati Scobey, to name two, are visual artists who took to the printing press with elegance and enthusiasm. I loved their styles, then and now, their integration of art, word and page. They both have such strong artistic statements to make, their life/spiritual force predominating. They both work with poets and artists and bring a *joie de vivre* to a craft often associated with tight precision and rigidity. Their buoyancy and creativity combined with their mad relief rolled etchings drew me up into their stratosphere. Kathy's ability to conjure up really fine, elegant and appropriate bindings for any given text continues to amaze me.

In terms of the West Coast, I had heard disparaging things about printmakers when I

was in the Midwest, things like “California printmakers take perfectly good paintings and smash them through an etching press to create a monotype, mostly decorative in purpose.” But when I took up a residency at Kala Institute in Berkeley, it was the earthquake, not monotypes, that influenced me most. The day I was drawing on hard ground in my apartment, at basement level in Albany, the quake of ‘89 swung my hanging plant to and fro, dropped a chunk of freeway onto the bridge, and caused many houses in the Marina of San Francisco to sink into the quasi quicksand of their fabricated foundations.

Tornados influenced my prints before the quake, the one in ‘84 that wiped out the town of Barneveld, eight miles from Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, ten days after I moved into a duplex there with my children during my divorce. We hid in the cellar and listened to what sounded like a roaring train overhead. Or the high winds of 2001, when sixty trees were ripped to toothpicks. The barn collapsed, and the outhouse and pond raft were uprooted and tossed into a field while I cowered behind a heavy sofa in a friend’s bermed boathouse in the sticks of Hollandale. So for deep influence, read “Natural Disasters.” I suppose it’s my penchant for drama, and nothing does it better than Mother Nature. About the time of hurricane Katrina, I had finished a painting of a former hurricane weather-mass. In my book, *Remember the Light*, which I have been working on for over 15 months, there is a signature wrapped in Mylar with a hurricane photocopied on two sides. In the etching I was working on in ‘89, I wrote in Tibetan (which I still remembered then), “How’s the weather.” So I guess I have John Muir and his escapades up pine trees in storms with his pocketful of tea and oatmeal in my Scottish gene pool psyche. I love the outdoors.

I also love contrasts of chaos and order, life and death. Symbols of sun, moon, lightning – the elements (earth, air, fire and water) all work their way into my poetry, drawing, etching and binding. I am deeply engaged in pursuit of the alchemical process re: light, evanescence and our temporary existence here. Lest that sound too pretentious, the age-old question, “why are we here, what is it all about?”

Back to the West Coast! I find myself hanging out with the Sufis and Buddhists. And agnostic poets. I spend as much time as I can going on silent retreats. From that process I write down dreams. From the dreams and from observing nature I draw, paint, and write. I love to travel and used to try to learn the language of the country I would visit; but after Tibet, I gave up on that one. I had studied Tibetan for ten weeks, an intensive written and spoken class for Nepal-bound students. I was only going to be in China and Tibet for three weeks. In Tibet for only nine days! Nevertheless, the trip deeply

influenced my love of mountains, the inner life and my thoughts about the persistence of life amidst enormous difficulties. And now I have finally printed up the poems I wrote there, which are included, as are the etchings I did during the earthquake, in this current, tiny edition of 7 books.

KS: What about travel?

ML: My trip to Jerusalem in 1999 got me started on painting icons. I was deeply moved by visiting the Monastery of St. Jean du Désert, thirty minutes from the city; here six Russian Orthodox monks repaired old icons and painted new ones. One of them had worked at the Louvre in Paris. He demonstrated grinding up rubies and lapis for color. "I have to do that," I thought to myself. So when Vladislav Andrejev of the Prosopon School of Iconography in New York State came to San Francisco, I took the icon class four times: twice with him and twice with his son, Dimitri. I try to incorporate some of these painting techniques into my books. I was surprised and delighted to learn that the Sufis and the Orthodox Russians share a great love of light and its manifestation. Having been raised Baptist, with a minister who later became a Unitarian, I am always happy to see how my past and present come together in nuanced ways. Nothing spectacular on the outside, but subtly revealing on the inner. So I am always grateful for revelation that occurs through the arts, nature and personalities.

Oh yes, and craft! My maternal grandfather was a cabinet-maker. I thought about this while I hand-planed those cherry and maple boards for covers for this latest book, and carved bas-reliefs of my hands into the inside covers, I felt the presence of my grandfather. I should also mention the wonderful artist and binder Laura Wait, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, who kindly shared her studio with me for four days, teaching me how to plane the wood and drill the covers and to make the prototype for this edition. When I visited Sheridan, Wyoming in May of this past year, I came across two incredible ostrich skins, lavender and teal, colors I couldn't resist. They will serve as the outer covers for some of my drop spine boxes housing *Remember the Light*. I really enjoy the bookbinding process. Filling in the hole where the tail was, with a different tad of leather, drawing attention to it... I like that! Life has holes. How we smooth over the rough spots – that makes it worthwhile to me. Perfection is elusive. May it stay that way!

KS: Indulge me in a flashback: Some years ago I enrolled in a printing course through the continuing education program at RISD. The studios were situated between the river and the bottom of a great hill on the East Side of Providence where I grew up. I would

occasionally look up from my tinkering and see students working on computers through a glass partition at the far end of the studio. One day, during a break, one wandered out from behind his monitor and asked what we were doing with these “machines.” I explained what letterpress was, and we started talking. I asked him what he was studying at RISD – of course – typography!

Now I’m teaching typography, and students do most of their work behind the monitor on the computer. Classes in the print shop are classic field days – a break from everyday work. Could you talk about your relationship to new media and old in your work? Also, the first generation of computer-mediated children have come of age, and some of them are involved in typography and artists’ books. Your thoughts on the future of the book and work of emerging printers and artists?

ML: Currently my husband John is taking a Dreamweaver class on building Web pages. He has been taking classes four to six hours a day, five days a week for ten weeks now and there are some light bulbs exploding!. But when he shows me the Dreamweaver code, my eyes cross. I live in another century. For years I sat on my high horse about giclees (Iris prints/fancy expensively made reproductions of original art work), probably the same high horse as polymer plates but but I think we’re talking apples and oranges. Polymer plates on the letterpress produce letterpress! Giclees are reproductions. Both modern, both made my teeth grate. At least at first. I really didn’t want to take on the new technologies.

But let me explain with another digression. In my “Book in a Day” at the Center for the Book in San Francisco, seven folks give up their time and money to make a four-up half-title/title/text/and colophon “book” with a two color cover and blank endsheets. We print an edition of 40 copies. It’s just an exercise for them to set some lines of type, lock it up, ink the rollers, run the paper through the press, fix some typos, print the 40, distribute the type and clean the press with Crisco before a final wipe of roller wash. The Crisco is the new technology (although any brand transfat will do). Kudos to Columbia School of Printing in Chicago where I saw it done first! Most of my students come from graphic design backgrounds. They know new technologies but they want to get their hands dirty. Usually one day with the old and somewhat abused type is enough for many of them to give up on the metal and to try the polymer plate making class. After all, they want to design their text, use fonts they love; and in many cases use multiple colors when they print it. Plus they want the text to come out looking good; if the embossed look (rolling of eyes) is in their cross hairs they can apply pressure without worrying they are rounding the shoulders of their type, or worse, breaking off the serifs.

Marrying old and new technology in my art has been a challenge. I consciously tried to do this in *Remember the Light*, where I printed and painted on etchings. I used acrylic, watercolor, egg tempera and Prismacolor pencils. Areas have been excised; one page has a blanket stitched circle. I photocopied on acetate and sprayed it with Krylon. Several poems were laser printed: one on acetate with acrylic under the printing, one on commercial "column" paper. I mounted letterpress furniture type high and printed it; the shape echoed shadows falling on the table toward sundown. The book is sewn 8<sup>th</sup> century style, on linen cords inserted into boards. I am constructing leather boxes using ostrich, Niger goatskin, deer and elk skins. The book has brass ring and post closures on straps. And yes, I do own a digital camera. Mostly I don't know how it operates. So maybe tomorrow I will want to learn Quark or the most current computer book design class, but I doubt it. You will have to ask others about the future of the book. My friend, Gillian Boal, at the Bancroft Library tells me libraries are turning into museums. This made me pause; but I had to ask myself when was the last time I was in a library? When I was trying to sell a book was the answer. That was a shock! I buy books at stores or online and rarely use the public library.

I think books will continue to enthrall and fulfill people. Nothing will take their place. A flat computer screen and an index of movies to watch on the TV, all those cell phones and excitements in the hurry-hurry mode . . . fun for a while perhaps, but not soul fulfilling. Holding that book, and daydreaming, reading in a tree or a hammock . . . reading at 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!

I think there is a wonderful abundance of emerging young artists and poets who bring, and will continue to bring, incredible vitality to the form of the book. Many of them are using the dinosaur letterpress machines. Just wait! They will surprise us all with their integrity, delight, originality and prowess.

*This e-interview began on November 26, 2005 and concluded on November 22, 2006.*

PAGE

PAGE 8