

Exploring Uncharted Territory

Book Works by Tara Bryan

by Deborah Kogan

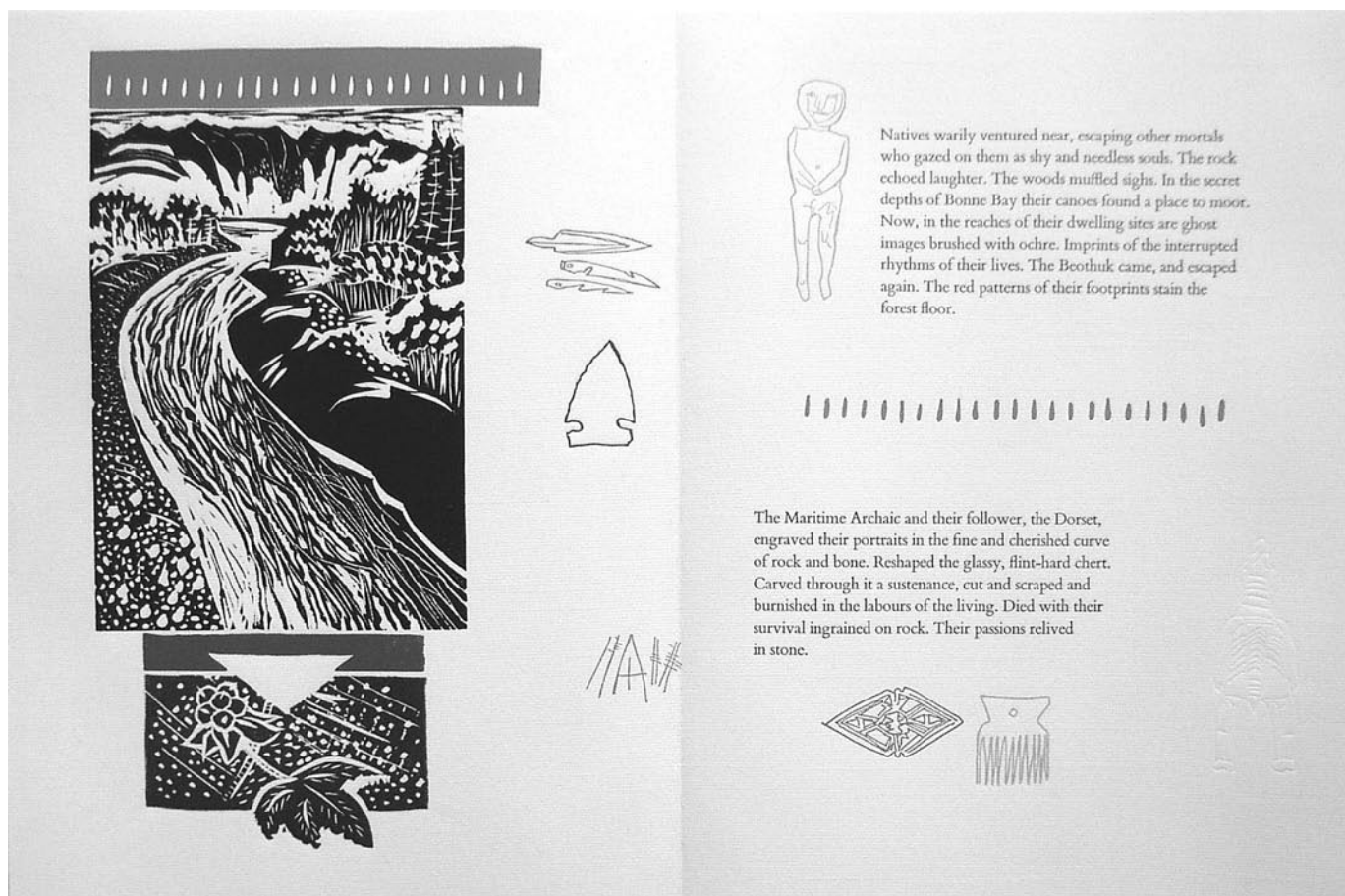
In this profile, we trace how artist Tara Bryan found her way to the book arts and how she has completed several collaborative book projects that explore the history and geography of her adopted home in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. In a related article in this issue, Susan Angebrannt describes Bryan's tunnel book "World Without End."

When the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation did a feature story about book artist Tara Bryan in December 2006, the story referred to her printing studio on the outskirts of St. John's, Newfoundland as a "cottage industry" that produces small editions of carefully designed and crafted books that are intended as "physical works of art." The news story went on to describe St. John's — the capital of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador — as a small city that has become a home for a number of artists and craftspeople who are refugees from "the mainstream."

My impression is that Bryan has never aspired to belong to the mainstream. She has

always resisted categorization, which leaves her free to pursue a wide variety of interests. She told me, "I have never been able to concentrate on one thing to the exclusion of everything else." In an artist statement written for one of her exhibitions, she said, "Every project is a new challenge, and I seem to have a knack for getting myself into uncharted territory." Born in Texas and raised in Texas and Oklahoma, where, she says, "the sun is relentless and the sky endless," Bryan grew up with drawing as her main activity as soon as she could hold a pencil. She says, "The physical act of making marks has always intrigued and absorbed me." When she went to college at the University of New Mexico

Below, spread from
Gros Morne Time Lines



she studied music theory and composition (which, she points out, is another form of mark making), but continued taking drawing classes.

A change in direction in the late 1970s brought Bryan back to the visual arts. In 1983, when she entered graduate school at University of Wisconsin-Madison in painting, she was still exploring a wide variety of interests. In addition to painting classes, she took classes in Chinese, and “was fascinated by the work coming out of the papermaking, printmaking, and typography studios.” She took a typography course from Phil Hamilton; then a bookbinding class from Jim Dast (conservator at the UW library) taught in his home on weekends; and finally classes with Walter Hamady. She says, “I was hooked [on the book arts].” She included two book works in her final MFA painting show. In a final plot twist in the development of her artistic identity, Bryan spent a year teaching English in Sichuan Province, People’s Republic of China, “during which time I studied Chinese calligraphy and traditional ink painting and traveled across the country from Shanghai to Lhasa. I returned to North America transformed [into a landscape painter].” She spent the next three years in New York City, trading work at the Center for Book Arts for classes to advance her book arts skills.

In 1989, Bryan made her first visit to Newfoundland, and in 1991 she permanently relocated there. She, her Canadian husband, and two dogs currently live in a small town just north of St. John’s. In her practice as an artist, she finds it useful to alternate between her work as a painter and her work as a printer, each of which draw on a completely different part of her brain. Newfoundland offers a landscape painter a “tangible” atmosphere that, according to Bryan, “softens the light, making the landscape delicious and mysterious.” Her paintings—often long vertical or horizontal swathes—picture the Newfoundland coastline.

As a book artist, Bryan always gives careful consideration to the format, structure, and materials used in her books, as well as to the book content. Over the last fifteen years, she has completed sev-

eral collaborative book projects, in which the participating artists work together to generate a book concept, images, and text. Bryan describes the working process for these collaborations as follows:

When I work with other artists we generally discuss the overall concept, size and materials. Then the author goes off and writes and the printmaker goes off and develops images. Then we come back together and I have the job of putting it all together. I find that the most critical part is choosing the right person or people to work with initially...I am very careful from the beginning, because everyone has to buy into the process. If one person is too focused on his/her own work instead of the gestalt, it can be a real problem.

In the collaborative projects in which she has participated, Bryan has played the key role in designing the completed book as a coherent physical and visual entity, in addition to acting as printer of the text and binder of the completed book. She says, “I like collaborating because it expands my brain. The end result is never something I would have come up with on my own, although, since I am the “facilitator” who has to fit the parts together in the end, I think the collaborative pieces are close cousins of my other work. Several of these collaborative works, described below, allowed the participating artists to explore the meaning of the landscape, geography, and cultural heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as the processes of collaborative art making.

Gros Morne Time Lines (2001)

In 1987, Gros Morne National Park (which roughly translates from the French as “the big gloomy”) on the Island of Newfoundland was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its natural beauty and geological heritage—including ancient rock formations, jagged coastline, waterfalls, and fjords—and its historical heritage, with over 5,000 years of human habitation. An “Artist in Residence Program” was initiated in 1998 as a joint project of Parks Canada, the

More of Tara’s work can be seen on her website, www.tarabryan.com

Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Canada Council for the Arts to encourage artists from throughout Canada and the world to come spend time experiencing the Park and making art to build awareness of and appreciation of the Park by a broader audience.

Among the artists to take advantage of the Gros Morne Artist in Residence Program during its first two years were Anne Meredith Barry, a Canadian painter and print-maker, and Tara Bryan. Independently, each of these artists was thinking about developing a book project as a result of their experiences in the national park. After seeing the prints, drawings, and paintings made by Anne Meredith Barry during her 1998 artist's residency in Gros Morne, Bryan proposed a joint book project. As the third member of the collaboration, they approached Kevin Major, a well-known writer living in St. John's. This collaborative applied for and secured \$20,000 in funding from Canada's Millennium Arts Fund to help support the *Gros Morne Time Lines* project's total budget

of \$50,000.

As the text for the book, Kevin Major composed a spare 1,000-word prose poem (a fitting number of words for a project celebrating the new millennium) that weaves together the geography and history of the Park with a sense of personal history and connection to the past. The text ends:

In Gros Morne time is marked in rock
and wood.

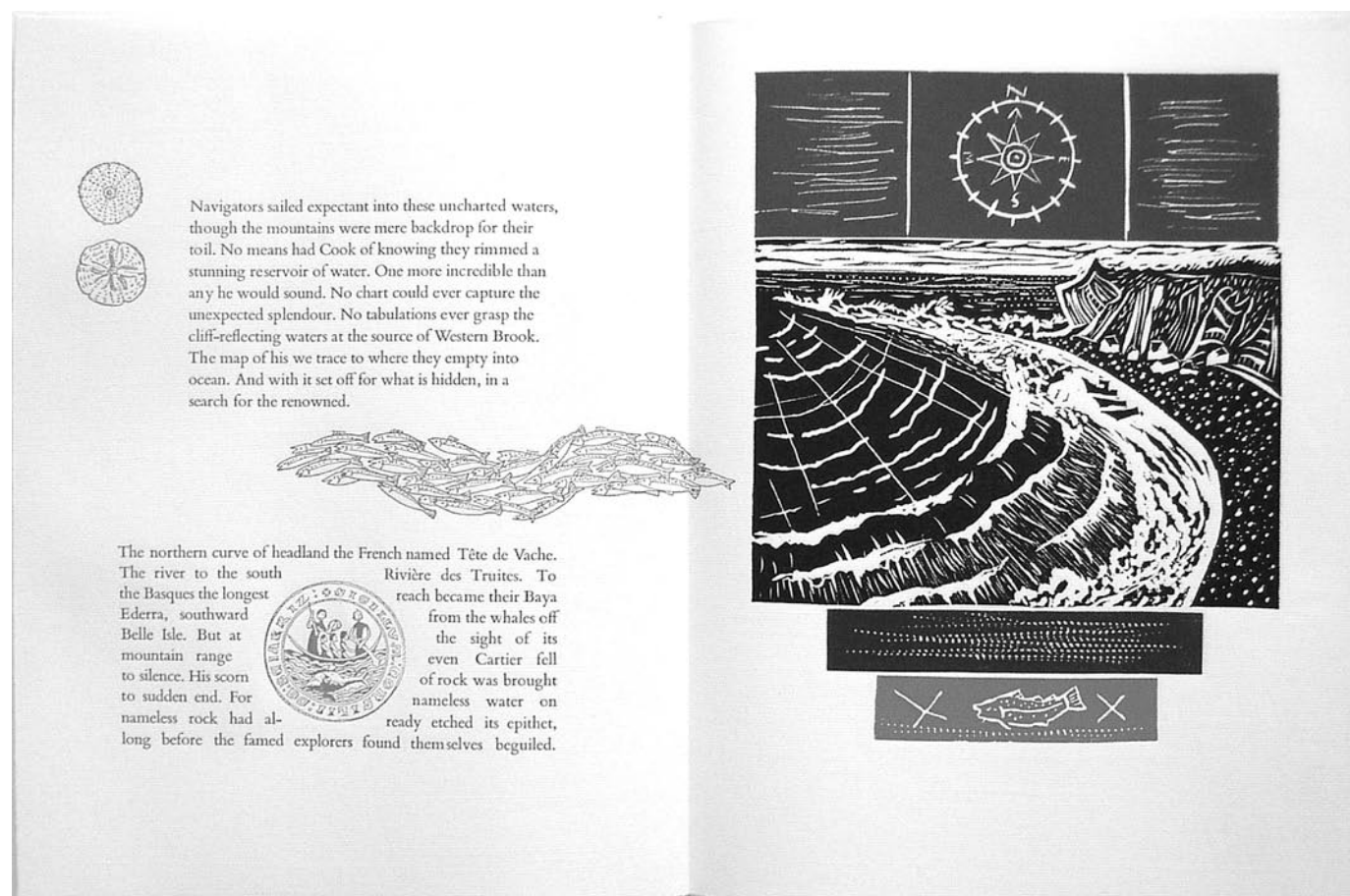
Snowdrifts the shape of continents
cling to the towering Tablelands.

The sapling planted by a boy
grows to a memory for his children's
children.

Such are the lifelines we conceive
the timeless impressions that we hold.

Anne Meredith Barry contributed eight linocut landscape images to the project, as well as a number of delicate line drawings from which additional printing blocks were made. (Barry was diagnosed with cancer while the book was being produced, and died

Below, spread from
Gros Morne Time Lines





Near Martin Point a stone-clad beach is strewn with mighty boilerplate, rust bolted still to wood. Cogs and rivets watercoloured to a golden mottled brown. Here the iron work of men was ripped apart by reef in a blinding winter gale. We can hear the storytellers yet . . . a lifeline rigged, a mailbag fixed, an infant pulled to shore. The hues of the shoreline rocks lie resplendent in the tide. As exquisite now as exquisite then, when the ocean played its other games, and rock proved a worthy stage, and at that hour an end.

The relentless mind of ocean waves has had its way along this coast. Yet fishing men and fishing women wilfully stood their ground. The mountain chain they took for markers, the curve of coast for guides. And the bounty of the lumber woods came to set their sights ashore. They are the unwavering settlers of this place. Their quest made of it a home, their tenacity the stratum of our pride.



Above, spread from
Gros Morne Time Lines

You can view a digital image of each page of *Gros Morne Time Lines* at the web site of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation at www.cbc.ca/gros-morne/en/interactives/book_explore/ and can listen to Kevin Major reading his text while you watch photographs of scenes from Gros Morne Park at www.cbc.ca/gros-morne/en/interactives/book_experience/.

in 2003, shortly after the book was completed.) In bringing this large concertina-fold book to life, Bryan designed 9 connected pages of images and text that stretch out in a continuous meandering 18 foot-long "time line" that stands for the human changes and geographic transformations that connect the present day to the ancient origins of the land that is now Gros Morne National Park.

Barry's multi-colored images are jigsaw-puzzle linocuts, so all the pieces are separately inked and fitted together to be printed simultaneously, which Bryan says made it tricky for her as the printer, but faster than printing each color separately. Bryan designed all aspects of the page layout, chose the paper, typeface, and binding materials and printed and bound the completed book at walking bird press in St. John's. She and her collaborators agreed to publish *Gros Morne Time Lines* in a letterpress edition of 65 copies. A sense of attention to detail is evident in all aspects of the book design. A polished piece of ancient rock from the Tablelands in Gros Morne Park is inset into the cover of

the book. Specially produced caribou bone clasps are used as closures for the book. Bryan treasures the experience of making this book, because, for once, the collaborating artists had the funding they needed to make the book exactly as they conceived it.

Gros Morne Time Lines was well received. A copy of the book is on display in the gallery at the Park's visitor center. An educational project taking book arts into the elementary schools was developed around the book. The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador purchased 15 copies of the book, which they gave to visiting Premiers and New England Governors when they met in St. John's in 2006. The edition sold out in about six months. Because one of the goals of Parks Canada and the Canada Council for the Arts in sponsoring this artists' project was to enhance the public's familiarity with and appreciation for Gros Morne National Park, the work has been well documented.

L'Anse Amour, L'Anse aux Morts (2007)

Sometime in 2004, Kevin Major suggested to Bryan that they recruit another artist and undertake a new collaborative artists' book project in response to an ancient burial mound at the town of L'Anse Amour on the southern shore of Labrador. Major had just visited the burial site at L'Anse Amour, which is a National Historic Site, while on a recent trip to teach a writing workshop at a nearby local school. As Bryan explained, the burial site is... "just a pile of rocks just off the road to the light-house, which, with the whales in the bay, is the main tourist attraction [in L'Anse Amour]. There is a simple wooden deck and some interpretive material, but many people who intend to see it drive past. [The site is]... very open and windy... The contents of the grave are in the provincial museum in St. John's."

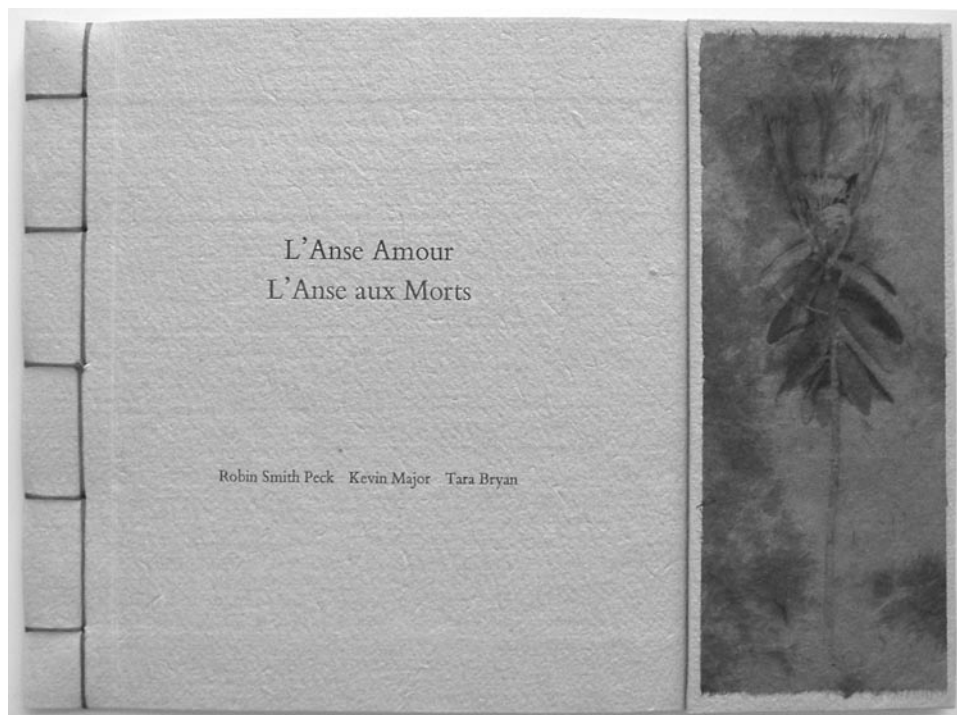
Thus, the site is interesting not because of any physical edifice, but because of the mystery of the Maritime Archaic Indian people who buried an adolescent boy or girl face down in a shallow pit with a slab of rock over his or her back in this site some 7,500 years ago, and who performed unknown but complex burial rituals. As described in the prospectus for the completed book, the artists imagined the ancient rituals, based on the recovered artifacts: "Near the head they placed a cache of knives and spear points, and an ivory walrus tusk. Below the neck was set a whistle made from the hollow bone of a bird. All the while, on either side of the body, the funeral fires blazed into the night."

To help them respond to this site in a collaborative book, Major and Bryan invited printmaker Robin Smith Peck to join them, because her prints are layered and mysterious. Smith Peck uses plants and natural forms in her work. She grew up in Labrador and lived there at the time they approached her to participate in the project. Once they had assembled the team of art-

ists/writer, the threesome approached Parks Canada for funding so they could visit the site together. The visit to the site took place in the fall of 2004. As the artists looked at and thought about the site, Bryan says, "Our discussions focused on the mystery [of the child buried face down with a rock on its back], since there are no remaining Maritime Archaic people, and there was no written history... We were all deeply affected by the photos in the local museum taken of the mound when it was uncovered, with fire residue and the skeleton with a rock on its back... We settled on something of a field notebook with translucent pages to echo the layers of an archeological dig..."

The images that Smith Peck began developing for the project included images of a fire pit near her house in Goose Bay, Labrador, scanned images of flowers from the Labrador Tea plant, and photographs of landforms as well as photos of her son lying on his stomach (at the same age as the child buried in the mound). At the same time, Kevin Major was working on his text. Bryan says, "Kevin and Robin worked independently and I waited." The final images used in each copy of the book are original prints that combine digital, relief, chine collé and stencil printing. When Major had completed the text, Bryan had letterpress type cast for printing.

Below, cover of
*L'Anse Amour/ L'Anse
aux Morts*



In the completed book, printed on a variety of Japanese and North American handmade papers, Kevin Major's text describing the burial site and imagining the burial ceremony are interleaved with Smith Peck's translucent composite images. The completed book, produced in a limited edition of 30 copies, is called *L'Anse Amour/L'Anse aux Morts* (Cove of Love/Cove in Death) after an older name by which the site was known—referring to the burial mound. Although all three artists discussed the work as it progressed, Bryan said, "I always get final say on design issues, taking in consideration all the options proposed...I wanted to use a rough handmade paper for the cover, and I wanted to stitch it simply using caribou sinew. The book was delayed for a year as I followed leads...hoping to find a hunter who would send me some sinew. Actually, my first contact found some and was going to bring it when he came to St. John's, but the fellow had the caribou stored on his back porch (this was January) and one of his dogs got off its tether and ate it. I had no luck and ended up using artificial sinew just to finish the project."

In September 2008, the artists will officially launch *L'Anse Amour/L'Anse aux Morts* at an event at the Point Amour lighthouse, www.pointamourlighthouse.ca, which is down the road from the burial mound. They are also planning to celebrate the completion of the book with a reception at the Christina Parker Gallery in St. Johns, where Smith Peck and Bryan both show their work. The book can be viewed on Bryan's web site at www.tarabryan.com/lamour/ &

Deborah Kogan is a photographer and book artist who lives in Santa Cruz County, CA.

Below, spread from
*L'Anse Amour/ L'Anse
aux Morts*

