



Cover, I Am Here Vol. I, The Flowers in Her Room, 2021, Artist Book, Ed. 500

I.AM.HERE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANA ESTRADA

Interview by Sara Reiger

ANA ESTRADA DE ISOLBI

I am an artist and researcher based in Meanjin / Brisbane, Australia. My work and PhD research investigate how art practices can contribute to the creation of safe spaces for dialogue in aged care. I am interested in applying storytelling as a crucial tool for vocalising visions and ideas of aged care workers and residents. Over the years, my books featuring aged care stories have received recognition and awards, including the SLQ Siganto Fellowship, the AAANZ best book award, the APPA silver award, the Ian Turnbull Memorial Award, Libris Award, and a commendation from the Australian Photobook Award of the Year to mention a few.
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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sara Reiger is a book artist and art educator. She graduated from Iowa State University with a BFA in Drawing and Painting. She received her MFA in book arts from the University of Iowa Center for the Book in 2021 where she was the recipient of an Iowa Arts Fellowship. She currently resides in Iowa.

Could you tell me a little bit about your history and how you got into the book arts?

I'm Mexican, but I came to live in Brisbane about twelve years ago. My undergrad degree was in visual arts back in Mexico. I came to live here in Australia, and I started working. One of the first cultural shocks that I experienced was looking at a lot of older people living on their own or just being on their own in the street for their daily tasks.

Coming from Mexico, made me notice and wonder why they were on their own. What's happening with this demographic in this country? And I got very curious. I started volunteering for different organizations and visiting older people in their homes, and eventually started writing about their life stories.

I always liked books, but I was not really into artist books. My background is in documentary photography. The way I was presenting my stories was more formal, in gallery spaces, with the photograph and the caption or the photographs and the story. But eventually I ended up applying for an artist book fellowship. And the application that I put forward was *Memorandum*, an artist book about stories that I have been collecting.

That opened my experience to the world of artist books. I started researching. They have a huge collection in the State Library of Queensland. I started going into the library as part of my fellowship and just getting my hands on these amazing books. And that's how I started.

So you found the book arts organically through printmaking classes?

You could say that, yes. Tim Mosely, who is the head of Printmaking at Queensland College of Art, is very well recognized in the artist books field in Australia (and overseas). He runs a few artist book courses as part of the curriculum. He was my supervisor for my Masters, and now for my PhD.

But I think the real closeness I felt to the artist book came from the need for what I wanted to say in my work. I was working with, as I said, portraying older people. I was portraying an older woman. I had the camera on the tripod, and I was using a cord to photograph.

While we were talking, I am shooting many, many portraits in a row. And then when I was editing and selecting which portrait to pick, I noticed a movement, like a very slight movement in her face. And I thought, oh my God, that movement is her breathing. I could see her whole body, like going up and down a little bit. And I thought, oh, that movement, it's coming to life and I want to capture it. But I knew that it was difficult to capture using only still photography. I thought I could maybe create a series of portraits where I use a sequence of photographs. That is exactly when I knew that I needed to make a book. I made a few photo books before this that were almost like a 'coffee table-book', where you can see photos and captions and that's it. But then when I realized that the book could actually give me a little bit more to express something else, that's when I got really excited about the book.

The artist book is a perfect medium for me to actually show these small differences in gestures. That's how I came to the book. And that's exactly what I did for my grant: I took my photography off the wall and used the book format instead which allowed me to show movement.

Can you talk about how your work has evolved over time? From your thesis and commercial printing to work that has more evidence of the artist's hand?

For my thesis, I was very conscious about how I was using the book. Like what are the things that the book can give us that you cannot find in any other medium, like time and sequencing and layering. For example, the fact that when you make a hole, you are on one page, but you're also allowing the viewer to see a tiny bit of whatever is coming next became a device. And then cutouts became a part of my vocabulary.

I was experimenting in the studio, discovering all those devices, and it was really fun to just understand the language of the book.

After my thesis project, I got really obsessed with papermaking. I started thinking about paper as more than just a surface where you can put things and content. The paper itself can contain information. I moved into a space where I started experimenting with paper, which led to making paper from clothes.

I made a book with my ex's clothes that he left behind when he moved out (*I Cannot See You*, 2019). For me, it was the same "aha" moment I had with the book—the paper was a new discovery. It allowed me to say more things.

In *I Cannot See You*, the whole project was about absence and presence. I was talking about someone who was not here anymore, but I still had the clothes. I was trying to let the person go, but I was also keeping their clothes and then questioning: is he still here or not? And I think the cutouts worked really well for that because I was saying something through empty space.



*Zoom conversation between
Joan Nolan and Ana Estrada,
from I Am Here II, 2021*

With the paper, I was discovering I could grab something from the world and transform it, and then give it to the reader, and they take it with them; they are actually taking something with them that belonged to something (someone) else.

I think that transformation was really useful for me in that project because it was about grieving and it was about transforming and it was also about conveying my emotions through making. And that was the first project I did with paper.

I've been very slow with my practice since then because I started working in an aged care facility. I've been collecting stories and also receiving clothes, and then pulping these clothes, and then making paper. I've been working on my most current project with Tim Mosely and I still don't know where it's going yet.

You're collecting more clothes for paper for your current work?

I started my PhD about three or four years ago. I had the idea of using paper and exploring touch, and then continuing to tell stories of older people. I was thinking about how we could use touch to create connectedness between aged care residents and the community. That was the original idea. I started volunteering in a care facility, and then COVID hit, and they were like, no, you can't come in anymore.

That put my whole idea of touch in question, right? It's like, okay, now we're going through this massive crisis and we cannot touch each other. How can I still talk about touch in a more metaphorical way? As a result of COVID, I moved away from papermaking because I just couldn't go into the paper studio.

I also couldn't go into the care facility. I started meeting aged care residents online. They were in their rooms completely isolated, and I was now talking to them through the screen. At the beginning, I was completely against it. I thought it was going to be a failure. I thought, no way you could connect with someone through the screen. Like, no way. But eventually, it was fascinating.

I have talked to one resident, for example, for two years.



Every Tuesday morning, they would have the iPad in front of her and we would chat. We connected so well. To the point that she would offer me whatever she was eating. It was like, oh, do you want some cake?

Then I was recording the conversations and transcribing. With this project, it stopped being like a documentary project or just me recording oral histories. It was more about a relationship. I started being part of the work: it's like, this is also about me. It's about me building these relationships, and it's about me observing the world and capturing the stories and listening to someone. And it's about the whole process. Which was a huge change in my work. The writing changed—the tone changed completely. It became way more poetic.

I started using very similar physical strategies to what I had used with the book. I applied that to the writing itself. So there was a lot of repetition. There were places where you would read something and then you would read it again, and then that would take you to another part of the story.

Copies of *I Am Here* Vol. 1 at an aged care home, 2023

I spent about two years working on those two different books, *I Am Here, Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*. They were printed through the Visual Studies Workshop. I worked with Tate Shaw very closely, which was an amazing collaboration, even though we've never met in person. Everything was done through the screen.

Afterward, the idea was to deliver these books into the aged care homes and make people understand the stories behind the walls, right? My question was still how could we connect the aged care community to the outside community? And how could we connect people within the same aged care facility, the staff and the residents?

After publishing, walking in the facility, I have staff members stopping me, saying, "Oh my God, I can't believe, you know, Joan's story. Like, I've been caring for her for more than ten years, and I never knew that she was such a feminist." And I realized, oh my God, this is the power of storytelling. The staff were all so busy in their daily lives, and they might not have had the chance to sit down and listen to the stories of the people they care for, but art does that very well. Art connects us to people who can be close or on the other side of the world.

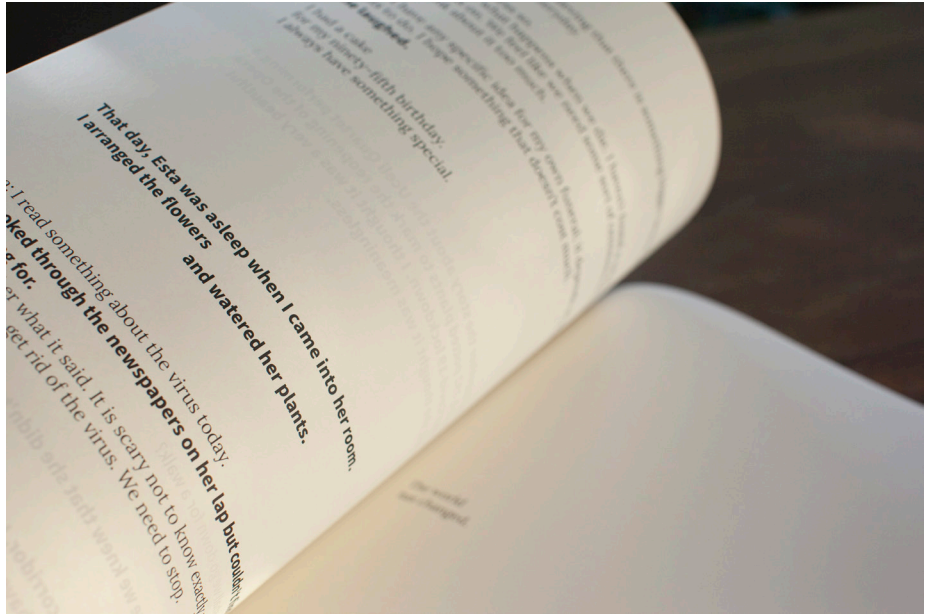
This organization that the care facility belongs to has many, many different facilities across the country. Somehow my publication was there on a table during a meeting and managers started reading. They called me, asking if I wanted to meet the state manager. I came into that meeting and I sat with her and we chatted and liked each other right away. I told her we need soft skills in this industry. And artists. I think sometimes we underappreciate the skills that creative people have because creative people have a very different way of moving in the world.

She offered me a job and it was a very, like, non-artistic job [laughs] and it was challenging.

I spent almost two years working in that facility, bringing creative solutions to problems that we had.

It's very easy to think that the artist book belongs to the artist book niche. That it's a small niche and that we make books for collections and for artists. What I found is that the medium is actually so approachable and so generous that anyone could actually get to the content.

Also, artists and what we do can actually make changes in other spaces as well, which was a nice thing to experience firsthand.



At the moment, I'm working on a new artist book project with residents in the facility. It won't just be me designing the book. It's going to be some sort of newsletter. The residents are writing their own stories. Each resident will have a little bit more input into how their story is portrayed physically. They're also photographing, we are involving volunteers, and it's going to be a community project.

I Am Here Vol. I, The Flowers in Her Room, 2021, Artist Book, Ed. 500

We formed a newsletter committee. For example, one resident is in charge of fiction. She actually started writing her biography, and then at some point she was like, "Oh no, I started lying. So it's not my biography anymore. Now it's fiction" [laughs]. She's writing a story about this girl who grew up on a farm and had plenty of dogs, and it's now a fictional short story.

Another guy is obsessed with birds. He's writing an article on birds. It's very interesting because they want to tell their own stories. I'm pretty much just facilitating the space now.

How often will that newsletter be published?

At the moment, it's in a strange space. I was working in the facility, and we were meeting every Wednesday to discuss details. Every time we met, it was a disaster. It was like, we want it to be short, we want it to be long. We decided we were going to publish every four months. But I'm not working there anymore. I gave it a three-week break. Now I have to go back and restart things.

I would like to apply for a grant so the publication can actually be completely independent from the organization.

It's interesting to consider an autobiography turning into fiction. In Esta's book, (I Was There, Vol. 1 and I Am Here Vol. 1), you wrote in your thesis that she had three different first memories. You couldn't figure out which was the real first memory, so you put them all in the book. But in a way, we fictionalize our memories every time we remember them [laughs].

That's true. I think we're really good at drafting our own narrative.

It's interesting. When you hear the same person talking about their memories, especially someone who has dementia. You see how well they know their story still. The way they tell the story can sound as if they are improvising, but it's like, no, no, they're using exactly the same words as when they've told the story before. We craft our own lives very similarly to how we craft our memories.

One thing you have talked about is the concept of the irrelevant but important details. As you work on this project as part of your PhD, are you talking to the residents about your thoughts and process?

No, I think work is very organic. I don't plan much, even when the work seems quite defined on everything. I don't plan much in terms of how the conversations go. With *I Was There*, I was just coming into their homes, sitting, drinking coffee, and we would just talk. Sometimes I would ask questions, but in the same way I would if talking with a friend who's telling me about their childhood. Not in a prescriptive way.

I got very lucky. With Esta, who was the subject of *I Was There* and *I Am Here*, we got really, really close. We met weekly for more than three years. We became family. There was no more like, oh, I'm an artist working on a project.

We were friends. We loved meeting. She was a very intelligent woman. She was an observer. She would notice all the nuances and I was fascinated by that. Every time she said something perceptive, I was trying to capture that to bring it into the work. There's this part in the book where she talks about this memory where she had breakfast for the first time in a hotel, which was in the middle of nowhere in Australia. She sat down and the waitress brought a plate of butter to her that had been formed into beautiful shapes. And she was fascinated by the butter.

And for me, listening to someone who's almost one hundred years old, talking about the beauty of the shapes in the butter that she saw when she was six, it's like, that's beautiful. It's easy to think that we are going to get to ninety and we're going to talk about our professions and all the big things we did. But it's not always the case. When we hear a memory like Esta's with the butter, we think, why would you remember?

You remember, because probably in that place you felt really alive. And she was very present, and it was very special and it stayed. Certain things can stay in our minds, because they were just amazing for our senses. With her story, there was this play. I moved from the big narrative to this irrelevant information that really shaped her life and her personality as well.

When she passed away from COVID, her family invited me to the funeral, and I sat at the front with her daughters, and it was a lovely celebration.

When her family were reading the books, they were laughing at all the irrelevant things, and they were like, "Oh yeah, of course my mom said that." Another thing that happened with Esta is that there was something very important in her story that her family was not aware of until I started making the books.

I actually had to talk to them. I said, “Your mom mentioned this and I don’t know if I should put it in the book.” And they were convinced that it had never happened in her life. We ended up meeting with Esta, and it became like a family topic and they resolved it. The book also allowed their family to go through this sort of healing process, which was really lovely.

That’s amazing. Going back to your current project and how you’ve moved into handmade paper, are you going to be using clothing or items from the residents for your books?

No, I think at the moment I’m working on a couple different things. One thing is the newsletter, and that will be made digitally and reproduced in somewhat low quality because we want to print as many as we can. The other thing is that I’ve been just making paper from the residents’ clothes. I can’t visualize yet what I’m going to do with it.

As far as publishing, do you think you will continue in a mix of more commercial publishing methods and handmade publishing methods? Or are you moving away from commercially publishing your work?

No, I don’t think I’m moving away from it. I think I don’t mind if it’s commercial or if it’s handmade. I’m not romanticizing my craft or my practice or anything. What matters to me is that I find the right medium for what I want to say. So in terms of giving agency to residents and giving them the tools for them to tell their own stories, it needs to be commercially printed because it is easier.

I think for my other project, it’s more about touch and it’s also about my relationship with the residents. It’s a bit more personal or political. I think that it makes sense that it’s handmade. And it makes sense that it’s only a few pieces because they’re very special and I’m not interested in having thousands of people looking at that book. The method depends on the needs of the story.

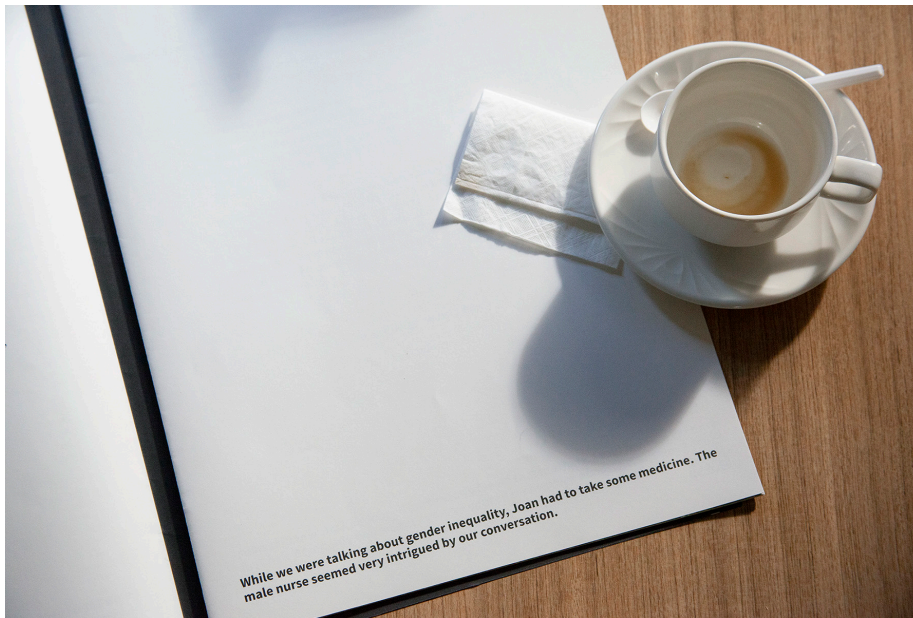
Can you speak to the questions of ethics that you bring up in your discussion about your work in your thesis?

The ethical issues that I have encountered while working have actually shaped the way I work a lot. From being in the facility every day, I see how difficult it is for people to move from their own home into a care facility and how difficult it is being isolated and institutionalized.

I feel that my responsibility as an artist is to share the tools with the residents. They can’t go into the studio and make paper. So do I “steal” things and go out, make my own work, and build my own career with the things that I took from a community? Or do I want to bring the tools into the community and enable them to tell their own stories?



I Am Here Vol. II, *The Tiny Little Things*, 2022, *Artist Book*, Ed. 500



I Am Here Vol. II, The Tiny Little Things,
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So that's the direction I'm heading more and more. The hard part is that you have to let go of some qualities of the work. And that's difficult. If you're very precious with your practice, then of course you cannot do this type of community work, because you lack many controls over the end result.

In your previous work, there was a strong element of the interconnectedness of image/photograph and text. How are you moving forward with imagery in these new works?

That's a hard one. I haven't been photographing. It's crazy how sometimes we move almost outside of our own space or something. And then we come back and

we're like, do I need a camera? Do I actually need to make images? And I think for maybe like a year, I thought I would never make photography again. At the moment, I'm actually visualizing and I still don't know if that's exactly where the project is going to go

I've been thinking of making a film. I would like to have very formal portraits with care residents where they are sitting, looking at the camera very still, just having a conversation about something. And I'm thinking that I would love, when we launch the newsletter, to have massive stacks of newsletters everywhere in a gallery space. Maybe a gallery space, but in the facility, in the home, and then having screens around.

I think the relationship between text and image is going to be in the actual physical space rather than playing in the book. More of an immersive or like immediate experience where you could be reading the stories and then also looking at the screen and seeing other stories or looking at someone looking at you.

That makes sense. I was thinking about how for I Was There, you're in someone's home drinking coffee, and everything you are seeing and experiencing gets translated or transformed. Sometimes into a pretty austere page, which isn't quite the same as the experience you or they were having.

Yes, and the new work is like the next step of that. All those questions, I try to approach them or resolve them in the next publication with Joan, who is one of the women who I was talking to every week through the screen. Every time we saw each other, the screen would open and she would say, "Oh, your face looks so lovely. You're so lovely. I love your smile." And then she would look at the window because she had a window next to her bed, and she would say something about the color of the paint in the house in front of hers. And then she would describe it to me because I couldn't see it.

She would say, "It's like a pale green, but then there's like this very pale pink on top of it, and the combination is just beautiful. I wonder what the painter was thinking." Every single time she would describe the color of the house, and there was one point when I

thought, there is no way I can translate this. There is no way I could ever, ever explain to someone how beautiful the experience was for me just to be sitting there so present with someone who is not with me physically.

And yet I get to hear this very poetic description of a house that is in front of a window. I tried many different things in the book. How could I translate this “thing?” And because it’s so abstract, that’s exactly the outcome of the work. I get to experience these amazing moments, and I need to learn different languages and tools for me to be able to translate them and to share them with an audience. And sometimes they don’t do justice to the real thing. ■