

## THEME: MEMORY, REPAIR, AND CREATIVE RECOVERY

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This presentation centres upon a collaborative project called *BookArtObject*, a long-term artist book group project based in Australia. Since starting in 2009 after a conversation between Caren Florance and Sara Bowen during a bookmaking workshop, the project has varied wildly in scale and scope. The primary concept is for participants to respond creatively to a published text, whether it is poetry, fiction, or non-fiction.

Caren has since completed a creative PhD that researched the artist book as a flexible vehicle for collaborative research, positioning it as a form that can act as common ground for multiple creative practices (Florance, 2018: 5). Caren’s creative training took place at the Canberra School of Art’s Graphic Investigation Workshop, where the head of the workshop, Petr Herel, referred to the artist book as ‘an instrument of collaboration’. He regularly assigned collaborative artist books as major projects for students, often based on one or two poems or an excerpt of text, utilising whichever visiting artist was in residence within the workshop (Herel & Fogwell, 2001: 27).

Similarly, the concept behind *BookArtObject* was to be a ‘book club’ for artists: a poem or text was selected, permissions were sought, and each artist was given free scope to use the text or react to it in some way. This project could be categorised, following the taxonomy written by Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady (2003) as a ‘contribution collaboration’, a project in which ‘several artists contribute... in their separate ways, each maintaining their own signature, but producing a unified object, or achieving a common goal’. Each artist needed to create an edition that covered at least the number of participating artists, with extras made if desired. We quickly learned that it was best to create works that could be easily posted to each other without incurring exorbitant shipping fees.

This current collaboration, *LOSSED*, is the sixth iteration or ‘edition’. The largest ‘contribution collaboration’ to date started in 2011 as *BAO 4*, involving over 80 book artists from 16

countries who produced a range of responses to Sarah Bodman’s artist book, *An Exercise for Kurt Johannessen* (2010). This time, as founding members of the collective, we – Sara, Caren, and early *BAO* collaborator Rhonda – decided to pull back from wider collaborations to shift our gaze closer to home. We have used this project to explore the intersection of our personal interests in trauma and creative recovery.

The three of us are deeply invested in the affordances of artist books and the emotional and material collaborations that can occur between hand and eye, text and image, content, and page, page, and cover, and especially between book and reader. Artist books, approached from the



Figure 1



Figure 2

### Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Sara Bowen, *Conversation/Fading*, 2022 (detail)  
 Figure 2: Sara Bowen, *Conversation/Fading*, 2022 (detail)

outside, are radical: the apprehension of an artist book requires the viewer to suspend accepted particularities of aesthetic practice. The gallery wall that consecrates a painting is not there, nor are the fixed spatial relationships implied by a static work of sculpture. Instead, the 'double inventiveness' of the artist book creates a liminal space in which concept and structure integrate and a new conversation is possible. The form of an artist book can be docile, giving way to subtle complexities in the content, allowing words and/or images to breathe and be inhaled. Or it can misbehave, be complicated to negotiate, and demand physical interaction. With books made by printmakers, there is usually a deeper story embedded within the layers of production, and this underlying story – the material poetics of our process and intent – is at the core of this paper.

Collectively, we are interested in broad themes: collaborative practice, social change, creative ways of coping, healing, and recovering, and the promotion of constructive empathy and compassion. Individually, those themes are explored from very individual angles in terms of production and personal experience. Initially, we discussed practicalities: a common size (20 x 15cm) for travel convenience, and an overarching poetic title to draw our concerns together. The evocatively spelled word *LOSSED* was initially our 'text'. However, as we shared our progress with each other, we discovered that we had a published text in common: *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Bessel van der Kolk (2014). This keystone text for trauma recovery resonated with our current preoccupations, becoming a ghost moving through our work and our streamed conversations.

Sara Bowen explores her childhood, attempting to interrogate difficult family dynamics by slow, repetitive cutting into a reduction lino print of a photo of her parents on their wedding day. It is a necessarily one-sided conversation, and it perhaps produces more questions than answers. However, the immersive nature of this memory excavation facilitates discovery, bringing relationships into focus as the print matrix is progressively destroyed. As the pages fold out, the 'complete' visual image on the first page splits, unfolds, and separates, losing detail and focus until the final, barely legible image on the last, whole page. The reading of the book goes backwards in time, mimicking the process of visual information fading and reflecting the loss of the ability to retain the richness of specific memories as we age.

At the same time, the book asks questions about the verity of photographs (and memories). Although the artist was present when the photograph was taken (in utero), the memories clearly cannot be hers, so while the imagery is photographic, it is unreliable. It functions as a relic that transcends time and space (Moerman, 2012), a mnemonic device that reflects a past that is the way we would prefer to remember it, not necessarily the way it was. When read 'smoothly', the pages of the book obscure and deny the difficulties and stresses of intervening years, focusing on a preferred narrative and the 'perfect arc' of a story that fades into the final credits while retaining the possibility of a happy ending.



Figure 3

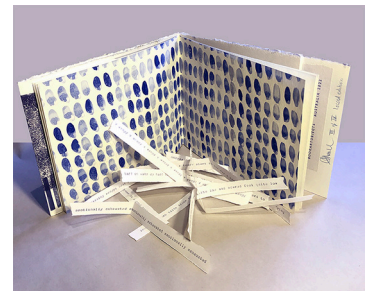


Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Sara Bowen, *Conversation/Fading*, 2022 (open view)  
 Figure 4: Caren Florance, *Disremembering*, 2022 (detail)  
 Figure 5: Snapshot of Caren Florance's nuclear family, 1971, carried by her father during his Vietnam War service

Even though the 'indexical representation of reality' (Moerman, 2012) through photography has been questioned since the invention of photographic techniques, we continue to rely on them as authentic representations of reality. However, the book and the photograph ask, 'What is true?'. As the reader pulls and refolds the pages, one in each hand, the story has the potential to slip away from them, to lose its docility and misbehave, bringing one person or another into sharper focus. Suddenly, the narrative arc is less smooth, and the story perhaps becomes more truthful. The reducing layers of ink are patchy, spotty, and filled with blanks as the details are lost and the underlying matrix of memory is cut away.

Caren Florance has been creating work about her family for many years, with a more recent focus on her mother, Sandra, and Sandra's journey with dementia, following an urge to document her mother's progress in real time. The word 'progress' is deliberately double-edged; while her medical progress denotes a negative trajectory, resulting in physical and mental decline, her emotional progress signifies a state of release and detachment, achieving something that many Eastern philosophies strive to attain.

Sandra is experiencing early-onset dementia, most likely hastened by the trauma of finding her son's body after he committed suicide at the age of 17, after which she was diagnosed with PTSD and was on antidepressants for over 30 years. She would speak about the event and her son if asked, but only in terms of the facts, not her feelings. Sandra was very afraid of getting dementia and spent a lot of her later life researching preventative measures. However, as soon as the symptoms began, she went willingly into forgetfulness, abandoning her daily diary-keeping, and all other duties, like cooking, without a skerrick of anguish. She is still 'herself', but is also almost nonchalant about losing her memory, using the phrase 'I disremember' when asked something that she can't grasp. In 2021, Caren and her father discovered that she no longer remembers that she had a son, or that he died. She looks at photos of him almost curiously, in the same head-cocked manner that she looks at Caren on the Zoom screen if they haven't been together in person for more than a couple of months. Her daily life is now full of joy: she is witty, positive, and quick to laugh, enjoying everything around her.

In 2021, Caren made a small artist book called *Remembering Herself*, which explores how Sandra's memory is activated when certain music is played. Caren used Spotify to experiment with music they had listened to as a family, in addition to music that was popular when her mother was younger. This created a useful timeline to gauge how much Sandra could remember. She has strong memories of her childhood, her adolescence, and her courtship with Peter, her husband of 55 years. However, her recollections started to grow fuzzy around the time Caren entered her teen years. She sparkles when the right music is played. The song, 'You Don't Own Me' by Leslie Gore, seems to be a foundational tune from her own teen



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 6: Caren and Sandra, 2022  
 Figure 7: The three LOSSED books as a set  
 Figure 8: View of Cobargo (NSW, Australia) during the 2020 bushfire

years, and Sandra's typical response if challenged is the empowering phrase, 'I'm allowed'.

*DisRemembering* (2022), a sequel to that book, is more materially complex because Caren finally had access to a letterpress studio after two years of Covid disruption. In this work, Caren proposes that forgetting is not always a negative action, as her mother is happier, less burdened, and able to appreciate each moment than she was when she was weighed down by grief.

What is the physical weight of grief? Where does it go when released? Caren feels that she has inherited this grief, and *DisRemembering* is written from her perspective, not Sandra's. She chose Reflex Blue, an intense colour that seems to hold grief but also contains a lively vibration. She used large wood type letters, positioning them to turn their backs to the reader, exposing their wave-like woodgrain, their wear and tear, and their flaws. The text is poetic yet analytical, equating Sandra's willing forgetfulness to a desired path, a thin foot-worn track short-cutting between more established thoroughfares. Meaning exists unread, hidden behind the blocks and amidst the gridded watercolour brushmarks that evoke routine, medication, or blue gas flames.

The cover also acts as a folder, holding thin loose strips of typed lines of text hidden behind the main body of text, prone to falling out randomly. They document some of the rare moments when Sandra admitted her feelings to herself in her diaries, captured in short, simple phrases like 'feeling weepy' or 'emotionally exhausted'. There is one happy strip, using words written when her son was a baby: 'everyone in a good mood: J woke up singing'. It felt necessary to include him in this way. This 'secret' stash draws upon Caren's teenage diary-keeping: following in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother's practical record-keeping, Caren wanted to write more about her genuine feelings and thoughts. She created a 'secret' pocket in the back of each diary, slipping her deeper feelings into that space as if to hide them from the reader. So, this part of *DisRemembering* forms a bridge between Caren's early emotional expression and her mother's reluctance to fully indulge in such a practice.

On New Year's Eve 2019, Rhonda's small hometown, Cobargo, NSW Australia, was devastated by a catastrophic firestorm. More than 300 homes, 300,000 hectares, countless domestic and native species, and six local lives were lost in this single firestorm. It was a traumatic, life-changing event for all who experienced it. Cobargo subsequently became an international symbol of both climate change-induced natural disasters and community-led disaster response after it was featured in international media reports.

Rhonda has been deeply involved in recovery efforts in her region. Both the fire event and her recovery-related activities have influenced her art practice (and vice versa). In the weeks following the firestorm, Rhonda created her artist book *Our homes have been incinerated* (2020), in response to Greta Thunberg's speech 'Our house is on fire'. This

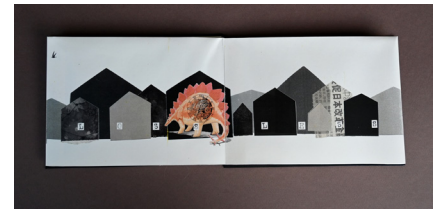


Figure 9

contained a single image, taken by Rhonda from the veranda of her childhood home, depicting a neighbour's destroyed home with the view of the razed main street shrouded by the thick orange smoke beyond (Florance, 2020). It was emotionally and physically difficult to complete this work. The Cobargo region, even years after the fire, remains a disaster zone. Many residents are still homeless, living in temporary accommodation, while ash continues to fall from the ceiling cavity in Rhonda's studio, serving as a daily reminder of what has occurred. *LOSSED* purposely eschews the deeply personal response to trauma that was expressed in *Our homes have been incinerated*, choosing instead to focus on universal themes of loss and recovery in the aftermath of disaster.

For *LOSSED*, Rhonda used the strangeness of the purposely misspelled word 'Lossed', as the stimulus for the work. Those six letters could be broken down and reformed to recreate the story of both despair and hope that mirrored her community's experience. Initial recovery efforts in and around her hometown required the creative and pragmatic repurposing of materials found at hand. By limiting textual inputs, Rhonda alludes to this recovery response. This restrained and disjointed use of language also echoes an observation by van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score*, that 'traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words.' (van der Kolk: 233). On one side of the book's concertina structure, letters fall away until only a dangling conjunction remains – SO. On the flip side, the letters recombine to construct a tale of hope, commencing with a simple directive – DO. This mirrors the practical and pragmatic work that Rhonda is undertaking to rebuild the village. SO... DO...

Since the fire, Rhonda has begun a PhD with the University of Canberra. In her research project, *Ash Alchemy: Art after Fire*, Rhonda employs Creative Practice Research to examine how the creative arts can inform and/or assist with practical community recovery in the aftermath of a disaster. *LOSSED*, with its emphasis on hope, marks a distinct change in Rhonda's practice and expresses her emerging research interest in post-traumatic growth. Calhoun and Tedeschi note that most people exposed to catastrophe do not go on to develop stress-related disorders (Calhoun & Tedeschi: 23) Indeed, they observe that post-traumatic growth is common, however, they also mention that growth is not synonymous with the absence of pain (Calhoun & Tedeschi: 46). Rhonda's contribution to her hometown recovery efforts, in particular her involvement in the creation of the Cobargo Bushfire Resilience Centre (ABC Australia, 2020), may be interpreted as an example of post-traumatic growth rooted in communal sorrow. Bessel van der Kolk maintained that people with an intimate personal knowledge of trauma often instigate social change and that many of the most profound societal advances have emerged from experiences of trauma (van der Kolk: 358). This is at the core of *LOSSED* and of Rhonda's current research focus.

The *Body Keeps the Score* opened out our initial conversations about family and societal trauma. Initiated by Bessel van der Kolk's

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experiences with American veterans of the Vietnam War, the work carefully unpacks how trauma affects a wide range of people, in both clinical and emotional terms, offering new ways to understand and move towards healing. Each of us found a connection within the pages, especially in its reassurance that there is no straightforward formula, no easy solution. As with every *BookArtObject* project, we began with a common theme and then diverged in many directions, our artworks themselves responding in multifaceted ways. 'We all know how fickle memory is; our stories change and are constantly revised and updated,' writes van der Kolk. 'Such autobiographical memories are not precise reflections of reality; they are stories we tell to convey our personal take on our experience (210).' With *LOSSED*, our three distinct books are bound together as a single edition, telling three different tales using different narrative codes, as part of *BookArtObject's* ongoing commitment to texts that reflect the world around them in their turn.

## ARTISTS BOOKS

Sara Bowen, *Conversation/Fading (LOSSED)*, 2022. Modified concertina structure with hard covers. Six-layer reduction print on 290gsm Fabriano Tiepolo paper; water-based relief inks. Closed: 150mm (h) x 250mm (w) x 8mm (d). Open: 150mm (h), variable width.

Caren Florance, *Disremembering (LOSSED)*, 2022. Pamphlet-sewn codex with loose inserts. Handset letterpress on 245gsm Stonehenge and 100gsm Zeta Matt Post Hammer paper, typewriter on 70gsm bond, linen thread. Closed: 150mm (h) x 250mm (w) x 8mm (d). Open: 150mm h, variable width.

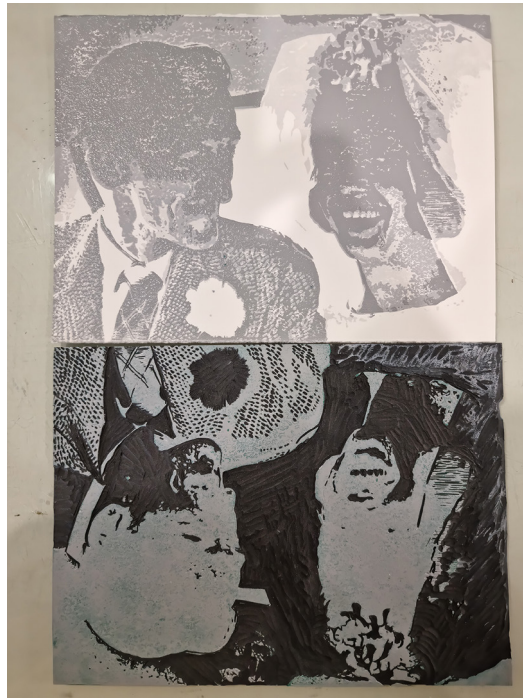
Rhonda Ayliffe, *LOSSED (DOSSEL)*, 2022. Double-sided concertina. Mixed media collage on 120gsm Magnani Velata Avorio, Canson Mi-Teintes covers. Closed – 135mm (h) x 195mm (w) x 15mm (d) Open – 135mm (h) x 1660mm (w)

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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1: Sara Bowen, Conversation/Fading, 2022 (detail)  
Figure 2: Sara Bowen, Conversation/Fading, 2022 (detail)



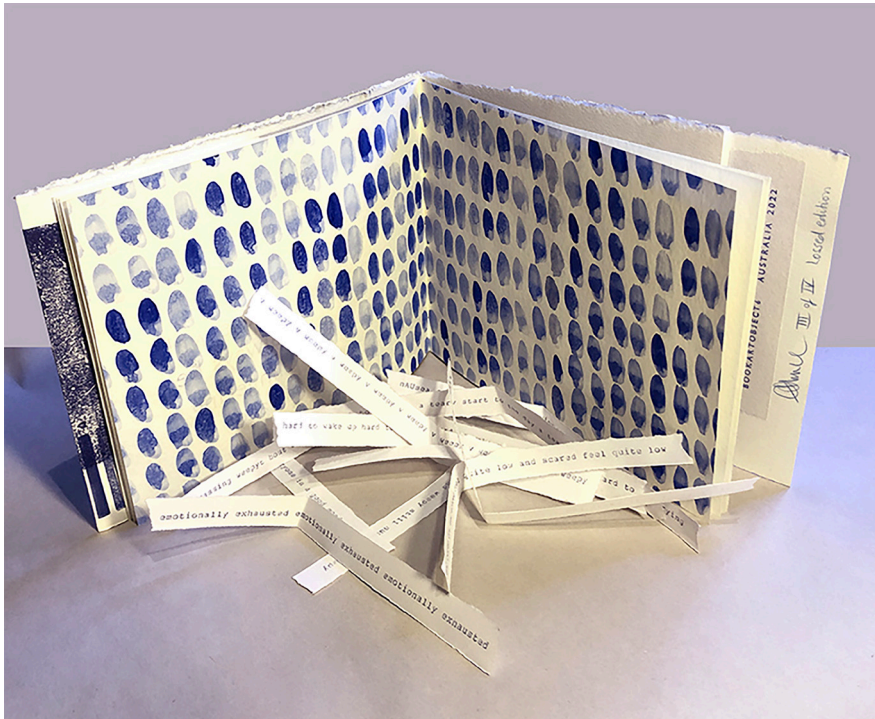
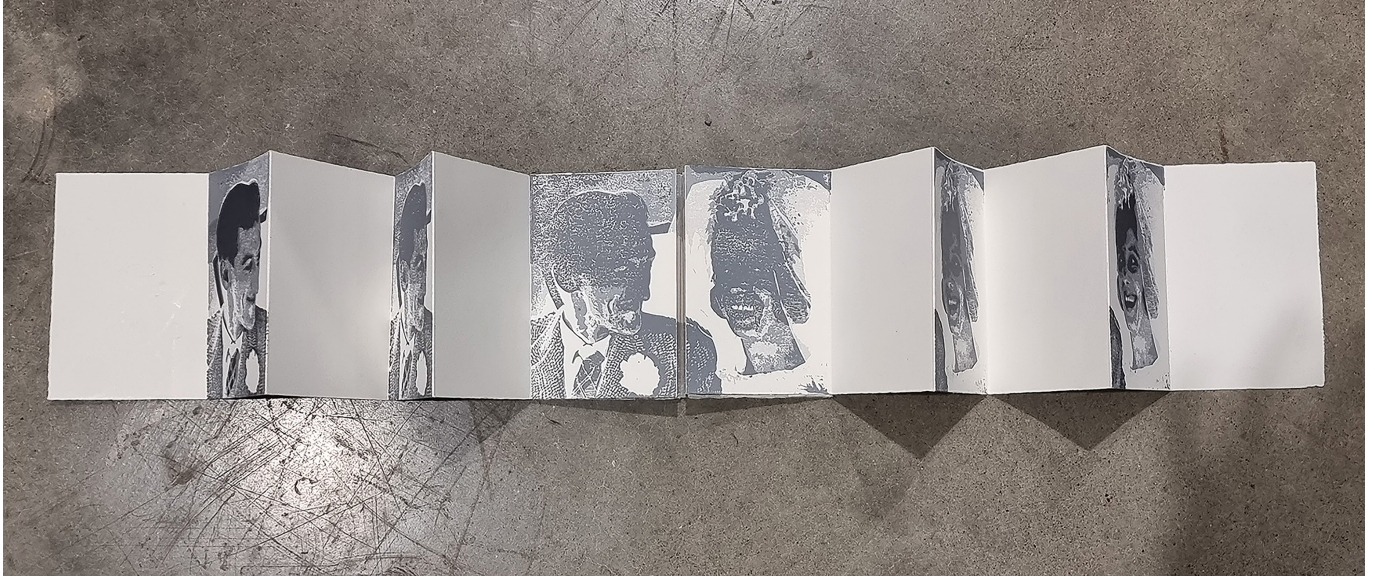


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Figure 5: Snapshot of Caren Florance's nuclear family, 1971, carried by her father during his Vietnam War service  
Figure 6: Caren and Sandra, 2022



Figure 7: The three LOTTED books as a set

Figure 8: View of Cobargo (NSW, Australia) during the 2020 bushfire

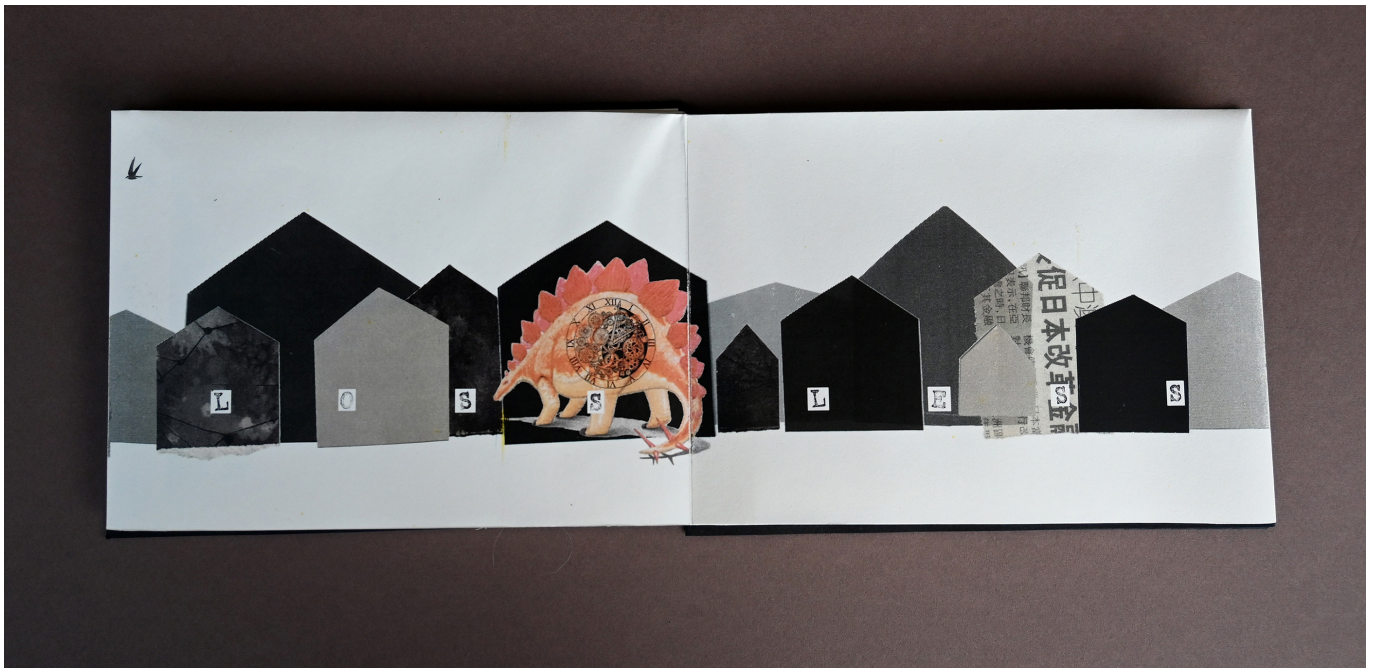


Figure 9: Rhonda Ayliffe, *Losted*, 2022 (detail)