

Interview with Clifton Meador by Sarah Bodman and Tom Sowden (05/11/08)

The interview took place at The Center for Book & Paper Arts (CBPA), Columbia College, Chicago, where Clifton Meador is Programme Director of the Interdisciplinary MFA in Book and Paper Arts.

Sarah Bodman – We really wanted to talk to you because you are somebody who uses the process appropriate to you at that time [in the production of artists' books]. I think Doro [Boehme, curator/special collections librarian at the John M Flaxman Library, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago] was saying that you've been using print-on-demand to publish?

Clifton Meador – I do all kinds of stuff. I started using print-on-demand a few years ago. Here's one [*Kardanakhi Tataroba*] from 2006. This is a Lulu book and it's a really fancy colour laser print. I was in the republic of Georgia and I didn't really know what was going on because my language is so bad, I speak some Russian but no Georgian. So the idea with this book was that I had this visual record and distorted colour of whatever was going on. For example they baked bread, but I tell the story once in this visual odd colour, and then I re-tell the story in line drawings with text. My conceit with the writing was trying to replicate the kind of flopping between languages, when you only partially understand a language and you get bits and pieces of things. You get these cipher words and you struggle to understand it. It's a one-sided narrative. It's all the things people were saying to me and my responses aren't in any of it. So it's like a dialogue with only one side of it.

S – That's really nice. Is that still available through Lulu?

C – Yeah, if you look at my website.

Tom Sowden - So do you sell these through your website, not direct from Lulu?

C – No it's direct from Lulu. It's a really amazing thing for artists, because you can put how much profit you want on the product, and then they send you a royalty cheque every quarter.

That was in 2006. Lulu started in 2006 so I jumped on it fairly rapidly – I was interested in it. Here's something I did just this Fall as a kind of experiment [*St. Petersburg Apartment*]. There's this classic book arts project where you tell the students to go find a visual narrative and they're supposed to extract the visual content. Then they pick another text from some other place and they remake a book with these two books together.

S – Ah, that have no connection?

C – Or that they perceive some connection. I have actually never given it myself in a class, but a lot of teachers I know have given it, we give it here in a first year class. So I decided to try it myself. We had all these pictures from St Petersburg, my son was living in a squat in St Petersburg, and it was a very Dostoevskian kind of place, it was just awful. I stayed there about a week with him because I like these kind of awful places.

S – I was going to say it looks like an amazing kind of place.

C – It was cool and there were all these really interesting characters living there. It was bohemian, St Petersburg, intellectual – really Dostoevsky. So I took the text of *Crime and Punishment* and I did a search through it for all the sentences containing the word terrible. So I took every sentence that contains the word terrible in *Crime and Punishment*, then I typeset it into the book in the order that it occurs in the original text. Then I used it as a text for this sequence of photos of this kind of awful apartment.

S – Very nice, it is awful isn't it, but in a great way.

C – That's my sensibility exactly.

S – You seem to spend a lot of time in Eastern Europe.

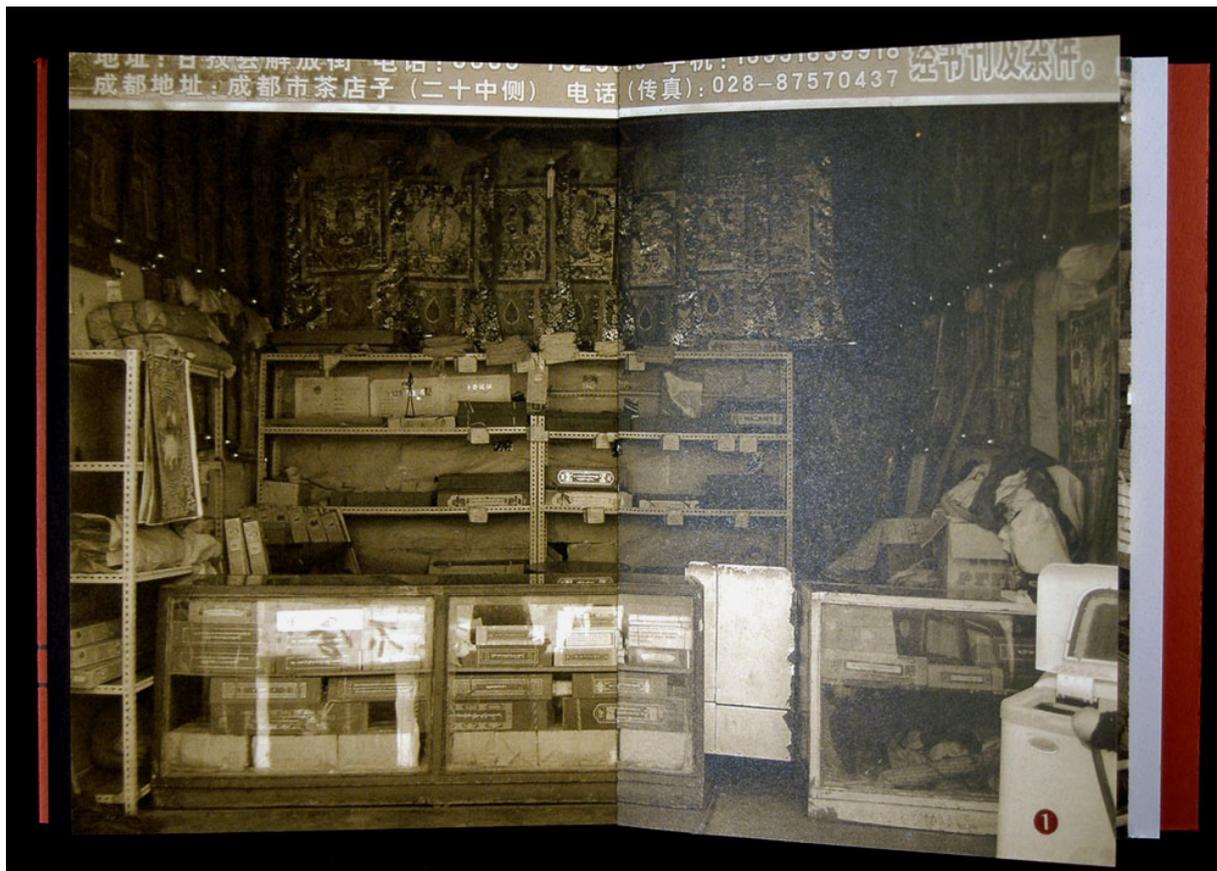
C – I've spent a lot of time in Russia, I've been in Uzbekistan, I lived in the Republic of Georgia for, well 9 months really.

T – And *Tourist Refugee*, was that done in Georgia?

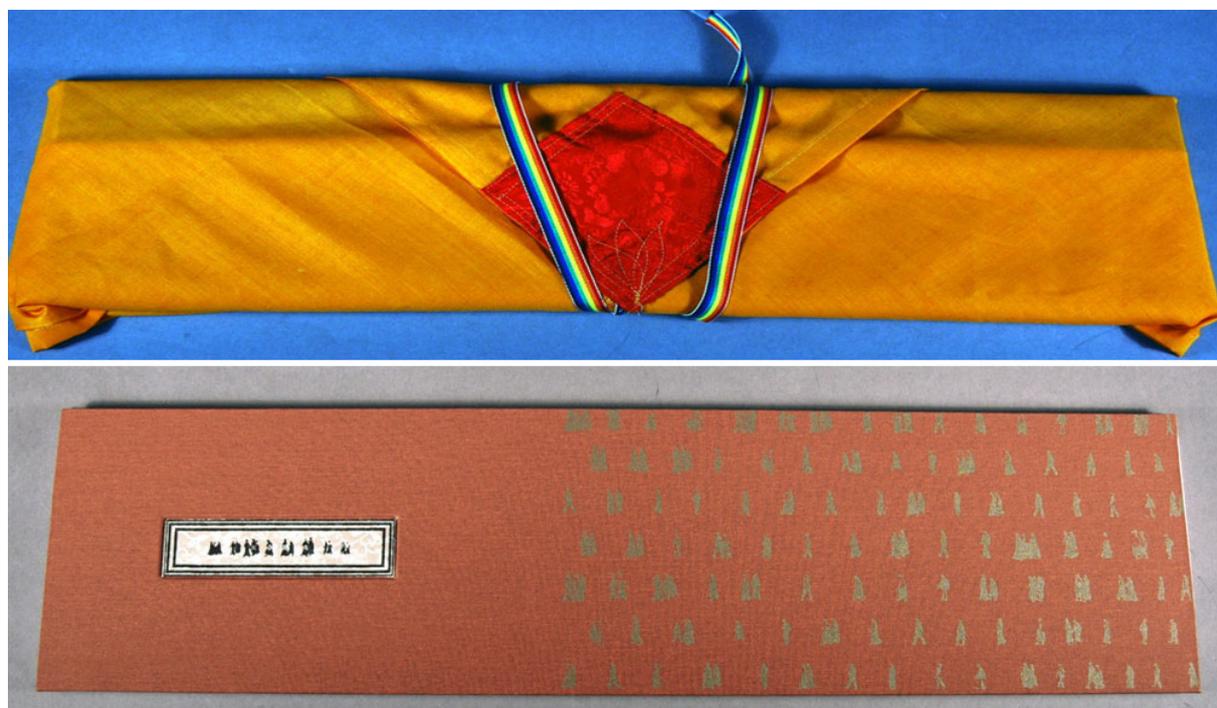
C – Right. That's actually a part of a much longer book that's never been printed, that I'm sort of trying to finish but I don't know what's going to happen with that. It's a little too history heavy, I got a little too excited about the history, too much I think. I'm still sort of plugging away at it.

For the past three years I've been plugging away at this project in Eastern Tibet, part of an interdisciplinary study team studying traditional Tibetan book production. We have a show of the work we collected right now at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. Of course I don't have any of that here. So I've done a lot of work around that idea for the past couple of years. The Tibetan books you've probably seen are these long, loose-leaf books, have you ever seen a Tibetan book?

S/T – No.



Three Tibetan Bookstores, Clifton Meador, 2007. Edition of 50.



Kora, Clifton Meador, 2007. Edition of 50.

22.8 x 5.9"; 34 loose pages, stacked as in a traditional Tibetan book structure. Cloth covered boards with screen print in silver of the font Meador developed from his photographs of pilgrims. Title-cloth inset printed in Meador's font. You can download a PDF of the *Kora* Font - A font of walking people, designed for *Kora* from cliftonmeador.com

C - They don't bind them at all, it's a stack of paper with two boards, and I've made a similar book that's in an offset edition, called *Kora*.

In Tibetan Buddhism, one of the ways you show respect for a temple is by walking around it clockwise – and that's called *Kora*. It's connected to the idea of the prayer wheel, inside the prayer wheel is a little piece of scripture, and each time you spin the wheel, it's as if you have chanted that text once. So these people are walking around the building, and they get some of the merit of the texts contained within the building by walking around it. I stood outside a temple and I photographed people walking past the same spot. I have several hundred photos of the pilgrims walking around the temple. So this kind of walking is a kind of reading in some funny way.

I was really taken with that, so I did this book. It has about thirty pieces of paper and one of the things I did, that is not really obvious from the work, is that I made a digital font. I drew these people and turned each one of them into a character in this font. So when you type you get people instead of letters.

S – Beautiful.

C – The story that's in this book explains this temple and kind of the significance in a rough way. But it asks the reader to consider the people as becoming literally embodied in the language itself. It's really a kind of simple idea.

T – So you could decipher that?

C – You could, yeah. But it's not very interesting. There is plain text underneath that you can read that tells a story.

S – Right.

C - So I use digital technology and more traditional means [to produce books] back and forth. That [*Kora*] lead to another little project called *Three Tibetan Bookstores*, and I only made fifty of those. We were travelling around and I'd visit all the bookstores I could find, because I'm interested in books funnily enough, and it's extremely frustrating, as you probably will know, to try and buy a book in a language you can't read.

S – Yeah.

C – So this book is really about that frustration of trying to buy a book in a language you cannot read. Here's one of the first Tibetan bookstores, you can see what the Tibetan book looks like – just these long stacks of paper,

and this was actually the bookstore at the monastery we were studying in.

T – Are they all Buddhist texts?

C – They're all kinds of things, histories, science, very large literature that's got more breadth to it than you'd imagine.

S – Not that we'd ever know.

C – Not that I would ever know. This was actually a bookstore in Chengdu in Szechwan in China, and it sold offset printed Tibetan books. I had this experience with the three bookstores of trying to buy books and this is actually a story you could decode about the frustration of trying to buy a book. The final thing in this book is another little book that is the mnemonics I recovered out of Tibetan Buddhism. I had these Tibetan English dictionaries, and I made lists of these mnemonic things, like the four perfect adornments. It's a little silly actually, but I think my idea was supposed to give you some access to what might be in these books. So that's the stuff I've been doing. I think that shows everything, there's letterpress, offset, laser print, I think it covers the gamut of everything. See, there actually was a point to that.

Here's one from last year that's letterpress and inkjet. I've been doing these, I don't know if they're quite books actually. This one was near that town and there's this river that goes through middle of the town. The rocks on the outside looked like Chinese literati paintings to me, you know they're just amazing – these rock formations.

S – They're beautiful aren't they?

C – I was struck by this idea of life imitating art, the backwards relationship, so the piece is really about reflection, there are rocks, literati and invasion. So the typography is supposed to suggest that. This is letterpress on book cloth, the title page and the colophon are letterpress, but this is just inkjet. I only made ten of that one.

T – Do you normally work in much larger editions?

C – I have in the past, but I'm starting to think that's insane.

T – Why?

C – Well, what do you do with all of them? There's not that much market, as it turns out.

S – That's the great thing about sites like Lulu.

C – No inventory.

S – Yes, exactly, no storage issues.

C – This [*Avalanche*] is from 2007. This is letterpress on the cover, silver ink on black paper. Then the insides are offset, two colour offset. This one has a complicated inspiration, actually this is the most beautiful spread. It starts out intentionally very ugly and gets more beautiful as you go through it. It's the consequences of the fall of communism, there's a road between Russia and the Republic of Georgia, called the Georgian military highway.

T – Is that the one the Russian military went down recently?

C - They were actually kind of over here and this one misses it, but there were troops in this area. I heard from friends that there's a bunch of activity down here. But it's just a beautiful road and it goes high up in the Caucasus mountains, which are beautiful.

I had been reading, *A Hero of Our Time* by Lermontov, it's a great novel it's the beginning of the romantic novel in Russia, so 1839 or 1840, and the story is told in five pieces, I just can't recommend it enough. It's very short and you get closer and closer to the object of the novel. The first section is two people talking about this character, and the next one you actually get to meet the character but he isn't revealed to the person narrating it. Then the next one is of pages from his diary. In terms of narrative structure it's a really nice book, very cool.

So anyway, I was fascinated with that and the novel all happened on the Georgian military highway. It's this character who's been exiled to Georgia because he got in trouble. I had been writing these little prose pieces that were connected in my mind to the fall of communism and there are all these little anecdotal stories. I wanted to make them into a book, so I wrote a connecting piece of prose that's typeset on this angle, linking prose and that was all inspired by Basho's travel writing. Basho, the Japanese poet, he's actually a travel writer. He writes these tremendously wonderful books of travel like *The Knapsack Notebook*, or *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. So as a book it's great because it's got these two really distinct voices in it, but they're unified. You get this sense of a man, of a person, very strongly through this writing.

I've been really taken with this, so that's why I took this formula as a book. It is about a particular road and sort of a homage to his *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. I had these five things that were about Lermontov in my head, so I jammed all that into a bucket, and shook it hard and dumped it out. The other conceit about

it is that the pictures slide over the foredge, so there's funny grid where these pictures are actually climbing a mountain.

S – That's really lovely.

C – This one's in a fairly large edition, as you can see I'm still binding it. I did about three or four hundred of that one. I used to do books in really large editions, you know thousands, and it's a crazy idea.

T – So have you still got copies of those?

C – Well this one, from 1996, I probably only have like 30. It's slowly sold out, it only took ten years.

S – That's perfectly acceptable.

C - I wonder if you know, I don't know how well you know my work – I don't want to bore you. There's one book that no one's ever seen because it's actually locked up in a warehouse, it's called *Whisky Defense*. I was an artist-in-residence in the Glasgow School of Art, in 1999 and I took pictures all over Scotland. I think it's an OK book about the Scots and Whisky. The idea of the book is that history is a hangover, and here's a picture of my ancestors so I was kind of connected. I don't really like whisky that much, but I was forced to drink lots of it.

S – Not pleasant.

C – I like whisky, it just makes my head hurt.

S – Or it doesn't like you. So you didn't ever make that book?

C – That book is made. There are 900 copies sitting locked up at what used to be Nexus Press, in Atlanta, Georgia. I've been arguing with them, I'm about to go to lawyers now, trying to get them out of there.

S – Well why don't they...

C – The people who closed the press down are basically evil people, and it's just a consequence of letting the Republican lawyers anywhere near the arts.

S – How ridiculous though, I mean what are they going to do with them? Sell them?

C – Nothing. They're not selling any of that, they have other works. You know *Memory Lapse* is mostly down there, which they were distributing, and we can't get that out of there either. I don't even have a copy of it here, I don't have a copy of it at all.

T – Why are they holding onto it, because it belongs to Nexus Press?

C – No. It's just sort of inertia, and they keep losing directors. So I'll get in contact with a director, we produce the contract, I demonstrate that I have property rights in this.

S – Because it's your book!

C – We get to an agreement and they say they'll ship it out to me, then they get fired or they leave, and I have to start all over with somebody else. I've been through this for two years now. Arts organisations under Bush in this country have just been on the ropes, it's been very rough, it's been a tough cultural environment for people. So, maybe I'll get it out someday.

So I guess to frame my work I start as a photographer, and I would call myself a photographer, designer and a writer now, and a printer. I'm still really connected to printing.

S – Yes.

C – Even though letterpress has been a really small part of my practice.

T – You wouldn't class yourself as a book artist?

C – Sure, but that to me seems like it's a funny thing to call yourself and I never liked the term ever. I've been doing this for a long time now and I've avoided the book arts world. There was a ten year period where I didn't go to any of the conferences, none of that stuff, I just wasn't part of that world.

S – I think sometimes going to the conferences is actually worse than not going.

C – Maybe. I feel like I have a professional obligation now for my student's sake, to try to make the connections.

S - Yes, but sometimes it can really frustrate you going to the conferences and hearing people having the same old arguments about the same old things.

C – Yes, the definition of the field I find a really tedious argument after thirty years of having it. I think the best thing for us to do is to identify the good work and celebrate it. Let's just do that. Because there is really interesting work being done, lots of it.

S – Yeah, there is. There really is.

C – More than ever, and I know that I feel that really strongly. There are lots of people doing really interesting things, and there are people doing things that are kind of connected and they don't know that it's connected. There's all this odd work and poetry, visual poetry, that's really interesting and has got a lot to do with what I'm interested in. I'd also love some really good sculptural work to have attention called to it, so that it raises the bar in that area. Because I'm sure there's good work – I just haven't seen very much of it.

For more information on Clifton Meador and his work see: www.cliftonmeador.com
<http://stores.lulu.com/cliftonmeador>

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