

# Working in Three Dimensions

SPENCER W. STUART interviews film director James Kennard on his feature-length documentary, *The Book Makers*.

BASED IN LOS ANGELES, James Kennard is the 31-year-old son of acclaimed director and producer David Kennard, whose credits include work on *Cosmos* (1980) with Carl Sagan, *The Heart of Healing* (1993) with Jane Seymour; and *2001: HAL's Legacy* (2001) with Arthur C. Clarke. Since graduating from Oxford in 2010, the younger Kennard has been busy developing his own reputation, both within his father's company, InCA Productions, and independently. This year, he released his first feature-length work, *The Book Makers* ([www.thebookmakersfilm.com](http://www.thebookmakersfilm.com)), which surveys the many fine press book artists active today in and around the San Francisco Bay Area as well as a few international participants in the annual CODEx International Book Fair and Symposium.

Alcuin Society vice-chair Spencer W.

Stuart recently took time to interview James Kennard about the film, the future of book arts and how his own ideas of the book have changed during the course of the project.

**Spencer W. Stuart:** In 2014, you directed, shot and edited a short documentary, *Arion Press: Creating the 100th*, which follows letterpress printer and publisher Andrew Hoyem's creation of a deluxe edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Now, for your feature-length directorial debut, you are back with the book arts. Walk us through your interest in it. How did it start and what continues to draw you to it?

**James Kennard:** I've always been quite bookish and I have my own little collection of favourite books. Studying Modern History at Oxford I also spent a lot of time in libraries, being lent access to original manuscripts that you hardly feel you should be allowed to touch. So, the smell and mystery of books was pretty well instilled early on.

The Arion Press short film came up a few years into working full time at InCA Films—the production company founded by my father, David Kennard. We had just had a



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*The Book Makers* is James Kennard's feature film directorial debut. (All photos courtesy of InCA Productions)



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*Above: Award-winning children's book author and illustrator Christian Robinson believes strongly in the importance of representation in the stories he depicts and bringing a sense of play in the process of creation. Bottom: Robinson at work on his story-book another in his Sacramento studio.*

run of producing documentaries about crafts, including the 'A Year in . . .' series of wine region documentaries, and work with the San Francisco Symphony in *Keeping Score* (2004–2011).

I had already got to know the featured book artist Mark Sarigianis socially while he was apprenticing at Arion and happened to live a couple blocks away from the press. So, I dropped by. After seeing the incredible equipment and artistic knowledge that was being preserved there, I was convinced this would be amazing to film.

The executive producers of *The Book Makers*, Nion McEvoy and Leslie Berriman, were on the board of Arion at the time and helped raise the money to make the short. Everyone went away happy with the result, and I went off freelancing. But we all felt there was a lot more to explore, so about a year later we reconvened to talk about a feature-length film about book making in the 21st century. There began the next few years of research and discovery.

**SWS:** *The Book Makers* provides a broad introduction to several practitioners of the book arts. Who were some of your early introductions? How did you go about mapping the landscape of the crafts and meeting these various figures?

**JK:** I did a lot of research developing the pitch idea, but our real introduction started after a morning meeting with my father once we had the pre-production go-ahead. We decided to cold-call the eminent Peter Koch and within an hour we were having lunch with him and his team at their Berkeley Studio. He gave us a long list of people he thought were doing interesting work, so half the research was done for me.

Then began a period of contacting people and explaining what we were trying to do. Thankfully, I've always found artists to be so accommodating when you're genuinely interested in their work. They also get the whole aesthetic aspect and are very understanding when you want to stick a bunch of film equipment in their studio.



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*Above: Russell Maret, a highly regarded book artist and master of traditional printing technologies, shares the process behind his 50th book with students attending the CODEX Book Fair in the San Francisco Bay Area. Below: Maret makes books that transform the text, elevating a trade into an art.*



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*The legendary CODEX Book Fair in the San Francisco Bay Area attracts people from all over the world who make, collect, or just love books.*

I feel obliged to say I met a lot of people I wish I could have included—but for much of the project’s life the book arts was only intended to be about a third of the film. I’ll name Martha Hellion and Patricia Lagarde in Mexico as two people I wish I could have filmed with. Also several artists in Asia, but we had to keep on budget.

**SWS:** Books are all about feel. What were some techniques you employed to convey the tactile nature of the books as well as the process of making them?

**JK:** Film is lighting and movement! One worry I had was that the movie might feel a bit static and claustrophobic—trapped in the studios and offices where books are largely made. I’m not a fan of documentaries that only alternate between talking heads and still shots.

I talked with our amazing cinematographer and colourist Jamie LeJeune about adding as much camera movement and dramatic lighting as we could get away with on the shoot day, so that the books felt three-dimensional. Jamie and I agreed to never worry too much



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*Left: At the Internet Archive, 70 people scan daily as part of a goal to give everyone in the world access to all books. Right: Computer engineer and visionary internet activist Brewster Kahle founded the Internet Archive, a foundation that continues to digitise all the world’s books created in human history.*





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The Book Makers taps into the tangible connection humans have to physical books even in a digital world.



about the existing lighting, only what would convey the feeling of the artist's work. Audiences hopefully shouldn't consciously notice it, but Mark Sarigianis' studio is lit completely differently each time we visit.

Also, close-ups work great for conveying the texture of materials, and of course the tools make a lot of good sounds, helped in the film by our sound designer Mark Escott. We cannot yet convey the smells.



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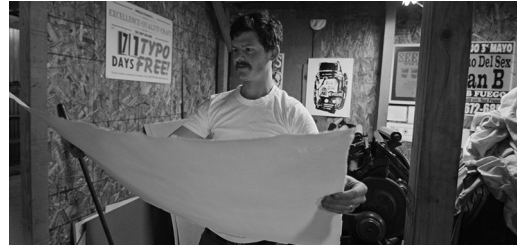
Top: Fine press printer Peter Koch considers books spiritual objects. Bottom: Koch's *Liber Ignis*, a 30-pound book made entirely of lead, demonstrates the concept that the story is the book.

**SWS:** Like *Arion Press*, you directed, shot and edited *The Book Makers*. Through the course of interviewing, what were some directions that surprised you?

**JK:** I was genuinely surprised by the fundamental variety of ways people were making books and why they were doing it. The film would have become terribly repetitive if everyone was just doing fine letterpress. Veronika Schäpers has her strange UV light method shown in the film, but even Mark Sarigianis who's making a very traditional book is programming his old machines via software communally developed by Monotype enthusiasts.

**SWS:** From making the film, are there any lines of thought you'd like to pursue, further relating to the book arts?

**JK:** I would like to follow on more about how people are integrating the digital world into the book. At the time of filming I looked into a lot of explorations in that field, which were interesting, but I didn't feel it had quite crystallised into something compelling. Most digital creations don't yet lend themselves to filming. You end up watching a screen portraying a screen—for instance, there was a piece that was cut showing Karen Bleitz's kids using interactive e-books. But I think we're on the cusp of some technologies, especially relating to augmented reality, that can make the digital arts tactile and real enough to watch outside of using the app itself.



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*Top: In *The Book Makers* viewers follow the 621-day process of an independent press printing of a deluxe edition of Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye*. Middle: Mark Sarigianis sets out to print a limited run of *Ham on Rye* on his own with a specific paper, process, and pure persistence. Bottom: Sarigianis is seen in the film working at his fine press *The Prototype Press*, based in West Oakland at the time of filming.*



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*Historian Abby Smith Rumsey says in the 21st century, books can be looked at as if totally reborn and reinvented.*





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*Author Daniel Handler (aka Lemony Snicket) talks about the hypnotic experience of time with a book.*



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*Author and McSweeney's founder Dave Eggers believes books get into our bones in a way that almost nothing else can.*



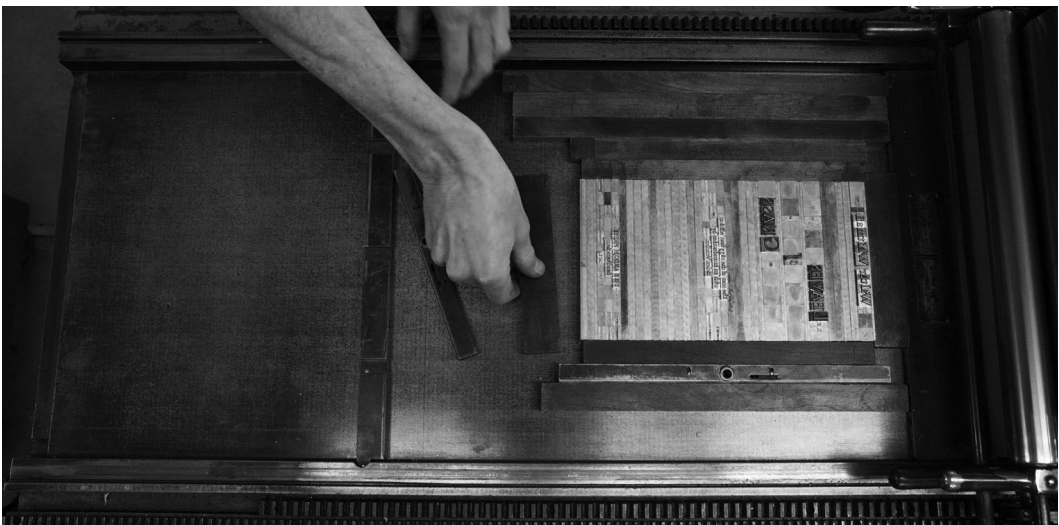
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*Typographic artist Sam Winston upends traditional linear narratives with his visually striking books using digital ideas in the physical page.*



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*A widely respected force in the bookmaking world, Veronika Shäpers emphasises materiality in her work, an affinity she developed in the time she has spent in Japan.*



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*Type setting Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. The Book Makers reveals how centuries-old techniques are still being practiced in the digital age.*



*Veteran book artist Julie Chen emphasises the theatricality of books in radically playing with the form they can take, as in her Chrysalis.*



*During the annual Bay Area Book Festival in Berkeley, the Lacuna art installation offers free books to the public.*



*Coloured goat skins for book covers. At the CODEX Book Fair, suppliers, authors, collectors, librarians, and bibliophiles gather in the name of books.*

**SWS:** As an observer, what are your thoughts on the future of the book arts?

**JK:** It's a huge unknown. On the one hand, I think the increase in communication will keep these arts alive and accelerate everyone's creativity in using them. On the other hand, it's clearly becoming even harder over time to subsist in the narrow periphery of people who will buy this stuff, as I see among my artist friends. I'm hoping the institutions that collect and underwrite the whole endeavour will carry on supporting it.

**SWS:** As a filmmaker with an appreciation for fine printing, have your own reading/collecting habits changed over the course of making this film?

**JK:** Ironically, while making this film over the last few years, two of my favourite book experiences I think work better as e-books. One is Charles Stross's *Accelerando* (2005), a sci-fi novel where I kept looking up the footnotes. The electronic format made this easier than the print version. The other is an autobiography by Adam Buxton that felt more native as a chatty audiobook, *Ramble Book* (2020). So I'm agnostic.

I think it was Peter Koch who said that glancing at a stranger's shelf tells you whether or not you're in friendly territory. Mine will only tell you a certain amount, but it's still sound advice.

~ Spencer W. Stuart is vice-chair of the Alcuin Society, drummer, and collections management specialist based in Vancouver, British Columbia.