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The Value of the Collaboration with the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts

Wits Creative Writing

The collaboration with the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts formed the heart of the Creative Writing Honours *Text & Image* course. Structured through guided visits, independent archival research, and direct integration into students' creative and critical projects, the partnership invited students into a living archive of book arts that resists categorisation.

Across the semester, the Centre became a laboratory for discovery: students wandered through sculptural books, textile books, diaries-as-artworks, conceptual objects, and impossible hybrids. In an age dominated by screens and accelerated consumption, this encounter restored the slow, tactile practices of wandering, browsing, touching, and letting curiosity lead. Writers who entered the course thinking of books merely as vessels left with an expanded understanding of book-ness itself, text as texture, page as landscape, fold as meaning, accident as method.

Most importantly, the Centre shifted students' sense of themselves as makers. It pulled them away from polished product and back into the generative terrain of process, risk, error, improvisation, experiment. Students spoke of boundaries dissolving, of feeling "alive with creativity," of discovering that artistry lives not in perfect drawing but in attention, imagination, and the physical presence of the hand. Chance encounters in the archive sparked entire projects: a pinned butterfly becoming a central metaphor, a fabric-bound diary unlocking new structures, a secret pocket suggesting an entire narrative frame. In this way, the Centre became not only a resource but a catalyst, reconnecting students with material thinking, creative lineage, and the expansive, unruly possibilities of making art in book form.



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Student Responses

Alyssa Fischer

Before visiting the JGCBA, I saw writing as art, and a book as the vessel to hold that form of art, but visiting it has expanded my understanding of books as art to books as artworks in and of themselves. It was an incredible experience, seeing all of the examples displayed, and getting an understanding of how broad the definition could truly be.

Looking at the grand number of examples gave me so many ideas on how to structure, present, and create my project that I never would have gotten from a simple written explanation of what book art is. It allowed me to really understand what I was meant to create and push past my own boundaries of image and text as partners into image and text as a conversation.

Justin Blanckensee

The Jack Ginsberg Centre is the first and only place I have ever encountered artist books. I had read what I have now learned are artist books, but I had no idea that the form existed as a medium in and of itself. Of course, this was eye-opening and hugely exciting for me—it feels rare, at least in my experience, to learn that these kinds of discoveries exist and that there is still an opportunity to happen upon them by chance. We are so saturated with algorithmic media consumption, and I am almost getting emotional writing this, that the Centre and all of the pure, unadulterated, work they do, is a saving grace for any artist drained and desperate to ground themselves with any remaining enclave of passion and integrity. It is a uniquely vital place for this reason.

The Centre puts excitement and boundary-breaking at the forefront, and in this way any one definition visitors will have of a book is routinely, almost casually, dispelled, over and over. The "book" blurs into sculpture, into abstraction, texture, pre-and-post language imagination, animalia, artifact, etc. This meant that, in my own work creating an artist book, I never felt any boundary was too sacred to cross. In fact, I almost feel that compared to the other work housed at the Centre, my book is limp and tame! And yet, combating that, I knew that the Centre and the ethos they hold is so generatively porous that any one of us could find a giant lexicon of an imagined language on the same shelf as a quite serious book of sonnets printed on Japanese fabric paper, and that at some point along collecting 15,000 artist books the world of definitions and distinction melt away and only art remains to be seen.

Kim Garner

The Centre absolutely expanded my understanding of a book; and when it becomes so much more. I'd never really looked at books behind glass cabinets before, and that physical state immediately made me see them as art. Then, when we were able to touch them and listen to them being explained by David, I started to understand how the way they were made changed them further from book to art and back again. The form completely changed; sometimes through folds, or

through its housing, or through secret pockets of more work. Often just through the way the words looked on a page - which is something I'd never thought about before!

My engagement with the centre was central to my entire project! I don't think I would have been able to do my project without the Centre. For one, the books I saw sparked all my ideas. And the final exhibition we saw on nature (where butterflies were pinned into a frame and documented) morphed into a central image of my book idea. But also, the help I got in requesting to see books on cataloguing and lists and diaries really helped me get a sense of style I wanted to capture. Without their help, I would never have found those works. It also made me think about how the book would be displayed, which for my work meant I really wanted it to feel low-fi like a photocopy.

Keamogetswe Podile

The Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts transformed the way I process images and writing. I did not anticipate that these two ideas could bleed into each other and create an entirely new story. Initially, it seemed so strange and abstract, but now the focus on details beyond the text is honestly what keeps it alive. It keeps these books relevant.

JGCBA fostered a great thinking place. I took out an art book and stared at it for hours. It was Degas: An Imaginary Diary. The way this book was created in a manner that seemed so real, it had a rustic and teenage diary edge to it. The handwriting, the accents, the use of maps and the self-portraits captured my attention. I was subconscious about how plain my writing and drawing were, but this book encouraged me that they both accent each other. It does not have to be the perfect artwork, it just had to be the work that I loved. The imagination carried in each page.

Abigail Bate

In the Jack Ginsberg Centre, the book stopped being only something to read; it became something to behold. It truly shows that only you are holding yourself back from imagining and creating something beyond what we've been made to think is the limit. In the centre, I learned to see books as sculptural, tactile, artworks, spaces where language, and material, and form can come together in complete experiment.

It helped me to let go. I was stuck in a very rigid mindset with my project, but after every visit to the centre, I learnt to free my mind more and more. When I was there, I really just felt alive with creativity, like it seeped out of the artworks and into me. I felt encouraged to take risks, to have fun, to go wild with my work, like the artists around me had done. The centre is a hidden gem for artists and writers alike, and can really foster inspiration and creativity in those who visit.

Payal Chana

Spending time in the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts completely shifted the way I thought about books. There were moments when a book didn't feel like a book at all anymore. Instead of turning pages to read words, I found myself unfolding shapes, opening hidden layers and looking at how light moved across paper. Reading basically turned into looking, and even touching. Some pieces felt more like sculptures or puzzles than anything you'd find on a normal bookshelf.

Being in the space changed the whole experience too. It never felt strict or quiet the way a normal library does. It felt like a place where you were allowed to explore, to get curious, to dream a little. Working on my reviews there even made me more productive because the room itself felt creative. And every new exhibition made the space feel different again. That constant shift made me realise that books can also be changeable, playful and alive.

Once I experienced books in that way, I stopped thinking of them as fixed or perfect objects and started seeing them as artworks you engage with physically and emotionally.

The Centre shaped my artist book more than anything else did. Seeing so many different styles and structures showed me that there really are no rules. That is what pushed me to experiment with my own ideas and trust that I could make something more tactile and emotional, not just something you flip through and read.

A lot of the books I saw blurred writing and art in ways I had never thought about before. That helped me stop separating myself into “writer” or “artist.” While making my book, the writing affected the visuals and the visuals affected the writing. It felt like the two roles were finally working together instead of being kept apart.

Being surrounded by such bold and inventive pieces also made me braver. It encouraged me to take risks and think of my book as something that someone will experience with their hands, not just with their eyes. That changed my whole understanding of what a book can be and how personal and alive it can feel.