

Even Before You Left the Farm, 1997.
Laser prints in vintage cardboard mounts.
Open size 8½ by 30 by 9½ inches.

KAREN HANMER

Slicing off the spine of a book, photographing its pages, and wrapping the resulting stack of paper in the film negative is an odd sort of custom binding. But then again, it depends on the book. When it is Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, the mutilation makes sense: His polemic condemns (among other things) the chopping up of books used to make microfilm copies. Karen Hanmer's take on Baker's book is smart and witty, and its intelligence delights while evoking discomfort because of the violence done to the book.

When she talks about the book, however, Hanmer evinces mild dissatisfaction. "Some of my work is clever," she says. "*Double Fold* is clever—but my best work is poetic." While she enjoys making artistic interpretations of published volumes, the poetic works she is speaking of are the series of handmade books that incorporate texts and images from her family history.

Hanmer originally aspired to be a fine-art photographer, and her passion for photography is evident in most of her books. Rather than taking her own pictures, she most often uses family snapshots and found photographs. She drifted into the book arts because she was "interested in narrative, and one photograph on the wall doesn't do that. Not even a series of photographs can.

"I really like creating an experience for the viewer—the size of the page, how long it is, how it feels, if gloves should be worn or not, and whether there's a piece of furniture to sit on," she says. Until recently, Hanmer had exhibited mostly in galleries, where touching the art is typically forbidden, rather than in special-collections libraries, where interaction is expected. In art galleries, she provides chairs and other clues that the viewer is allowed to handle the book. She is very focused

on the experience of the book. "You can get a pacing with your materials that you can't get with a photograph," she says.

She manages to bring emotion and warmth to modern book structures, like the flag book, by marrying that format with words and pictures that are enhanced by the structure. For example, when *Letter Home (III)* is fully opened, the individual flag pieces fold together to display a photograph of the artist's mother and her nine siblings. The image is disjointed, and many of Hanmer's aunts and uncles appear more than once, conveying the sense of a large family while suggesting its fragmentation and the individuality of its members. On the back of the flags is a letter Hanmer's mother wrote home to a sister still living in the farming community where they had grown up. The text, printed in sections, again symbolizes both separation and family ties.

Many of Hanmer's books explore her family's agricultural roots, because that was a part of her family history that she didn't see often in her youth. "I am very curious about my mother, who died when I was ten," she says. "I have tried to work it out through these books. The family thinks she was very glamorous, going off to Washington, D.C., and Europe with my father, who was a naval officer." Hanmer describes her mother's note from Naples, Italy, reprinted in *Letter Home (III)*, as written "like a young person going on a spring-break trip. There's a matter-of-factness about it that's kind of funny." At the end of the first and only surviving page, Hanmer's mother—who worked hard to leave her rural upbringing behind—comments about Italian farming techniques and expresses her amazement that they still used oxen to plow fields. Hanmer conveys these conflicting visions of her mother by using a glamorous photo of her mother and her Naples apartment building on the back of the book,



Front and back of *Letter Home (III)*, 2004.
Pigment inkjet prints. Size fully open, 8 by 19 by 3 inches.

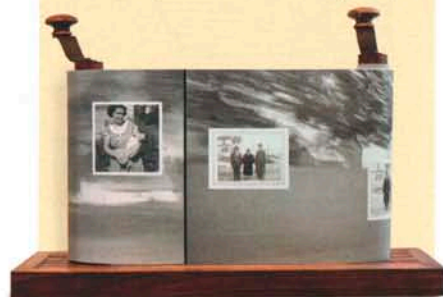
COLOPHON



Ann Black, 1999
The story of a small-town schoolteacher and her philandering boyfriend.



Bequest, 2001
The history of an immigrant farming family.



Homestead, 2001
Milestones in the history of a large farming family. Scroll 240 inches long.



Succession, 2002
The history of a large immigrant farming family over a sixty-year span.



Big River, 2004
Ball-bearing game inspired by a Johnny Cash song.

KAREN HANMER
709 ROSDALE ROAD
CHICAGO, IL 60025
WEB: WWW.KARENHANMER.COM
E-MAIL: KAREN@KARENHANMER.COM

relatives. In the 1930s, the young Miss Black had a serious boyfriend. "She cooked and cleaned for him," Hanmer says, "but it turned out he had another lover. The story eventually came out, and Ann Black disappeared," says Hanmer. "She left town and didn't come back to teach school the next year. I often wonder what happened to her." The book incorporates pictures of Ann Black, along with unidentified found photographs that convey the arc of the story, if not its exact participants.

Most of Hanmer's books are limited to twenty copies. Creating an edition of a book is similar in some respects to printing twenty photographs, but Hanmer likes books better than her original medium: "I wanted to do something that I would feel more personally connected to. With photography, you press a button and a mechanical process happens. The only way to have a personal connection is to put your hands in a lot of toxic chemicals." Books require careful, painstaking work, and an attention to details and materials that Hanmer enjoys. "Instead of being one among millions of photographers," she says, "I'm one of thousands of book artists." ■

◆ Scott Brown is the editor of *Fine Books & Collections*.

while placing a group photograph taken on the farm on the other side.

After her mother died, Hanmer didn't see that side of the family very often. She says, "I would visit the farm in the summer when I was growing up. During the month of August, when I was in grade school, we would go back to Minnesota," until her mother died. "When I was old enough to have a summer job, I did that instead. If my mother had been alive, I think we would have kept going."

Another work that explores her mother's life is *Even Before You Left the Farm*, an interpretation of a flag book that uses vintage photo mounts and frames attached to an accordion backbone. The photos and the text explore a woman's life from her rural girlhood to her suburban adulthood. Here again, the cleverness of the design only enhances the emotional power of the black-and-white photographs by reinforcing their distance from the present.

In *Ann Black*, Hanmer uses a letter from her husband's aunt to tell a story from another small town. It also suggests themes of personal reinvention, a recurring idea in Hanmer's books. The letter tells the story of Ann Black, a schoolteacher in Crosby, North Dakota, who was friends with one of Hanmer's husband's