

R|A|M

Variations on a Theme: Artists' Books at RAM

October 11, 2023 – January 13, 2024

As part of RAM's Twentieth Anniversary celebrations in 2023 and acknowledging a specialty focus of the institution, this exhibition surveys artists' books from the collection.

Artists' books—a category of making in its own right—can encompass aspects of printmaking, papermaking, illustration, design, and more. An artist can directly produce the book or work with a team that implements an idea—or a combination of both. Artists' books as a whole consider the idea of the book, as well as its physical format, as a starting point for aesthetic and conceptual investigations. Designs can vary widely and include pieces that question the framework, use, or definition of a book; that include multiple components; or that are not functional in any traditional sense of the word.

RAM has over 550 artists' books in its holdings—a collection that may be one of the largest of its kind in a Midwestern art museum. By their nature, artists' books bridge the focal points of the museum's collection: craft and graphics. Books, while printed in one form or another and editioned, are also three-dimensional objects that show evidence of the artist's hand—effectively closing the gap between prints and three-dimensional craft. In addition, many traditional craft techniques like papermaking and binding are used to create these pieces, relating these graphic works to bookmaking traditions.

Biographies and statements from selected featured artists

Book artist **Susan E. King** (1947–) is best known for artists' books which combine form and content in innovative ways. In 1971, King received her BA in studio art from the University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, focusing on ceramics. In 1973, she earned her MA in art from New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico. King began making artists' books in 1975 while working at the Women's Graphic Center of the Los Angeles Feminist Studio Workshop, where she worked alongside artists such as Judy Chicago. In 1976, she went on to found Paradise Press in Santa Monica, California, where she designed and printed a variety of artists' books for herself and others. King has received artist-in-residence grants from A Room of Her Own Foundation, Nexus Press, the Visual Studies Workshop, and Women's Studio Workshop, among others. She has also been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Grant for her work in collaboration with contemporary multi-disciplinary artists Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and Bettye Saar. RAM currently has four of King's artists' books in the collection.

Explore: <https://susankingart.work>



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Often employing satire, **Barbara Kruger** (1945–) uses slick, advertising-like imagery and bold text to comment on contemporary society. Born in Newark, New Jersey, Kruger left academic studies to work as a graphic designer, picture editor, and an art director at various magazines including *House and Garden* and *Aperture*. Her earliest artworks were large-scale fiber pieces. While she gained some recognition for her fiber work, she looked for a more direct way to address her concerns about greater cultural issues. Utilizing images and text, Kruger developed a somewhat confrontational aesthetic employing black and white photography and streamlined lettering. She uses pronouns like “your” and “I” to implicate the viewer. Blurring the boundaries between art and commerce, many of her works have been translated into marketable products such as bags, t-shirts, mugs, and matchbooks, like those in RAM’s collection. Kruger is currently represented in RAM’s collection by one work.

Amos Paul Kennedy Jr. (1948–) began his career working in computer programming after earning a BS in mathematics from Grambling State University, Grambling, Louisiana, in 1972. After a visit to Colonial Williamsburg in 1989, where he saw a printing press demonstration, Kennedy decided to give up his systems analyst job of 18 years in order to learn printmaking. Kennedy took letterpress classes at Artists Book Works in Chicago, IL where he began to make text-based prints of poems and quotations. Starting in 1993, Kennedy taught a series of book art workshops for the Victory in Peace program, a Racine-based initiative focused on providing resources and education for children with difficult home lives. In 1997, Kennedy earned an MFA from the University of Wisconsin–Madison where he worked under the direction of Walter Hamady. In 2010, Kennedy completed an artist residency at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and in 2015, he was selected as a United States Artists Glasgow Fellow in for his work in the craft field. RAM currently has 14 artists’ books involving Kennedy in the collection, 11 of which were produced in collaboration with Victory in Peace program participants.

Running a letterpress poster shop, Kennedy creates posters, books, and other printed materials. He is not afraid to provoke, and often engages in discussions of identity, race, and perception—regularly referencing racially charged images or slogans. Printing texts of all types appeals to Kennedy as a way to communicate with a larger audience. Of it, he states: *“I had studied calligraphy for a very long time, about 10 years, but I wasn’t good at it. The letterpress appealed to me because I was attracted to books. I love letters; I love books. It was a way of working with letters, making books, and also the fact that you can make multiple copies.”*

Explore:



<https://www.instagram.com/kennedyprints>

Read:



<https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2020/12/letterpress-artist-amos-paul-kennedy-jr-s-rosa-parks-series>

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Keiko Hara was born in Korea in 1942 and was raised in both Japan and China. She began her college education in Japan, ultimately receiving her BFA in painting from Mississippi State University for Women in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1974. From there, she pursued her graduate degree at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee where she earned her MA in printmaking. She also earned an MFA in printmaking at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Hara is a multidisciplinary artist particularly known for her printmaking proficiency. Considered an authority on *mokuhanga*, or Japanese woodblock printing, Hara primarily creates prints with abstract compositions comprised of vibrant and intense colors. Her pieces symbolize the tactility of objects, their connection to nature, and how people perceive, feel, and conceive the universe. Hara has had solo exhibitions at a multitude of institutions, including the Art Collective, Walla Walla, Washington; Sammamish City Hall Gallery, Sammamish, Washington; and Foundry Vineyards Gallery, Walla Walla, Washington. She has received numerous honors such as artist-in-residence at the Pilchuck Glass Summer Program, in Stanwood, Washington; and a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. Hara is an archive artist at RAM with over 30 works in the permanent collection, including prints, paintings, and artists' books.

Explore: <https://www.keikohara.com>



Ruth Laxson (1924 – 2019) studied printmaking, drawing, and painting at the Atlanta College of Art intermittently from 1958-65 before changing her artistic focus to artists' books in the 1980s. In 1980, Laxson received a National Endowment for the Arts Exhibition Grant. She founded her personal press, Press 63+, in 1987 at the age of 63. She also continued to print books through Nexus Press, Atlanta, Georgia, where she was a resident artist in 2000. Laxson had two retrospectives of her work—one in 2008 at the Marcia Wood Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia, and one in 2013 at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia in Atlanta. Laxson's work was often inspired by the theme of "communication" and explored the ways in which meaning was made and transmitted through words, images, and numbers. Laxson is currently represented at RAM by one artists' book.

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Born in Racine, **Pleschette Robinson** (1980–) was 11 years old when she created her first book, *Harriet Tubman: A Story by Pleschette Robinson*. Robinson wrote, designed, and printed this book under the supervision of Amos Paul Kennedy Jr. as part of the Victory in Peace program, an organization for youth with difficult home lives that was created by Taylor Home and sponsored in part by RAM's Wustum Museum. While involved in this program, Robinson worked directly with Wustum's associate curator, Caren Heft, to write and produce an entire series of five books. One of these books, titled *Angels*, was featured as part of the White House's 1993 Christmas tree display in Washington DC. Robinson graduated from Horlick High School in 2000 and was recruited to play basketball at Northwest Shoals Community College in Phil Campbell, Alabama. In 2000, she was recognized by the Racine YWCA as the recipient of their annual Young Women of Tomorrow, Young Woman of Courage award. RAM has copies of four of the five books that Robinson produced during her time in the Victory in Peace program.

"I have found that the visual arts have long been a significant part of Latino culture, providing a visible means of communicating social consciousness and reawakened self-esteem. A considerable amount of my time has been spent in developing a "bivisual" means of communicating to both cultures through my artwork. The works are hybrids; they combine elements of both mainstream America and exotic Hispania. Through these works, I attempt to reach out to my Latino past in a concerted effort to expand and enrich my mainstream identity. Where my enculturated mainstream upbringing has denied my Latino ancestry, my artwork creates an acculturated balance between these two worlds."
—Adrian R. Tió

Printmaker and book artist **Adrian R. Tió** (1951–) was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Puerto Rican emigrant parents. In many of his prints and books, Tió includes bilingual text in Spanish and English as a way to connect to his heritage and make them accessible to a larger audience. He received his BA in fine arts from Temple University, Temple, Texas (1974), completed post-baccalaureate study at the Tyler School of Art, Rome, Italy (1975–76), and earned his MFA from the University of Cincinnati, Ohio (1979). From 2007 until his retirement in 2021, Tió served as a professor of fine arts and the dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Tió's works are held in a number of private collections, including: Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, Chicago, Illinois; The White House, Washington, DC; Mexican Consulate Office, Chicago, Illinois; Ohio Arts Council, Columbus, Ohio; and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC. RAM currently has one work by Tió in the permanent collection.

Explore: <https://www.adrianrtio.com/about.html>





Artists of Color at RAM

RAM is committed to supporting diverse voices—whether that diversity reflects race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, social standing, or world perspective. In this moment in time, it is critical that spotlights are placed on voices that have been historically underrepresented, and at RAM that begins with women and artists of color. Artists of color are identified in this context as non-white and non-European in heritage. This simplification—which is arguably a flawed starting point—does not account for the nuances and variations of society. It is a beginning—a way to direct those who want to educate themselves about what is possible when new perspectives are discovered. Modifications to this approach are expected as RAM learns and grows. Further, as an educational institution rooted in the humanities and using art as a catalyst, RAM wants to encourage inquiry and exploration about the world in which we live. RAM hopes spotlighting artists of color spurs further engagement with these artists and their ideas. The following is a list of artists of color whose works are included in this exhibition. This effort is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work.

Chung Hoon Baik, Jim Escalante, Keiko Hara, Amos Paul Kennedy Jr., Pleschette Robinson, Liz Rodriguez, and Adrian R. Tió



Women Artists at RAM

RAM acknowledges the efforts of self-identifying women in the art world consistently and sincerely at all times. The museum highlights how women are inextricably woven—and often the foundation—of creative endeavors and discourse. By current count, 41% of the artists in RAM's collection are women. This percentage—which is consistently increasing—is already substantially greater than the ratios calculated at other organizations with permanent collections and active exhibition programs. At RAM, work made by different genders is considered for inclusion in the museum's holdings on equal terms. And notably, because RAM relies on gifts of artwork to build the collection, this policy has been reinforced by open-minded donors who have collected, and then donated, quality work regardless of the gender of the artist. The following is a list of women whose works are included in this exhibition. This effort—similar to efforts to highlight artists of color at RAM—is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work.

Kathleen Amt, Keiko Hara, Susan E. King, Barbara Kruger, Ruth Laxson, Ruth Lingen, Eva Mantell, Beverly Nichols, JoAnna Poehlmann, Pleschette Robinson, Liz Rodriguez, and Erica Van Horn