

Nicholas Callaway on Book Packaging

Nicholas Callaway is the founder and president of Callaway Editions, one of the most design-savvy book packagers in America. His books include *Madonna: Sex*, *Ferrington Guitars*, *Cyclops* by Albert Watson, and *LaChapelle Land* by David LaChapelle. After receiving a B.A. from Harvard in 1975, he became the first director of the Galerie Zabriskie, in Paris, France, which specialized in nineteenth- and twentieth-century photography. He researched and curated the exhibitions; mounted, framed, and installed the shows; managed the bookstore; wrote, edited, and designed newsletters, catalogues, and exhibitions; handled media relations; managed the artists; and became a general advocate for art photography in Paris in the late seventies. In 1979, he returned to New York to publish books. Despite publishing successful books, Callaway was initially undercapitalized. Forced to rethink his operation, he turned from publisher to packager—developing content, finding talent, designing, and producing. Each book is then published by a larger (and usually different) publishing partner. Callaway's books are exemplary marriages of content and design.

Judging from your books, from Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers to Madonna's sexuality, it's obvious that you have eclectic tastes. Can you describe these tastes or passions?

Words and pictures, both still and moving, that have the ability to inspire or astonish. I have learned to segregate my personal passions from my tastes as a producer. Professional: the arts, especially the useful ones, design, photography, fashion, children's entertainment, popular culture, golf. Personal: Greek revival architecture, ancient Egyptian civilization, Tibetan sacred texts, medieval music, golf.

As a book packager, you are reliant on publishers to support your projects. How do you decide what is publishable?

Ideas come from many different sources: extraordinary artists I admire and seek out (Irving Penn), newspaper clippings (David LaChapelle), Page Six (Madonna), a wooden pull-toy found on a search for a gift for my then-infant daughter (Miss Spider). Once we fall for someone, then it's a question of trying to start a chain of enthusiasm that begins with our copublishers. It's a difficult and exciting challenge to convey your vision to someone who often doesn't yet see it.

The graphic design of your books is one of their defining characteristics. What are your design preferences?

I try to get inside the subject and divine what it wants to be in its designed form. We try to have no design preconceptions, and I enjoy the fact that we live in an age that has such an astonishing array of styles. I am equally fond of our Stieglitz and Madonna books, and they are not as different as many people might think.

Madonna: Sex was quite a controversial book, and not only because of its content and Mylar covering. Fabien Baron's design ushered in the trend of book as object. What was the challenge in making this book?

Madonna, Fabien, and I wanted to make a book/object that would look and feel unlike any other book ever made, beginning with how the book was approached by the consumer. It needed to be sealed in a way that would protect the innocent (we thought of diary locks), and we wanted an opening device that would require penetration, as it were. The Mylar bag (made by a body-bag manufacturer) idea came from vacuum-sealed peanut packs you get on airplanes. We had hoped to vacuum-pack it so that it would be stretched tight across the aluminum cover and would make a whooshing sound when opened. That turned out not to be possible. We wanted lavish, sensuous printing in both black-and-white and color, but we faced seriously short deadlines.

From this, shall we say, novel and novelty approach to the high classicism of your Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings (1982), you have covered many design methods. How did this come about?

The planning for the Stieglitz book had begun in 1946, the year he died, when O'Keeffe gathered together his entire archive, donated it to five American museums, and decided to publish a book that would do justice to the greatness of his work. Nearly thirty years later, I met her at a Harvard commencement when she was given an honorary degree. I anonymously handed her a peony, which she kept with her throughout the ceremony. A year later, at the age of nineteen, I wrote to the famous recluse when I was planning a trip to photograph in the Southwest, telling her I had given her the flower. I received a letter a few weeks later, saying she had always wondered who gave her the peony. I spent several days with her that summer. Eight years later, a week after I returned from France to start my publishing house, I took the \$300 I had saved and went to see her, asking if I could publish her memorial to Stieglitz—despite the fact that I had never published a book before. Three years later, it was issued. The express intent was to set a new standard of printing fidelity to the original. The book was on press for six months; every picture was press-proofed before printing; paper was specially manufactured by Mohawk to the right color and tooth; each picture was printed split-fountain, dry-trap on a one-color press in three-hundred-line tritone to match the color and tonal range of the original.

Stieglitz was an exercise in understatement; LaChapelle Land (1996) was over the top, a tour de force of image and package. What were some of the concerns with this book?

We wanted to see how over the top we could make it: full bleed from beginning to end, glossy inks, glossy paper, with gloss varnish. David wanted to have a billboard effect for the outside, and I thought of the great Japanese poster artist Yokoo Tadanori. So I wrote to him—he and David never met during the process—and he agreed to create a collage that double-distilled David's work by putting together into a seamless whole as many of the elements that appeared inside the book as possible: *Sergeant Pepper* meets tantric monopoly. When David saw his computer-rendered rough, he astutely said that computers aren't cool anymore, that what he missed was the handwrought, rough-cut feeling from Yokoo's early work in silkscreen. I wrote to Yokoo, asking him if he ever did silkscreen anymore. He came back two months later with the amazing thirty-color hand-

pulled silkscreen we used for the box. It seemed like the perfect yin, and so we asked if he could do yang for the cover inside. He did. The next challenge was to get the feeling of thirty-color silkscreen in offset process color. We convinced the printer to do twelve colors for the price of four.

Your marriages of design and content are usually very successful. What made you decide on the matchup between David Carson and Albert Watson with *Cyclops* (1994)?

I had admired David Carson for a number of years, since *Beach Culture*, and we had talked about working together on several projects, but it was Albert who first suggested David, feeling that he would provide a “rock ‘n’ roll” counterpoint to the graphic monumentality of the photographs. I would say that the final result was art-directed by the two of them in equal measure.

***Ferrington Guitars* (1992), designed by Skolos/Wedell, marked, at least in my mind, the beginning of what I'd call the “overall package” in book production. How did this book come about?**

I met Danny Ferrington at Linda Ronstadt's house while photographing one of her O'Keeffe paintings for *One Hundred Flowers* (1987); he was working as her personal assistant. I was so taken with the combination of his native genius and his endearing charm that we decided to do a book on the spot. It took five years. Halfway through, the CD revolution was taking the industry by storm, and I said to Danny that it would be a bit like coitus interruptus for the viewer to be able to see all these beautiful guitars, but not be able to hear them. After all, a guitar—any musical instrument—is both latent and mute until it is brought to life by the musician. So, we decided to produce an album of original compositions written and performed specially for the book.

How do you work with designers? Do you give a long leash? Do you impose constraints?

We made many trials with different designers on the guitar book until I remembered a series of extraordinary posters created for an audio company by a team of whom I had never heard—Nancy Skolos and Tom Wedell—and they were perfect, seamless: she the designer, he the still-life photographer. I said we wanted a book that would not just show instruments, but in every way symbolize and express and be music. They nearly killed themselves doing it, but it fulfilled our idea. In many cases, we provide creative direction and criteria—price point, trim size, overall look—and then leave it to the designers to stand or fall on their own. This means we often go through several designers before we find the right marriage of content to form.

Who are the best book designers?

The best book designers are those who deeply understand the unique expressive possibilities of the book's printed page, whether or not they do the bulk of their work in books or not. That being said, good design is good design, and often we try to entice designers from other media to bring a fresh eye to book design. Most designers long for books, even though it doesn't pay well, and don't have the opportunity to work on good ones; so we have a large talent pool to work with. And we need more!

Do you think that design makes a significant impact on the consumer's enjoyment of the book?

Absolutely. It is a fact still neglected by the majority of publishers, in contrast to most other consumer goods, from fashion to cars to computers to electronics.

Let's talk a little about the Miss Spider series by David Kirk. In a very competitive children's book market, what was it about this project that caught your fancy?

David is a visionary and a genius of an artist. I knew it the minute I saw one of his toys. I was a new consumer in the toy market, searching for Christmas presents for my daughter's first Christmas, wandering the aisles of Toys "R" Us, appalled by the bad design, cheap manufacturing, and ugly packaging. I went to Mythology (now closed), an offbeat store on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and was dumbstruck by a wooden pull-toy called a Sneaking Baby Alligator. Everything about it was original, clearly the result of a single, and singular, creative mind as opposed to a marketing committee. It was brilliant, with a strange palette, beautifully engineered, and in a box with a painted label that stimulated the child's imagination by placing the three-dimensional toy in a little story context. It was also an immediate, huge hit with my daughter. I wanted to find out who was behind this "Hoobert Toy," so I called the company and asked to speak to the president. It was David Kirk on the line, and he said, "That's me." I told him how impressed my daughter and I were with his toy, and asked who painted his packaging. He said, "Me. I used to be a painter before becoming a toymaker." I asked if he had ever thought of illustrating a children's book, and he said he had indeed. It was called *Miss Spider's Tea Party* and was about a lonely spider's quest to make friends against the odds. "Do you have a publisher?" I inquired. "Yes," he said quietly. Not knowing what to say, I blurted out, "Well, are you happy with your publisher?" He said that he wasn't because he had been paid a tiny advance and then his editor orphaned him by going to another house, and he had never heard from the editor again. I asked him to send any materials, and it was a moment I will remember all my life because I knew that he was literally a visionary—no hesitation, no searching; the most exquisite, fully formed line renderings of a world that existed only in his imagination.

How would you describe Kirk's vision?

I describe it as David's toll-free number into the collective unconscious of children. When I later saw his oil paintings, I was equally dumbstruck by their beauty and their technical mastery. This was no illustrator; it was a great painter transcribing his fantasy world. I called him and said that it was one of the most amazing children's books I had ever seen, said that I would not want to interfere in a publishing relationship that was working, but since this one was not, why don't we go to David's original publisher together and see if we could buy him out? I offered him an advance four times what he had been paid. This was more than David had ever made in a year, and so he was pleased. We went to the publisher, who let him out of his contract. Four years and three books later, Miss Spider's books have become the biggest-selling nonmovie, non-TV children's picture books of our time. David and I are partners in a family entertainment company, Callaway & Kirk. Four new books are in the works (no bugs), three more Miss Spider titles, two computer-animated feature films (one starring Miss Spider) for Universal, a learn-to-read CD-ROM with Scholastic, and many toys.

Do you see the children's book field as expanding or contracting, creatively?

From a field of approximately five thousand children's books published each year, there are about ten I find interesting. I don't see it expanding creatively, especially in relation to the enormous creative potential. We are trying.

What is the future of books and book design?

The technologies related to creating images, design, prepress, and printing are all getting better. Creativity and excellence are as rare as ever. Books aren't going away, but their place will change.