




PHOTO COURTESY OF RACHEL MELIS

Closeup: Rachel Melis

Rachel Melis is an Associate Professor of Art at the [College of Saint Benedict & Saint John's University](#) in central Minnesota. She received her MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and received her BA from Grinnell College in 2001. Grinnell's Center for Prairie Studies—which started in 1999, during her time as a student at Grinnell—has had a great impact on her work. Melis says the art she has produced since her undergraduate days has been influenced by what she learned about prairie art and ecology from professors including Jon Andelson, Mark Baechtel, Jackie Brown, Tony Crowley (former Grinnell Art Professor), and her fellow-students in Grinnell's Environmental Action Group. Melis has lived in three prairie states since Iowa—Wisconsin, Kansas, and Minnesota—and says that in each one, she has found inspiration from the land and people around her for her artists' books, prints and installations.

As a descendent of nineteenth-century prairie homesteaders, Melis makes work that concerns aspects of the prairie region which she feels many, including her ancestors, have overlooked. She strives with her work to record, re-imagine, re-image and re-print the vitality, diversity and importance of the Midwest's native plants, ecosystems, and peoples. Her work also celebrates writers from the nineteenth-century and today who have observed closely the complexities of Midwestern and rural life. Currently, Melis is creating images about bird, plant, and food metaphors used by and about women and children.

Though she does produce art in traditional two-dimensional forms such as paintings, pastels, and prints, most of Melis's pieces borrow from the tradition of printed books, artists' books, and books-as-installations. She has shared a sampling with *Rootstalk* for this issue; if you want to see more of her work you'll find it at her [website](#). 

I created the two works on this page using letterpress-printed text, paper, and linen thread or found vines and pods to convey the processes of carrying and settling. Books and envelopes serve as containers for ideas, just as pods are containers for seeds. Books, envelopes, and seeds all require a certain amount of destruction (at least having their spines “broken open,” if not prairie fire and wind) if they are to be read or recreated. This piece was part of my MFA thesis in Madison.



"SEED MIX," BOOKS VARY IN SIZE BETWEEN 2" X 1" AND 3" X 3", 2004.

Using the process I outlined above, I created the installation at right in Kansas. In both installations, I compare seeds to human-created paper books and ephemera/envelopes.





When I brought the "Carry On" installation from Kansas to Minnesota, I canned and jarred it.

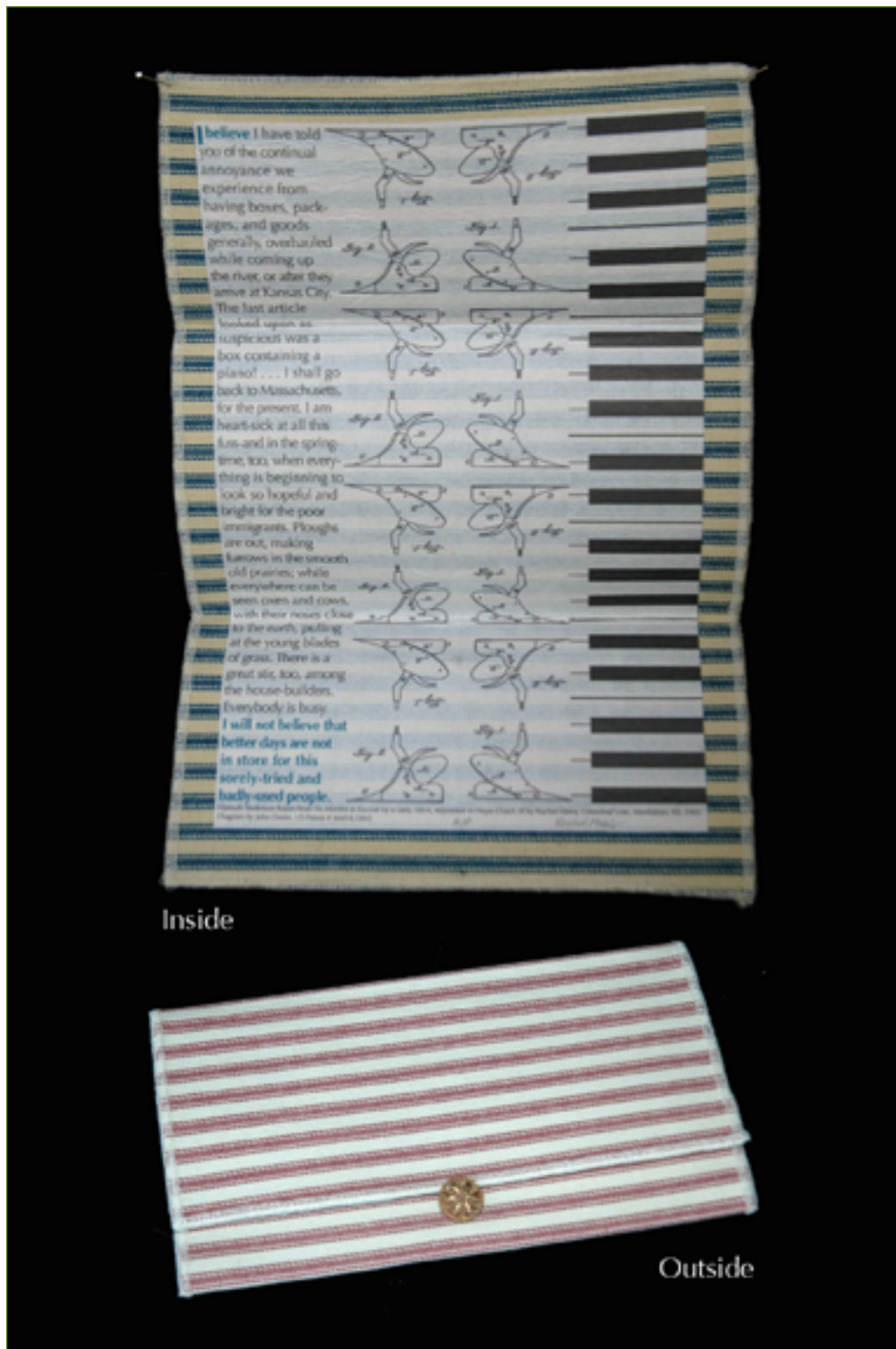
Concerning what's guiding the creation of her current work, Melis says: "I'm focused on the lives of Midwestern women past and present, particularly how women's work causes and reacts to social, environmental, and biological transformations."

"CARRY ON," (DETAIL) JARRED VERSION 4" X 1.5"; SAND VINE, LETTER-PRESS PRINTED PAPER ENVELOPES, AND CORKED GLASS JARS, 2006.



Purses are also human-made artifacts which, like books and seed pods, contain things we wish to carry forward into the future.

"HOPE CLUTCH," 11" X 1.5," ARCHIVAL INK-JET PRINTS AND FOUND FABRICS, 2005.



The purse-book is part of a series of excerpted letters by a woman, Hannah Anderson Ropes, who lived on the Kansas prairie for six months before returning to the east coast and serving as a nurse in the Civil War. I chose passages from her work that conveyed the strong presence of the prairie landscape and her emotional response to it.

"HOPE CLUTCH," (DETAIL) 11" X 1.5", ARCHIVAL INK-JET PRINTS AND FOUND FABRICS, 2005.



"A HERBAL' BY SEAMUS HEANEY," (DESIGNED AND PRINTED WITH SCOTT K. MURPHY) 6" X 11", LETTERPRESS-PRINTED TEXT AND IMAGE ON HANDMADE PAPER, 2011.

Along with her individual artistic practice, Melis creates collaborative broadsides celebrating her institution's Literary Arts Institute's visiting authors—particularly those whose work stems from a sense of place. “For this print, my colleague and I used paper made by one of our former students, Ellory Roske. It mixes fibers symbolic of the College of Saint Benedict's relationship to its land: native Big Bluestem, invasive Reed Canary Grass, and the Flax historically grown by the Sisters of Saint Benedict for clothing. Saint Bens has gone on to use this ‘signature paper’ to create letterpress printed broadsides given to each student admitted to the College.”

Concerning the image on our cover, “Caged Eaglet” from “Unsexed & Un-sphered: Volume I,” Melis says: “This image comes from a book which pairs two texts by another nineteenth-century women's author, Caroline Kirkland, who wrote about her experiences ‘out west’ before writing about women's rights ‘back east.’ My illustrations emphasize her use of birds as metaphors for women and explore links between her suffragette politics and her encounters with various cultures and communities in the forests of Michigan.”