Carolee Campbell

"An Argument for Lying Fallow"

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INTRODUCTION

BOOKBINDING IS A BROAD SUBJECT, AND AS THE FORM OF THE book becomes ever more elastic, so does bookbinding. This evolving tendency in contemporary bookbinding is well represented in the work of the contributors to this issue of Abracadabra. Here are articles written by printers who are binders, binders who are book conservators, book conservators who are teachers, teachers who are book artists, and book artists who are writers—among these contributors the combinations could go on recombining in numerous ways.

Limited edition binding, rare book conservation, and the artist's book each have their own particular set of concerns and approaches. Like the other book arts, in each of these areas of binding can be seen great subtlety and complexity. And though the Devil's minions always seem to be waiting for any opportunity to interfere in the painstaking labor of our art and craft, these articles are proof of the pleasures and satisfactions to be found there as well.

—David Brock
Guest Editor

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[Note: All editorial back matter is contributed by Gerald W. Lange, Managing Editor.]

AN ARGUMENT FOR LYING FALLOW

BY CAROLEE CAMPBELL

FOR A BINDER, I'M A PRETTY GOOD PRINTER. FOR A PRINTER, I'm a pretty good binder. But it is as designer/printer/binder and sole proprietor of Ninja Press that I find myself hoist by my own petard. The stubborn insistence in doing it all myself inevitably leads to being snared by pitfalls of my own making. Conversely, working alone from the point of original concept to binding the very last book in the edition, is so enormously satisfying, not to mention instructive, that I have yet to entertain seriously the idea of acquiring assistance. It is from this particular angle of view that I add my observations to the edition binder's collective compendium of problem-solving and technical serendipity.

My zeal for working alone more than likely stems from an abiding love of process forged during my years as a photographer with a predilection for nineteenth century techniques: hand coated emulsions of palladium, cyanotype, and salted paper; photographs on fine papers exposed outside the darkroom in sunlight. Searching for the appropriate alchemical balance in a thicket of endlessly varied formulas designed to render the subteltonal values of photographic expression exacts discipline and patience. This concentrated practice prepared me for the strict meticulousness that hand bookbinding requires, along with a deep respect for craftsmanship and tradition. I approach the workbench ever mindful of the need to strike a harmonious balance between mastery of craft, fluid efficiency, and speed. And yet, because I work alone, I repeat errors that need not be repeated and can be blind to obvious solutions for a confounding problem. My success, at times, seems purely by happenstance. Other times, just when all the elements of a book's design seem obedient and docile, one of its components will rage out of control. Should this description sound more like lion-taming than the venerable craft of bookbinding, it might well be taken as a bit of insight into the personality of this author.

To illustrate my particular approach to edition binding, I will describe the steps taken for the design of Ninja Press' most recent publication, El Sol y Los de Abajo by José Montoya, which was printed in an edition of 195 copies.

El Sol y Los de Abajo is a single elegiac poem which is sinuous and slim in shape and line-length. It is a linguistic braid of Spanish and English, written in the language of the Chicano—a blend of two languages into a third which become intrinsically fused. In my mind's eye I saw a tall, slender book. I wanted to enhance the serpentine quality of the poem and minimize page-turning. I wanted the option of holding the book in hand to read page by page in the conventional manner or to see the poem displayed in
its entirety. José Montoya is a painter as well as a poet. I decided to use a page of drawings from his sketchbooks to decorate the boards along with some isolated drawings within the text. For the type, I selected fourteen point Spectrum: first, for its honest, straightforward design; and second, because I’ve got a lot of it, including accents. (I will bypass the issues surrounding printing; a separate though equally challenging subject in terms of problem-solving.)

There were other aspects to the book’s design I knew I wanted. I did not want to reinvent the wheel yet again by making many practice models of a book structure that was new to me, so I elected to repeat, with a few modifications, a binding style from an earlier publication. In theory, that would eliminate the need for technical fine-tuning. Besides, the design worked well for this poem.

For the cover, the boards and spine were glued to a single piece of covering material that was printed with Montoya’s drawings from a zinc plate. The spine title was printed in a separate run. The material was then turned in at all the edges. The text, a modified accordion style, was attached by a folded tab at the foreedge of the front board only. This did two things: it allowed the text to lie flat when open and, if stood on end, the text could be pulled out to reveal the entire poem along with the drawings on both inner and outer boards. The inner boards were paneled with the same covering material in order to equalize the tension and eliminate board warp.

I wanted to design a book that effectively evoked the atmosphere of the poem. I wanted a spare, elegant structure that functioned efficiently and could be put together very quickly. With a wraparound single-unit cover, I eliminated having to put disparate parts together in stages. By gluing the text pages together at the foreedge, I eliminated the attendant problem of feeding a long sheet, representing several text pages, into the press, which would later require very accurate and fussy measuring and folding techniques. By trimming the assembled and glued text block at the head, tail, and foreedge by hand with a straight edge and knife, I didn’t have to be quite as careful when gluing the pages together. By using a jig that was once a Plexiglas box-type picture frame, I maintained accuracy by lining up the folds of the text against the rigid corner of the inverted box. Thus, in theory, I could glue out and assemble ten or so covers at a time in rather short order. Similarly, I could fold and glue five to ten text blocks, depending on my time and patience at the moment, with dispatch.

Now, for this book designer, the very heart of the book-binding dilemma lies in the ultimate selection of materials. I like to think I am not alone. Every experienced printer and binder has a closet full of swatch books containing an endless array of paper, cloth, and board; at first light, an enticing cornucopia of materials from which to choose. However, as we all know, only a handful of these materials are useful in the end. Few papers will accept an inked type form graciously, whether they are dampened or not. Many beautifully expressive papers will not tolerate adhesives. They are either too porous or they roll up into tight little cigar shapes. Some have no wet-strength. They crack and tear when folded or glued; some buckle while others shrink, become “furry” or pill—beautiful papers that are meant to work with and yet, very seductive. The same can be said to a lesser degree for book cloth and board. Thus, when designing a book that will begin to inform the reader of what is to come by its visual and tactile references, I am consistently drawn to materials that are peppered with vexing complications. An alternative would be to use those same few papers and cloths we know we can rely upon in different and inventive ways. In designing El Sol y Los de Abajo, I did some of both and in so doing, built into the design, more work, more time, and more frustration.

For the text paper I chose Superfine cover as80 in soft white. I had worked with this paper before. It has a neutral personality. It is inexpensive, keeps a fold, accepts glue, is not easily damaged, and prints beautifully without
dampening. There would be no nasty surprises using this paper. For the cover I decided on a grass paper from the Philippines. It is a handmade sheet that comes in one, two, and three-ply thicknesses. It is made from hand-picked cogon grass and has subtle references to the poem and the poet. Montoya served in the Navy on a mine sweeper that sailed to and from the Philippines. The Montoya family came to the San Joaquin Valley from New Mexico to work as pickers. The paper is similar in color and texture to that generic, unbleached, single-fold, industrial paper towel seen everywhere. Montoya has frequently used these towels for his pen-and-ink drawings. Also, the paper smells good—like new mown hay—resonating a certain sense of reminiscence inherent in the poem. I liked all those linkages even though they wouldn't be obvious to anyone else other than the poet.

I had never used this paper before and had never seen it used for anything other than a printed broadside that was then folded like a letter. The colleague who used it thought it printed pretty easily. So I borrowed a few sheets and made a model. I let the model knock around a good long while to see how the paper would react to being turned into a book. It did just fine. It took to bending around the spine well and seemed to like being glued. I ordered several hundred three-ply sheets. When I opened the packages the aroma was sensational. What I hadn't counted on was that each sheet was a slightly different color and that none of them were the color of the sheets I had borrowed for my model. Okay. I could see each book being a varying tone and I liked the idea. I spent a couple of days cutting text and cover paper to size. It was only after I finished that I realized that, because the sheet wasn't large enough to get both the cover and the two inner panels cut out of it, I had stacks of covers and stacks of panels, all of varying color. I then spent three days trying to match two panels with each cover as closely as possible. Towards the end of the pile, none of them matched. Okay. That might be interesting.

When printing the drawings on the dampened covers, I discovered the tack of the ink pulled and tore up the paper. That's when I began to suspect that the paper might all be made in a single weight, then coughed together to make the second and third ply, thereby lessening its internal strength. I also discovered that only one side of the sheet was printable and that wasn't the side I wanted to use. Okay, I switched to another ink and printed on the smooth side. Later, while drying the printed sheets in stacks around the room, I inadvertently placed a ruler on one of the stacks. When I picked it up several days later, I noticed that, even though the sheet was not in the direct sun, the ambient light from the windows had faded the paper. I saw that I would have to place each of the printed cover sheets in the sun to acclimatize them and, to prevent them from blowing in the wind to become chipped and soiled, I needed to sandwich them, a few at a time, between a board and glass.

Finally, I put together the first copy in the edition. But while turning the paper around the corners of the boards, the paper began to tear. I saw I had to apply the glue much more stringently and wait for it to "set up" before folding it over—extra time I didn't account for. It was then that I noticed that the paper was beginning to crack at the joints next to the spine. Now this was alarming. The paper had behaved well on my model. Nevertheless, now my entire design was flummoxed. There was nothing to do but incorporate cloth at the spine for strength. There went my idea of continuous wraparound drawings on the cover. I ruled out backtracking the paper at the spine as the paper would still crack. I began to search for a cloth the same color as the paper. But since every cover is a different shade, that wouldn't work. Then I decided to try bright red, matching the third color printed on the title page. I cut the cover above and below the spine title by hand. I glued the red cloth to the boards and the label to the cloth at the spine. The spine label is fourteen-inches long and about a quarter-inch wide. After applying the glue, it behaved like a piece of cooked linguini. And excess glue stains the cloth. So, gluing down the spine label required delicacy and finesse—and more time. Then there is the time and care needed to cut apart each cover paper, making sure the title is centered on the quarter-inch-wide label. That's the bad news. The good news is the brilliant red cloth improved the look of the cover tenfold. The sliver of red at the spine sparkled and gave me the idea to color in one tiny part of the drawings by hand. With crimson acrylic, I colored in a pair of amply drawn lips. The cover improved even more. Now it was stronger, both visually and structurally.

After painting the lips, I got the idea to add acrylic to the two drawings on the inside panels. Then I added some color to the back cover. These additions enhanced the book even more. So, now I have effectively tripled the time needed to complete each book. I bleach paper in the sun, cut and work two spine cloth strips, match covers with panels, cut covers apart, color in the drawings, and glue spine and covers down individually, requiring a skill that I consider to be more closely related to a surgical procedure.

Hyperbole aside, I made choices; some good and some bad. The good ones allowed the work to progress with an easy calm. The bad ones—didn't. However, in between my very rude language, I was finding ways to make rebellious material work and, in so doing, enriched the design.

I am now about forty-five copies into binding the edition. I have three new book projects that are at various stages of development: one is on the press (and not going easily); another is at the second-model level; a third still lurks in my mind. And because I want to stretch the limits of my creativity by instilling these nascent publications with a more provocative fusion between word, image, and structure—I am very happy when I am just binding. Stretching is exhausting. I get tired of it. It is so restful to know that all I have to do is the same thing, carefully and well, over and over again, another one hundred and fifty times. If someone else took over the binding, there I'd be, having to conjure and call into existence another design that, for this book artist, needs to gestate over the fullness of time. I am not pressed by need to find a way to speed up that creative process, so, I lie fallow. I bind books.