

VOLUMES

The Work of Book and Print Maker Stephanie Mahan Stigliano
by Roanna Forman

Suppose someone says to you, "Have you seen Stephanie Mahan Stigliano's latest book?" What do you think of? A paperback at Borders, maybe the hardcover edition? No, you wouldn't find Stigliano's work among those stacks. More likely you would first need to change conceptual gears to understand what she and other contemporary book and print artists mean by a "book." Throughout her career, Stigliano has stretched, or, rather, pressed, pounded, tooled, and sewn, the definition of a book, redefining such fundamentals as, "Does it have to have text? Does it have to have sequence? Does it have to have pages? What is a page?" Using mediums ranging from woodcuts to tin cans, Stigliano is constantly experimenting, with an extraordinary range of results. She recently invited me to her home studio to discuss her career, her art, and her important contributions to the Malden arts community.

On the arts in her childhood and family:

Well, I guess I was always really manually dexterous, that's what I've been told. If people dropped things, I was always called to pick up the tiny little pieces. I was always making things. I guess my family was like that. My Mom was always knitting or baking and my Dad built our house - he built two houses. He could make anything, fix anything. That was just sort of understood. And also my brother's a graphic designer and my sister's a landscape architect, so I guess the creative element is there.

On her training:

I went to art school when I was seventeen, and even before that I was making art and getting commissions, you know, wacky things like portraits of people's horses.

Well, I went to Philadelphia College of Art, which is now University of the Arts, and I studied jewelry and I also took a lot of crafts classes. But right on the same floor as the jewelry department was the printing department, so I was always seeing what they were doing and I often went in there to etch metal for what I was doing and saw them making a book and doing print, and eventually ended up doing mostly books and prints myself, using the jewelry skills to make books.

On the particular attraction of book and print making:

I think that what happened was that I always wanted to be a painter or someone who made images but felt I needed to make a living, so that's why I thought jewelry would be something really physical - that I could learn a craft, a trade, and do that.

On her motivation as an artist:

I don't have really big political ideas, rather I'm commenting on my life in small-scale context here.

On her various series of works:

It's sort of a very crooked path of what I do from one idea to another, I guess because I just follow whatever whim I have and whatever seems interesting enough to build on and build on and build on and I try not to judge it. I try to just go with whatever idea I have. I guess there was a period where my daughter was about from seven to nine where she was playing a lot of hand games and I just thought those were really fun like jumping rope and those clapping hand games from my childhood. That became a group of pieces.

When Angela was a tiny baby, I couldn't do work in the studio since I had to be with her all the time. So I took some letter press classes to learn how to print letter press because I didn't have

one [with letter press, the "the old-fashioned" typesetting method, type is set in lead, letter by letter]. I couldn't do that in the house because I didn't have a letter press, and it seemed like the books were small scale and I could do the stenciling, the extra embellishment at home. I could do it while she was sleeping.

On the physicality of her art-making:

I like to make things, I like to put things together, and I like to make things that people can touch and play with and move around and handle instead of art that's on the wall and is very flat and behind glass.

I guess wood cut is my favorite. I think I like things that are really physical, that you have to get really physically involved with, because there are movements that you make that create marks...you have to struggle with them a little bit. The material is also adding its force; it's not just you imposing your voice on the material. With drawing and painting - I love doing both, but it seemed like it was almost too easy...Somehow I didn't believe it enough, like if I'd be painting, and it would just happen so fast, and then it was over...shouldn't it be harder? *[laughs]* Then I'd continue working and make a big mess of it, whereas I guess the process, the physicality [of wood cut] slows me down enough so that I have to pause and actually think about what I'm doing instead of rushing all through it.

On the primary challenge of working with many materials:

Thinking of an idea that that material can express well. For example, I always wanted to use the bottle caps, in fact I bought a really nice piece by someone who didn't sign the piece - I don't know who did it. But it was really cool, bottle caps with pieces of paper that fit inside the bottle caps so it was a love poem that could be rearranged. And I thought, I want to really do something. So for years I saved bottle caps and couldn't think of quite the right thing to do, and then one too many times I opened up a bottle, and it said, "Sorry, not a winner." And I thought, that's it! That's it! You don't have to be a winner, but you can put stuff inside of the bottle cap. So I went back to different writings I had and weeded out interesting phrases and put them inside the bottle caps.

On being placed in the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard:

We were away in Italy and when I came back there was a message on my answering machine that Jerry Cohn from the Fogg had seen my piece at the Boston Printmakers Show and wanted to purchase it for the collection. I was jumping up and down - I couldn't believe it! First we go to Italy, and then this happens! [Besides Marjorie Cohn, Anne Anninger of Harvard's Houghton Library was key in building support for Boston area book artists. Stigliano has a piece in the Houghton Library.] For all the people who don't have that, it can just happen: you get in one show, and it's just the right show, and one person sees it, and it's just the right person. And there were hundreds of rejections and lots of money spent on shows that had this big entrance fee and you didn't even get in the show. Things like that happen for years. You never know what is going to be the right show. The moral is, just get your work out there.

On current projects:

I'm going to be teaching a Sculptural Book class at Mass Art if it fills, so I'm playing around with those ideas, making books out of tin cans and plaster and more found objects, found materials, and I'm also making some boxes to sharpen up my box-making skills. Recently... I made a piece for a show in the Fiber Arts Center in Amherst. I did woodcut prints on fabric and then embroidered and quilted it, and that was really fun.

One side of panels represent dawn, the other dusk. The story opens out as the hooks are undone in stages; however, Stigliano says, "You could put them together anyway you want. But I don't think anybody does it with that one. People are reluctant to touch art."

I've got a lot of things going on. I'm working on the hinges for the tin can books, and I've got lots of fabric with printing on it that I haven't done anything with yet. I went to Jo-Ann Fabrics and got these big iridescent silks that go orange and blue and change in the light, and then I printed on them. My idea was to embroider on them, but embroidery takes a really long time [*laughs*] so I did four square inches and that sort of stopped on that project.

I'm making a box - it's like a tower and it has four boxes, each facing different directions. I've come up with themes of four - like quartets, thematically, but I don't know how it's all going to work together. I get the idea and I get the form. I imagine it's like a composer, and the librettist. So you've got the words and the melody and the idea - it's like juggling all these different aspects - how do you get them so they work (or don't, and you lose your project up there in the studio, too).

On arts activity in Malden:

I really love Malden. It's a city, but it feels like a small town. Because I like it, I want to continue to make it into the place that I want it to be, so whenever I get a chance I want to contribute, and I've done that in a few ways. Like I was on Cultural Council for a couple of years. Then I met Sand T [owner of artSPACE@16 Gallery and leader of Malden visual arts community] and I thought, this is amazing. She had such a big idea, and she really had the energy to make it work, so I tried to hang around her and catch some of her energy, and learn from her examples, to be able to make things happen. So I try to help her in whatever ways I can. Once I juried a show for her ["Malden Art Now 2003"] and that was fun. Some artists came out of the woodwork for that. And I've been working with Debbie Burke and the Mayor on the Convent conversion. [The former convent on Irving Street is being converted into live-work space for artists.]

On MATV Gallery:

I love MATV. When I was on the cultural council, Anne D'Urso Rose came to us with a proposal to convert the hallway into a gallery space, and I thought, what a good idea! And so I wanted to have a show there, I saw it in a long, narrow hallway, which really when you put art in it transforms the space, because everyone in the building has to walk up and down that long blank hallway. One of the things they do is they make videos of the artists' work for the exhibition, so I got into making videos with Elizabeth Scorsello and it is so much fun. Very intense, lots of hours spent editing. I've enjoyed being an active part of the gallery committee, and helped interview people for Gallery Spotlight and the Telethon.

On the Window Arts of Malden Project - WAM [WAM will show the works of Malden artists in Malden Center business windows this coming September:

I think it's so exciting that Naomi [Brave] and Kelvy [Bird] are doing that. It's something that I thought of after I saw it in Somerville. I thought, "Why can't Malden have something like this?" When I saw that here are these two artists who are leaders, I thought, good, I'm going to jump on board and try to help them in ways that I'm able.

Stephanie Mahan Stigliano's work can be viewed at <http://stephaniemahanstigliano.com/> Stigliano is curating "From Two to Three Dimensions: Prints into Books," with works of seven Boston area book artists, at artSPACE@16 from Sept 9-30. The exhibit will travel to Emerson College for the International Conference of the Book, October 20-22 and remain on exhibit until Thanksgiving. Currently, some of her collection is on view at the Lilypad Gallery, 1353 Cambridge Street, Inman Square, Cambridge.