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Spring 2014

Pressed

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Recommended Citation

Ellison, Emilia Anne. "Pressed." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2014.
<https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.7ol2wl1f>.

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PRESSED

by

Emilia Anne Ellison

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in Book Arts
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Timothy Barrett

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Emilia Anne Ellison

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Book Arts at the May 2014 graduation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT PRESSED.....	1
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ABOUT PRESSED

The smell of leather is unmistakable. Much in the way that the earthy scent of pine trees or hay bales quietly penetrates all of your senses, leather's unique perfume lingers not only in the nose and on the skin, but also in the memory. *I am reminded of the saddle shop where I got my first pair of cowboy boots as a kid, the first full-leather bookbinding I made, every tack room I've ever set foot in, and my favorite sexy heels after I've sweat in them a bit.* If you have handled leather, you recognize that it feels soft, luxurious, and naturally robust. As a material, it surrenders easily to manipulation and in many ways, it is wildly forgiving, a trait appreciated by any honest artist. It responds variably to heat, pressure and moisture and its incredible ability to protect what it shrouds begins when blood is still pumping through its layers. It is skin, just like the skin you and I walk around in every day, and even in death, there is vivaciousness in this organic, primal material.

Another wonderful quality of leather is that it tends to have imperfections or scars—while many people seek out the most flawless skins for leather work, I prefer the opposite. The blemishes themselves suggest life: wounds both small and large ... perhaps a nasty bite from a fly, a fight with another creature, or a simple scratch from a fence. Those scars tell a silent, obscure story, just as ours do.

So, I am fascinated with leather and its inherent mystery. I'll describe how I'm using it later, but my thesis project involves more than just leather. It also includes what has been the instrument of my leap into communicating with a broader audience: letterpress printing. For me the printing process is emotionally painful—very rewarding but painful. What hurts (aside from my body after a long stretch at the press) is the fact that my initial fantasy is generally not what the final product is. So much time and energy is spent pre-press, beginning with writing (whether it involves choosing text by another author or writing my own) and including setting metal type, creating digital files and

photopolymer plates, choosing papers and color palettes. Determining the number of press runs. And page design. Each one of those bits is spring loaded with complication and I get snapped by a new dilemma nearly every time.

Once that initial work is done, the next step is to select a press to print on. It is like choosing an acquaintance—not a best friend but not a stranger either—whose body you will inhabit for a day. A press is inevitably riddled with quirks and, like leather, a sense of mystery. Even though you can check every possibility you know of, there is not always an explanation for why the roller height changes mid-print, or why your inking looks fuzzy, or why the press is making a new, strange sound. It is an exercise in problem solving and imagination, particularly for those still in the learning stages, but it is an enticing challenge every time. Especially when, if you are lucky, every single one of your choices, intentional or not, results in a sheet of paper that beautifully communicates exactly what you want it to. It is magical.

While I dove into hand lettering a little late in my scholastic game, I quickly realized that it was a perfect addition to my developing project. Hand lettering, a.k.a. calligraphy, has roots stemming from the beginning of humankind's relentless tussle with communication. We have been writing by hand with varying instruments in an assortment of languages since around the fourth millennium BCE. That's a long time and we are still doing it! Typefaces can thank their lucky stars that steady, creative folks perpetually refined the process of writing by hand so that eventually a sort of uniformity could exist. That sameness served two purposes. One, it allowed more people to be able to understand whatever idea was (and is still) being expressed and two, it demonstrated the delicacy and subtlety bred from repetition by the human hand.

Hand lettering is simultaneously easy and hard. Easy is holding an instrument and writing words with it. Hard is making it look good—good as in pressing slightly harder with the pen in the right places to create a subtle swell in a stroke which adds energy to what could easily be dull. Good as in choosing a suitable pen angle and the proper x-

height and finding the lovely balance of space between lines. Good as in writing enough letters that you get a consistent, attractive, repeatable shape and begin to develop a unique style. Enough letters that your own personality starts to come out in the words—that's my 'S,' and my 'W,' and those are my own sensually curved ascenders and descenders. It's *my hand*, and that's really personal. Not to mention difficult; pages and pages and pages of practice letters on grid paper, off of which I can feel helpless and lost.

When I do have that first moment of realization that my concentration has changed, that my hand knew what to do without constant stirring and I created a string of words that are beautifully spaced and lettered and *are not* perfect (because their allure lies in their personality and a perfect one of those just doesn't exist), it looks and feels magnificent.

The final element of my thesis project is essentially a small portion of my brain guts: a mish mash of humor, sexuality, foul language, and an appreciation for all things natural, including the human body. I am attracted to things that are rich with texture and the original impetus behind this project was a simple wish to harness some ideas that had been bouncing around in my head and plaster them on the walls of my home. Perhaps it is the ornery part of my nature that enjoys combining words that are considered harsh with the sultry swing of a hand like gothic cursive; it could also be responsible for my desire to place those words and images that are taboo to some onto a time-honored, beautiful material such as leather. But it might not be my inner contrarian pushing out; it could just be that I love the words, the images, the materials and the processes. It is difficult to untangle my perpetual internal conflicts enough to find resolution.

In the spirit of love, I snatched some of my favorite things from within both myself and the world of book arts and pressed them together. Literally. From the tradition of leather design bindings, I am pulling flat leather panels. Before a binder tools the final design into the covers of a leather book, typically he or she first makes a practice plaque to tool on in order to work through any issues before tooling the real thing. My

panels are a bit larger than a standard book and a touch thicker because they are finished works and I want that difference to be clear. And instead of customary gold tooling, which requires the use of hot hand tools, I have decided to use photopolymer plates (from letterpress printing processes) that I press into the leather with a nipping press. In lieu of gold leaf that would generally be used to fill the lines, I am using mica powders that are painted or stippled into the leather, as it is more suitable for the hand-drawn line qualities in both the images and the text.

All text is by my own hand: I have chosen gothic cursive and uncial letters (both made using a broad-edged pen) as well as a nameless, casual hand made with a ruling pen. For the leather panels and the corresponding broadsides, the text was first written on grid paper, then scanned and digitized, and finally made into photopolymer plates. The same plates are being used both for the leather and for the printed broadsides (with the exception of the printed “I Love You” for which scaled down, separate plates were used) and it is an exciting first for me to be able to see one design executed in different ways. All images are either original drawings or compositions made from tracing various parts from photos and combining those tracings.

Three leather panels are to be included in the show. “I Love You” combines a block of hand lettered uncials (stating some loving thoughts) turned sideways above a corresponding, inlaid, abalone shell shape. The leather is undyed deerskin and the block of letters is pressed blind, so there is no additional color, aside from the inlay. “Plow with Cock” is red calfskin with a line drawing image of an uncircumcised Minotaur in front of a naked and somewhat sexually vague derriere. “Hungry? I’ll give you something to eat...” is pressed into black French Chagreen goatskin leather and the image is a line drawing of a naked woman, from behind, slightly leaned forward. The text and part of the image are decorated using mica powder.

Each leather panel has a corresponding letterpress printed broadside, employing the same photopolymer plates used for the leather. All are printed on dampened

heavyweight Johannot paper using black ink for both text and image except “I Love You” which also includes a red, hand-inked shape and a blind colophon. For “Hungry? I’ll give you something to eat...” and “Plow with Cock,” I added bits of color with mica powder and gold leaf.

The hand lettered artwork consists of three works. “I’m a slut because fuck you” is white and pink gouache on black Ingres paper. “I Love You” is laid out as described previously, but instead with black gouache for the letters and acrylic paint for small details. The large shape is gold leaf and the paper is white Frankfurt. “I am not even a little bit sorry, shitface” is white, blue and orange gouache on slate Winterstoke paper with palladium leaf.

One fine binding is included. “Sack up, ho” is bound in black French Chagreen goatskin with silk sewn endbands and black inked edges. The text is pressed into both covers and filled with grey mica powder.

I discovered in graduate school that audience plays an important role for many people within the art world, therefore, a short examination of that is relevant. My own creative background was, prior to my time at the Center for the Book, based in the fields of ceramics and bookbinding. In my experience, both of these disciplines focused nearly wholly on the utility of what was being created—does this book open properly? Does this pitcher pour without dripping? While there are a vast number of creative subtleties involved with each area, an audience was not addressed whatsoever. I had full artistic license and zero consideration of audience beyond myself and my professors or classmates during critiques. Quality craftsmanship was the ultimate objective, and if that existed in the artwork, it was unquestionably both effective and beautiful.

Because of my specific but not uncommon educational path, I do not naturally consider an audience when I am creating any type of artwork. In no way does that suggest that I do not care about the audience, however. If discussions or thoughts arise out of any artwork I create, it is a success; I learn things every single time I hear

someone's perspective and that is extremely valuable to me. Yet, art can also be a success if the artist alone gets something out of it. Most certainly, I do not expect anything from my viewers, and I hope for that same sentiment in exchange when I am acting as a viewer myself. When I look at art, I generally don't think about it, I don't wonder about it, I just look at it. Sometimes it pleases my eyes and sometimes it does not. It is visceral experience for me and for that reason, my sincerest desire is that any viewer of my art simply enjoys it. I have always known that there is no guarantee even one person will like any given piece of art, however, and for me, that fuels the importance of making things that please *me*, first and foremost. Perhaps in the future, the audience's role will change in my work.