

CATALOG INTRODUCTION
THE NORTHWOODS SET BOOK PROJECT
A collection of artist books by members of Northwoods Book Arts Guild

Margo Klass, Curator

With great enthusiasm I introduce the Northwoods Set Book Project to the viewing public in *Book As Art 3*, the third exhibition of work by members of the Northwoods Book Arts Guild.

The Set Book Project is the result of a creative partnership between Northwoods Book Arts Guild; the University of Alaska Press and its director Nate Bauer; Peggy Shumaker, editor of the Alaska Literary Series; and the four poets who generously shared their published books as inspiration for this collaboration.

The project began in spring of 2019 when I met with Nate Bauer, Director of UA Press, to propose a partnership between the Guild and the Press, an opportunity for book artists to respond to already published books. The tradition of using a pre-selected text, a “set book,” as a springboard for a collection of artist books was not well known by our membership, but with discussion and inspiration from the OPEN/SET exhibition sponsored by the American Academy of Bookbinding,* we designed a hybrid version of the idea for UA Press and Northwoods Book Arts Guild.

Together, Nate and I selected four books as the “set” texts for the project. Each is authored by an Alaskan poet and published by UA Press as part of the Alaska Literary Series, edited by Peggy Shumaker:

Armor & Ornament, by Christopher Lee Miles, 2019

Li Bai Rides the Celestial Dolphin Home, Tom Sexton, 2018

Roughly for the North, by Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen, 2018

Of Darkness & Light, by Kim Cornwall, edited by Wendy Erd, 2019

All four books are authored by poets whose work is known and loved, and have compelling imagery to inspire book artists to design and create imaginative covers and bindings. Artists were given a choice of rebinding a copy of the published book, or binding a copy of the book’s text block digitally printed in signatures. Special thanks to Geoff Welch and the staff of Dateline Printing for working with individual artists to print the digital text blocks on a choice of papers.

Beyond those set parameters of the project, artists had full creative freedom to design the book’s structure and method of binding. There are traditional cased-in bindings alongside familiar non-adhesive bindings, as well as inventive variations of known structures. Many of the bindings incorporate unusual materials, including fish skin, vintage nails wrapped with fraying rope, beads and threads, souvenir cards from the 1950s, and delicate objects from the natural world. Casements for the books, an option added by many artists, are also notable in their range: classic clamshell boxes for many, but also an historical girdle book structure, a box construction sculpture, and even one made of cement and rebar!

The Set Book Project is a special collection of artist books to be considered together, a subset of 27 pieces in the *Book As Art 3* exhibition. It is a reflection of our Guild’s commitment to be “a community of artists actively learning about and creating artist

books.” The Guild is known for its collaborations with people and organizations beyond its membership. These collaborative projects represent who we are as an organization and illustrate how we enjoy rising to a common challenge, working and learning together as we support the Guild and each other. One way this common purpose is demonstrated in this collection is the binder’s practice of writing a colophon for each book. Normally hidden away in the back of each book, the colophons for this collection are presented as part of the exhibition labels. They tell the stories of how the book artists intersected with the poets, answering such questions as why the book was selected, what part of the poet’s work personally resonated, and how the artist’s intentions were made visible in the book’s design and materials.

As curator of the project for the Guild, I offer gratitude and admiration to the book artists who not only accepted the challenge of the Set Book Project, but also put visible and creative energy into their work. Participants’ remarkable enthusiasm and dedication to this project was unanticipated, especially since it coincided with a year of largely working independently during the Covid pandemic.

With congratulations to the artists, thanks to our partners, and great delight I invite you to enjoy the Northwoods Set Book Project in this catalog and in *Book As Art 3*.

**OPEN/SET: A Triennial Fine Binding Competition and Exhibition Promoting the Art of the Binding, American Academy of Bookbinding, 2017*