

Books to Hold or Let Go

Craft ACT, May 14-June 20; curated by Caren Florance.
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They say you can't judge a book by its cover, but bookbinding is a craft that teases such a cliché at its seams. A hand-bound book becomes an artefact: like a human skin, both revealing and/or concealing what lies within.

Books to Hold or Let Go is an exhibition of 24 different treatments of a deluxe bound edition of poems by Rosemary Dobson. The project, conceived by ACT bookbinder and artist Caren Florance, displays Florance's original version, hung as cover and sheets along a wall in order to allow binding, prints and poems their full view. The other books are located on plinths in the centre of the room.

Dobson's poems display a wry awareness of the passing of time, friends and partners, of mortality and finitude, and several of the books play with these ideas.

Robin Tait takes up Dobson's image of life's 'divining colander', its sifting and sorting of experience and values, in her delicate binding of concentric holes puncturing the cover papers. Florance's second work plays on the contrasts of fragility versus resilience: a loose covering of crumpled *momigami* rag paper, which softens from handling but remains strong.

Both Wayne Stock and Linda Newbown, with their images of hands, fingerprints and gloves, reflect on the longing to touch, to make precious, to possess and own. Newbown rather poignantly notes how binders secure book pages "so that you may more easily hold them.... We have held these pages and now let them go". Lee Bratt's concertinaed book reflects on the excitement of folding open a wordsmith's magic box.. Her book-ends are stitched with hand-holds, mimicking an accordion, squeezing out songs from within.

Other more 'solid' bindings, such as Elke Ahokas's slab of oiled Victorian Coobah wood, still retain a sense of 'seeing-through' to revelations beneath the skin. Others exhibit a concentration of form: Joy Tonkin's wood veneer a synecdoche of nature's vibrant growth and reflection of the original's forest-like prints.

Florance and Tait both pay homage to the late Alec Bolton, Dobson's partner, the founder of Brindabella, the famous handsetting press. Tait uses leftover papers from a previous Brindabella publication; Florance, his favourite typeface [Garamond]. These are the kinds of secret pleasures collectors revere.

Finally, a thought on self-importance and immortality: whilst art galleries are 'the repositories of infinite capabilities', Dobson recognises that "History tells me to take my

hand/from my inner vest pocket. /I shall not be Napoleon". For all their magic and beauty, books still remain quite humble things.

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