



Figure 1: The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, letterpress printed on 100 lb. Mohawk Superfine paper, 9 × 9 inches, 2012

DOWN THE SHAKESPEARE RABBIT HOLE

By Emily Martin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Martin earned an MFA degree in painting, from the University of Iowa in 1979 and made her first artist's books at that time. Martin joined the faculty of the University of Iowa Center for the Book in 1998 where she teaches artists books, paper engineering, and traditional bookbinding classes. She lives in Iowa City. Website: emilymartin.com

I STARTED AS A PAINTER, earning an MFA from the University of Iowa School of Art and Art History in 1979. I made my first artist books while still in graduate school. After graduating, I began making more prints, at first with intaglio before experimenting with photocopies and early desktop publishing to produce more artist books. I used various residencies to have access to letterpress printing, finally getting my own Vandercook SP15 proof press in 2001. I have always been interested in telling the viewer a story. For a long time, the story was drawn from my life, but in more recent years I've also incorporated themes such as the theater, social observations, current events, and sometimes all those things in the same story. I often use humor to draw in the viewer.

In 2011, I felt like I had been mining my own life for material long enough. I was also feeling a bit stuck. At the Codex Book Fair that year, Richard Ovenden of the Bodleian Libraries encouraged the entry of artist books into a Shakespeare-themed bookbinding competition. I made note but didn't really give it much thought. Later that fall, I was at the Guild of Book Workers Standards of Excellence Seminar in Hand Bookbinding in Boston, where a call for the exhibit was included in the conference packet. The call folder had a pop-up in the center and somehow that made the idea of entering seem more appropriate for me. I decided that this was the something different and challenging that I would take on. Little did I know where it would lead. The call detailed some specifics regarding size and explained that it was a designer book competition, but that it was open to all formats and materials. I had never made a designer bookbinding and I wasn't interested in the traditional approach, using leather, tooling, and other conventions of the genre.

I decided on carousel book format early on and the play *The Tragedy Romeo and Juliet* (figure 1) for my artist book of the same name: five segments for the five acts, mimicking theater-in-the-round like the Globe Theater, the original site of the performances. I was never interested in reproducing the entire play. I knew the plot and had read it in high school and seen it on stage and in movie adaptations. Now I read and reread it, selecting the excerpts after these new readings: one line of dialogue to represent the story being told in each of the acts. I had not remembered the chorus from previous readings of *Romeo and Juliet*, and chose to emphasize the timelessness of the play through repetition of the chorus and insertion of modern equivalents for Verona, such as Bosnia and Israel. I also added a commentary of my own beneath the repeated chorus.

The carousel book used a variation that I devised to allow for scenes and separate text panels. The spine tabbing, also of my devising, functioned to both hold the book together and balance the thickness at the fore edge. I decided on an edition of nine because I had nine sheets of a paper made by Mary Hark. I thought of all the books as auditioning to be the one entered in the competition.

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet had an unexpected result: my book was not only accepted, but it also won a prize. The process had been an interesting and very fun challenge. I enjoyed all the research and the deep dive into materials and ideas. I also enjoyed that while it came from my thinking, it was less in my head than autobiographical work. I decided to do another Shakespeare book where I was the one making the rules. I found that having a collaborator who is long dead worked for me. I had always been reluctant to use other people's writing because I inevitably end up messing around with it and understandably most writers aren't okay with that.

For my next book I chose *Othello*. Again I spent a lot of time with the play before beginning. I got really frustrated with Desdemona and her appalling passivity. So I decided I would see what else I could have her say using only words from her existing lines. I spent the summer of 2015 riding my bike and physically sorting her words, and I eventually decided on seven sentences. I made magnets of her more than seven hundred words to facilitate moving them around, not initially intending to include the magnets in the finished book. I also made a two-dimensional puppet of her to test out various postures and gestures. The Desdemona images are quite large at nineteen by thirteen inches (figure 2). I felt like she needed space to thrash about.

I had a winter residency at Penland School of Craft, where I spent my two weeks printing the text lines and developing the images of Desdemona. I printed her form with wire on a magnetic base, using three figures of wire that could be flipped and manipulated for differences between the seven figures. I kept the edition size small because the prints were developed on the press and could have failed at any time during printing. I made folders for the individual sheets to specify the order of viewing, labeled prelude, acts 1–5 and coda. Late in the project I realized the word magnets were essential to the finished book, and I felt compelled to make a clamshell box lined with sheet metal. Viewers can use the word magnets to create new lines of text.

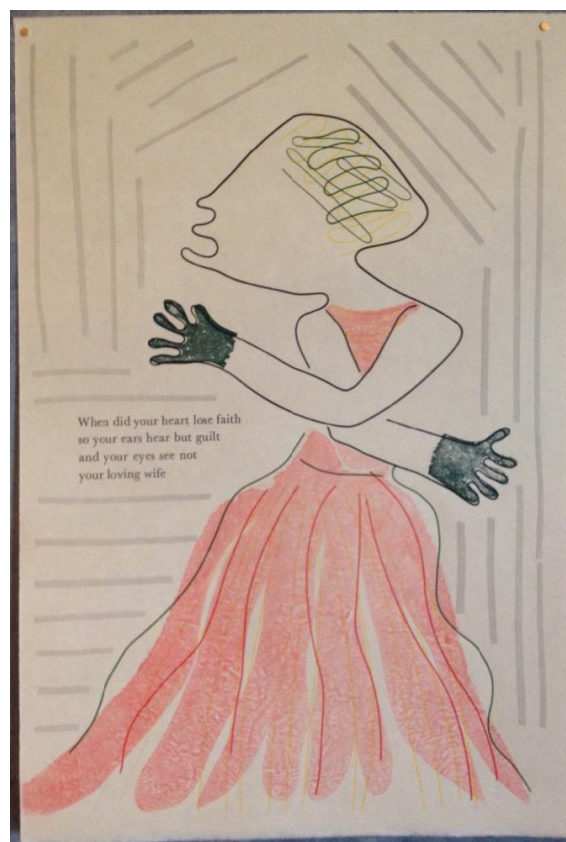


Figure 2: Desdemona in Her Own Words, letterpress printed on Sakamoto paper, 19 × 13 inches, 2015

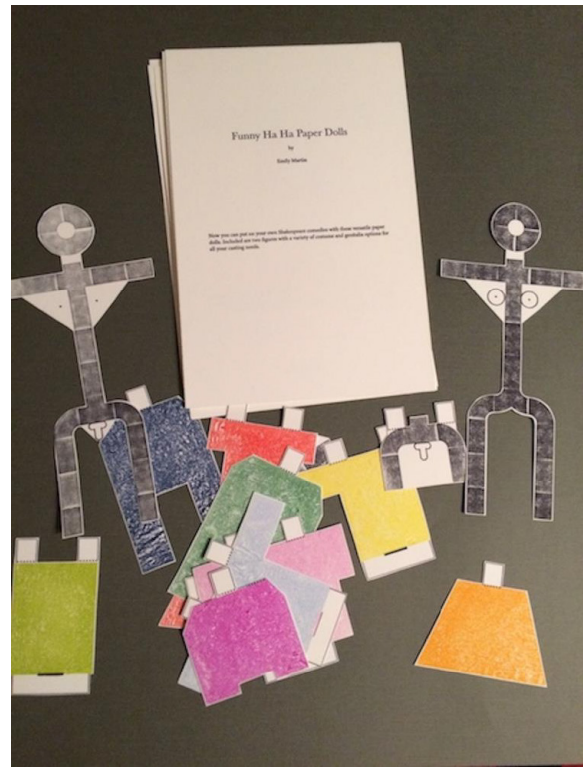


Figure 3 (left): *Funny Peculiar Funny Ha Ha*, letterpress printed on *Domestic Etch* and *Pescia* papers, 12 × 10 inches, 2017

Figure 4 (right): *Funny Peculiar Funny Ha Ha*, letterpress printed on *Lettra* paper, 10 × 8 inches, 2017

Having made a puppet of Desdemona, I decided to make more of the characters for a video using stop-motion animation. Desdemona is still the only character that gets to speak. The video is about two minutes long and can be seen on YouTube. Because the characters come from a play, it seemed a natural extension to have them actually perform. And because of the animation, I decided I wanted a specific order for the prints and made folders for them using the same designations for the scenes in the animation: a prelude, acts one through five, and a coda.

After that I was kind of on a roll. I was going to go to Venice and wanted to read *The Merchant of Venice*. I was surprised to discover that the play was considered a comedy. That took me down a whole new rabbit hole of the Problem Comedies and led to my book, *Funny Peculiar Funny Ha Ha*, in 2017 (figure 3). I made an extended study of all of Shakespeare's comedies. Among other things, I was surprised to learn that the plays that end in one or more weddings are categorized as comedies, and the tragedies are the plays that end in one or more deaths. These designations were made at the time of the printing of the first folio, after Shakespeare's death. Some of the comedies individually are enjoyable but there is a sameness to many of the plots that caused me to mix them up in my head: so much mistaken identity, gender confusion, and various other contrivances while romping their way to a fifth-act wedding or two.

Even more problematic are the decidedly unfunny themes that are common in many of these same comedies: hypocrisy, sexual harassment, intolerance, sexism, misogyny, and anti-Semitism. I struggled for a long time to integrate all these ideas. I finally realized that what I needed to do was to address each aspect separately, thus a dos-à-dos book.

In *Funny Ha Ha Funny Peculiar*, each side of the dos-à-dos got its own focus and treatment. The characters are the same in both books. They were printed using the P22 Blox, a set of modular shapes that can be interchanged to create a range of body postures and gestures (figure 4). The P22 Blox allowed the presentation of the characters to be interchangeable with each other as well. *Funny Peculiar* is a drum leaf book and presents selected lines from five plays delivered by characters on a stage set. *Funny Ha Ha* is a slice book that allows the viewer to mix and match the costumes and genders of the characters in a variety of postures.



Figure 5: King Lear, assorted materials, approximately 9 inches tall, 2018

The book was funded in part by a grant from the College Book Art Association. Because it ended up having an expensive price point, I decided to make a cheaper companion consisting of a letterpress printed set of two paper dolls and a variety of costumes and genitalia options for all casting needs when enacting new Shakespeare comedies.

I began reading *King Lear* after the 2016 presidential election, in part because the play was often mentioned in connection with the newly elected president. I decided to make two separate projects. *King Lear: A Tragedy in Five Puppets* (figure 5) was more focused on the personality and behavior of the president while *The Tragedy of King Lear* (figure 6) was drawn more directly from the play.

The project, *King Lear: A Tragedy in Five Puppets*, started with the spontaneous making of a beanbag puppet as a tension reliever in the winter of 2016. The remaining four puppets were developed slowly in 2017 after my decision to make a separate project. The boxed set holds five different kinds of puppets, including a beanbag, a robot, a sock puppet, a jump-up, and a flapping mouth. They present various aspects of the behaviors and language of our forty-fifth president. Each puppet was made with the materials appropriate to its nature: three are constructed from Chancery paper, one is cloth, and the other is a repurposed sock. All are around eight to nine inches tall. The font used throughout is Arial Black with Apple Chancery for the opposite side of the jump-up tab, all printed letterpress on a Vandercook SP15. Chancery paper, a hemp and cotton blend, was made by Tim Barrett and a team of student papermakers at the University of Iowa Center for the Book.

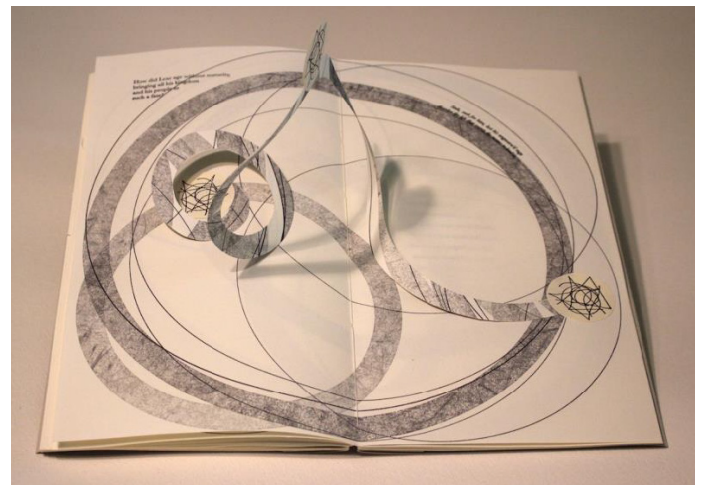
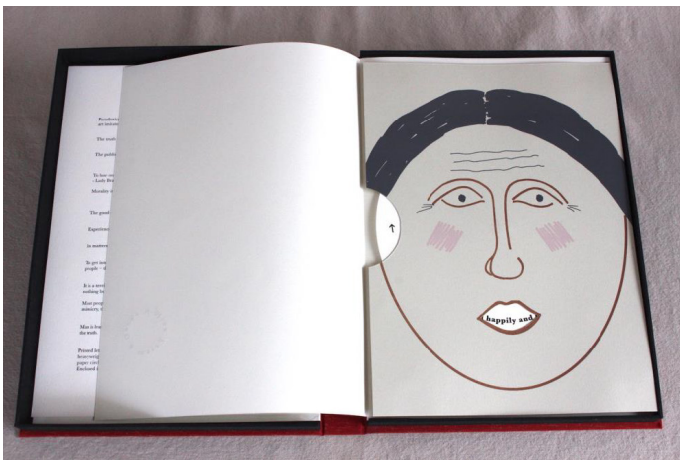


Figure 6: King Lear, letterpress printed on Arches Text wove paper, 12" x 6", 2019

I returned to Shakespeare's play. As I read and reread the play, I tried to focus only on the themes of the tragedy. There are many differences between this play and current events, but there are also some similarities. The vanity and folly of an aging man is a family tragedy. When that man is also the leader of a nation it becomes a tragedy for the whole country.

I represented the main characters of the play as abstract symbols printed on disks of pale yellow paper, and then attached them to the pages with thread and/or glue. Each page spread has a question or observation that came to mind as I read, resulting in a quote from one of the many main characters in the play followed by an interaction between the characters that reflects the substance of that quotation.

I always thought of King Lear as the sun around whom all the other characters orbit. Some of the characters have others orbiting around them too, such as Gloucester with his sons and the daughters with their husbands. The characters are not identified specifically, but context makes clear who is who. I did a lot of research and reading related to all the plays as I worked on them. The book was begun in 2016 and fully completed in early 2019 in an edition of twenty-five.



At this point, I felt I needed to give Shakespeare a rest and turned instead to another deceased collaborator in the public domain whom I have always been fond of: Oscar Wilde. I think I like working with plays because their performances and interpretations are meant to vary with each production. Oscar Wilde may not be quite as well-known as Shakespeare, but his social commentaries are very relevant to today's world. *Oscar Wilde: In Earnest and Out* (figure 7) is a set of five volvelles portraying five faces of Oscar Wilde backing five faces of characters from Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The inner wheels turn to allow the reading of lines from the play, as well as excerpts from Wilde's other writings, all emitted from the characters' mouths. Each volvelle is housed in a folder, and the set, along with an introductory panel and line citations, is enclosed in a clamshell box. This is a sample pairing of lines:

ALGERNON. The truth is rarely pure and never simple.¹
 OSCAR. The public has an insatiable curiosity to know everything except what is worth knowing.²



Just as I was finishing *Oscar*, the pandemic started. At the start of isolation, having no idea how long it would last, I started making a paper puppet each day as a comforting ritual that evoked a sense of companionship. I used trace monoprinting, a wide assortment of Japanese decorated papers, and fancy washi tapes. I was using off-cuts for the base paper and I had enough sheets for about two or three weeks; as the isolation continued, I started piecing the paper together until I was making the puppets limb by limb. At sixty days, as it became clear the pandemic would stretch on far longer than I originally expected, I stopped. I posted images of each piece to Instagram. Somewhere along the way, Shanna Leino, a wonderful toolmaker among other things, named my collection of paper puppets the *Solitude Squadron* (figure 8).

Figure 7 (top): *Oscar Wilde: In Earnest and Out*, letterpress printed on Rives BFK, 13 × 9 inches, 2020

Figure 8 (bottom): *Solitude Squadron*, assorted papers and washi tapes, 12 inches tall, 2020

At the start of the pandemic, I also discovered early on, to my horror, that I was too unsettled to read anything, including *Hamlet*, the source text for my intended next project. I had all this time and was just too anxious. Somewhat in desperation, appropriately on April 1, 2020, I started copying the play by hand onto a scroll of Unryu paper that had been knocking around my studio for at least fifteen years. That activity I kept to myself, partly because it seemed so nutty and partly because I didn't know how long I would keep doing it. I made it all the way to the end of the play sometime in July 2020. As I continued to copy out the play, I made paper puppets of eight of the main characters from *Hamlet*.

They eventually got their own costumes constructed from paper of wheat straw, sisal, and daylily fibers, as well as abaca paste papers all made by Andrea Peterson.

In the summer of 2021, I agreed to participate in the portfolio project for the Fine Press Book Association's *Parenthesis* deluxe publication. I decided Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, would have her own outing as a one-off print with one of her lines of dialogue from the play. I used up a stash of offcuts of Sakamoto paper. While printing the portfolio for FPPA I realized that there was more I wanted to do with this idea beyond my submission for that publication. I printed the remaining offcuts with her image and then developed a new text combining questions I wrote for her and lines from other characters of the play. The result was *Gertrude Has a Few Questions* (figure 9).

I based the text on the fact that many women have discovered as they get older that they become invisible. While it may be a relief to be spared certain unwanted attentions, it can also be disconcerting to discover that one has completely disappeared from general notice. Gertrude is the Queen of Denmark, yet she is more a part of the scenery, a pawn maneuvered by her husband and son rather than an active player. I gave her a turn at center stage and she wanted some answers.

For those unfamiliar with the play, *Hamlet*, I offer this very brief and very incomplete synopsis. Before the play opens, the King, who is Gertrude's first husband and Hamlet's father, is dead. Gertrude is remarried to Claudius, the King's brother. Hamlet proceeds to see his father's ghost, believes Claudius is responsible for the King's death, murders another character after mistaking him for Claudius, and both berates and belittles his mother, Gertrude. Claudius has his own series of deadly machinations throughout the play. By the end of Act Five, all the main players, except Horatio, Hamlet's buddy, are dead by stabbing, drowning, or poison.

The set of prints pairs five questions with lines from the play. For example, Horatio proclaims near the end of Act Five,

So you shall hear of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, of accidental judgements, casual slaughters, of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause, and in this upshot, purposes mistook fall'n on th' inventors heads.

And Gertrude responds,

Is this entire play an example of toxic masculinity?



Figure 9: *Gertrude Has a Few Questions*, letterpress printed on Sakamoto paper; 6.5 × 8.5 inches, 2020

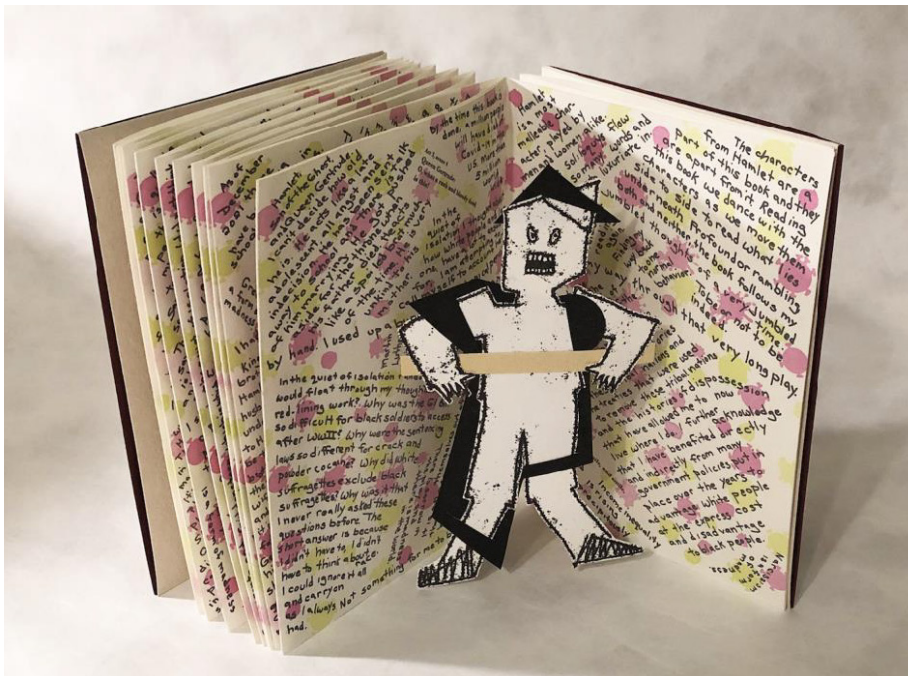


Figure 10: *Madness: Reading Hamlet in the Time of Covid-19 and Other Plagues*, letterpress printed on Arches Text Wove paper, 11 × 8 inches, 2022

reaction, so much death and isolation, and more. Underneath is a background pattern of my renderings of tears, drops of blood, Covid-19 particles, and bullet holes.

I have learned to not question my inclinations too much anymore. For whatever reason, I keep returning to making puppets in one way or another. I had several of the printed puppets left over from the edition of *Madness*, so I gave them new life as a performing troupe. The puppets have stick supports so they can be played with, performed with, or just admired as a gaggle of interesting costumed characters. I added Horatio, who is only quoted in *Madness*, but does not appear in the book. He is costumed differently from the other eight: whereas the others have their soft underbellies exposed, he is more covered up and possibly armored. After all, Horatio is also the only one left alive at the end of the play. A booklet with selected lines for each of the characters is included. The booklet, seven sets of puppets, and the support sticks are housed in a clamshell box. I made a short video, viewable on YouTube, combining the puppets from *Madness* with the lines from *Gertrude Has a Few Questions*, and featuring Russell Maret, printer; Eric Ensley, librarian; and Joe Baldrige, son-in-law, voicing the male characters, and myself providing the voice of Gertrude. All the *Madness* projects were funded in part by a grant from the College Book Art Association.

In closing I would like to revisit a time long ago at a gallery talk, when I was asked why I became an artist and I answered, only partly facetiously, that it was because I was better at it than my sister. I wish I had gone on to say that I didn't excel at a lot as a kid, and art class was the one place where I was good—not brilliant, but good. And that encouraged me to keep at it and to work hard, and I've been able to keep doing it all this time. ■

NOTES

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), 362.
2. *Ibid.*, 1189.