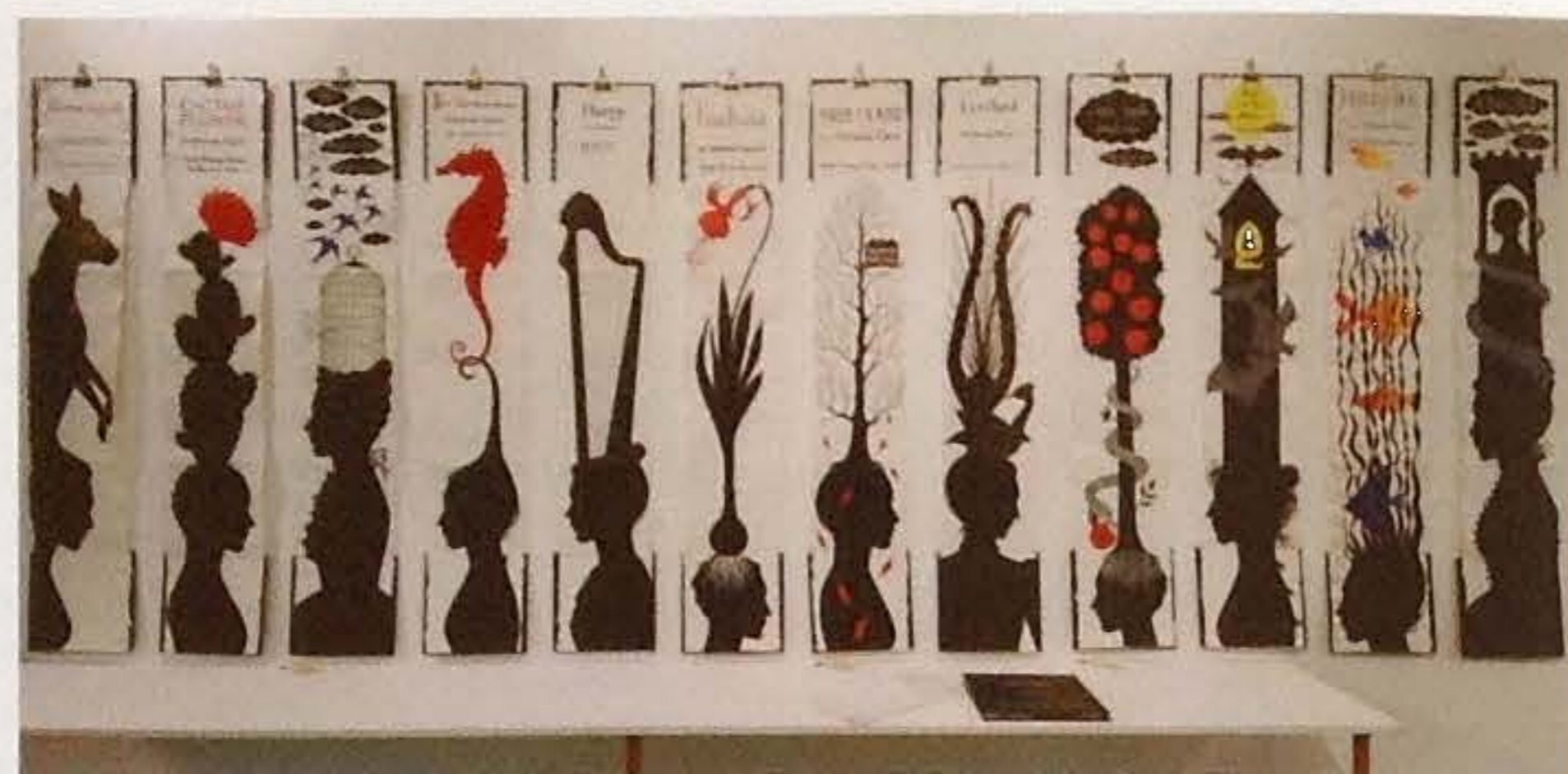




Deborah Klein in her Ballarat studio, September 2014, with lino blocks for the forthcoming artists' book. *The Moth Woman Vigilantes*. Photograph: Shane Jones. right: Deborah Klein, *Tall Tales*, 2013, unique artists' books, pigmented drawing ink and acrylic paint with cloth binding, 15.5 x 16.5 cm x 1 cm (closed), 80 x 15 cm (open). Installation view: Hand Held Gallery, Melbourne June 2013. Photograph: Tim Gresham.



## The Book Art of Deborah Klein

by Deborah Klein, a full-time artist who divides her time between Ballarat (in south-west Victoria) and Melbourne.

Books have always been central to my life. From the outset I was drawn not only to the tales and pictures within their covers but also their tactility and singular aesthetic qualities. Not too many relics survive from my early childhood, but I still have my handsome, well-thumbed copies of *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, *Pinnocchio* by Carlo Collodi, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll in a set of over-sized volumes, all of them exquisitely illustrated by an astonishingly versatile artist with the exotic and mysterious name, Maraja. Even now I love those stories, but it was equally Maraja's pictures that opened my eyes to the existence of a great wide world – indeed, worlds within worlds – outside the narrow confines of my own. They were also my introduction to visual art.

Over the ensuing years, the majority of my prints, drawings and paintings have been constructed within frameworks of thematically linked images, not unlike books without covers. My first artist book, *Tattooed Faces* (1996) evolved from a suite of linocuts made in partial fulfilment of a Master of Arts degree undertaken at Monash University during 1995-97. Euan Heng, who was my supervisor, recognized immediately the potential for extending the first of these, subsequently titled *Tattooed Face No. 1*, into a series and encouraged me to use a selection as the foundation for an artist book.

In common with the majority of my works made before and since, a narrative thread does not connect the tattooed faces. Rather, the diegesis is contained, layered and partially concealed within individual images. In this instance, the tattoos on each woman's face comprise a deceptively simple visual code that even when deciphered is open to multiple interpretations.

My second and third books also evolved directly from a specific body of work. In 2007 I was invited to be part of a group exhibition curated by fellow printmaker Jazmina Cininas. *The enchanted forest - new gothic storytellers* (2008). Specifically requested for the show was *Swarm* (2002) a multi-paneled painting – essentially a group of diptychs – in which back views of female heads were paired with butterflies, resulting in a vast flock of winged women. Warming increasingly to the exhibition's premise, I was keen to make additional work for the show. To begin, I revisited *Swarm* and intuitively started to research moths. Struck by their resemblance to masks, I made a series of paintings depicting inscrutable female faces partially concealed by living moths that had developed strategically placed eyeholes.

*The Enchanted Forest - new gothic storytellers* greatly influenced the future direction of my work. The *Moth Masks* linocuts (2009) that directly followed would later form the basis for the artist book *Women with Wings* (2010). Meanwhile, it was the exhibition's title that implanted in my mind the idea of writing stories suggested both by my works in the show and those produced in its wake. The first tales to emerge were *The Story of the Moth Masks*, *The Enchanted Hair Ornaments* and *Swarm*. More stories surfaced, almost fully formed. Some, including *The Girl in the Tower*, were feminist takes on traditional fairy tales. Before too long, I had a baker's dozen. Illustrated with a selection of my prints, paintings and drawings, they were combined in the small anthology *There was once... The collected fairy tales* (2009). It was commercially printed in an edition of 1000 and published by Moth Woman Press, which I founded in the same year.

After the Melbourne launch of *There was once...* in October 2009, I was recommended to

a gallery called Hand Held. Despite a central location at the top end of Bourke Street, it was somewhat tucked away on the second level of the cavernous Paramount Arcade. Hand Held was something of a Wunderkammer. Although diminutive, the space was remarkably adaptive to a variety of media, focusing widely on book and paper art, small sculpture, hand made jewellery, painting, installation and experimental work.

I was delighted that its Director Megan Herring was keen to stock *There was once...* More significantly, this marked the beginning of a creatively rich period, during which I would focus on book art with far greater consistency.

The zines at Hand Held Gallery had a distinctive aesthetic that had much in common with artist books, and I found myself increasingly drawn to them. A number were by local artists, including three whose work I already knew and admired, namely Paul Compton, Gracia Haby and Louise Jennison. Other zines were from interstate; some were imported from Europe (principally the UK) the US and Asia.

I began a modest zine collection that included some fine examples made by Megan herself. Before long, I was motivated to make some of my own, beginning with *A Short Book about Long Hair* (2009) and *Material Girls* (2010). Drawing from decades of accumulated personal mythology and iconography, I was able to create fresh narratives and eventually a completely new cast of characters: the Moth Woman Vigilantes. The MWV are direct descendents of the moth-masked women, but far more dark and dangerous. The first MWV zine was *The Moth Woman Vigilantes* (2011) closely followed by *The Moth Woman Vigilantes: a Menace to Society* (2011) *The Moth Woman Vigilantes Unmasked* (2012) and, most recently, *Republic of Mothstralia: Moth*

Deborah Klein's work can be viewed on her artist sites:

Website: [www.deborahklein.net/](http://www.deborahklein.net/)  
 Art blog: <http://deborahklein.blogspot.com/>  
 Book blog: <http://mothwomanpress.blogspot.com/>

Deborah Klein, *Tattooed Faces*, 1996, artists' book bound by George Matoulas, cloth cover with linocuts, 54 x 36 x 1.5 cm, edition: 4. Photograph: Tim Gresham.



*Woman Vigilantes: Coins of the Realm* (2014). As even the zines' titles suggest, the Vigilantes are becoming a force to be reckoned with.

During my association with Hand Held Gallery Megan curated me into several group exhibitions, notably *Vignette Virrine* (2012) for which I created a collection of miniature silhouette paintings on canvas encased in a small display box. After the show I continued to develop the painted silhouettes. Several subsequently served as studies for the thirteen one-of-a-kind artist books that were exhibited in the solo show *Tall Tales* in June 2013. Made with Hand Held's space specifically in mind, the concertina books unfold vertically, revealing pictorial narratives that are both literally and figuratively tall. The books are cloth bound; the illustrations and hand lettering are made with ink and acrylic paint on handmade Khadi paper.

Once described by Orson Welles as a ribbon of dreams, cinema has had an enduring influence on the approach to narrative in much of my work, particularly silent movies, which speak a language that is predominantly visual. The stop-motion silhouettes of animation

pioneer Lotte Reiniger (1899-1981) were prime motivators for the shadow women in the miniatures and artist books. Reiniger's short fairy tale films, which I saw as a child in the days of black and white television, were the first silhouettes I ever saw, and I never forgot them. But it was a screening in 2010 at Melbourne's Astor Theatre of her feature-length animation *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1928) that fully rekindled my interest in silhouettes.

Sadly, my first solo exhibition at Hand Held was also its last. It closed in July 2013. Amongst Melbourne's galleries, the space was entirely unique. Megan Herring offered emerging and established artists opportunities to experiment, play and gain invaluable experience in an environment that was stimulating, encouraging and supportive. Its closure left a gap that has yet to be filled.

My time with Hand Held provided solid groundwork for the next project, *Wonder Room*, a five-person exhibition that opened at Maroondah Art Gallery in late 2013. Its point of departure was the Wunderkammer, so there was considerable scope to present a truly

diverse collection of work. Among my exhibits was a selection of the *Tall Tales*, along with six additional vertical concertina books created especially for the show.

The artist book *Homo-insecta* (2013) was the final work I made for *Wonder Room*. An "unnatural history portfolio" of hand-coloured linocuts with inkjet printed text, it evolved primarily from the remarkable work *Metamorphosis of the Insects of Surinam* (1705) by naturalist, entomologist and scientific illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717).

Although from different families, the hybrids in *Homo-insecta* are from the same genus as the mysterious moth-masked women and are even tenuously connected to the morally ambiguous Moth Woman Vigilantes, the newest link in the evolutionary chain.

The Vigilantes continue to assert their presence. They will feature in a forthcoming artist book, a long-term project that is expected to come to fruition in 2015. Whatever else the future holds for my work, I have no doubt that artist books will be a part of it. •



left: Book art by Deborah Klein, Hand Held Gallery, Melbourne, 2013. Photograph: Tim Gresham. right: Deborah Klein, *Homo-insecta: An unnatural history portfolio*, 2013, artists' book, cardboard portfolio with cloth and ribbon, hand coloured linocuts and inkjet printed texts, 33 x 24 x 1.5 cm (closed), edition: 10. Photograph: Tim Gresham.

