



In Conversation: The Ampersand, Howard Munson & Margaret Fabrizio

Margaret Fabrizio: The Book as a Travel Companion



We've been curious for quite some time about an unusual collaboration between Book Artist Howard Munson and his friend Margaret Fabrizio. This issue's theme provided a good excuse to bring them both in for a little conversation with Editor Yeager. Margaret brought several travel journals and Kate Godfrey was on hand as staff photographer.

Nicholas: *I'm interviewing Margaret Fabrizio and Howard Munson. Howard, I believe, has made books to Margaret's order, is that correct?*

Margaret: No, it's never to my order. They wouldn't be the books they are if it were. He knows I'm taking a trip and then he makes a book for me to take on my trip. It's always a big surprise what he does. Then I fill it up while I'm away on my trip.

Nicholas: *And how long has this been going on?*

Margaret: Let's see, what was the year? The Turkey trip was the first. I think that was 1990 or something like that?

Nicholas: *And how many collaborative books have ya'll done?*

Margaret: I think I have eight or nine.

Nicholas: *Why did you decide to do this?*

Margaret: I didn't. It was Howard's idea. He knew I was taking a trip, so he gave me a book and it was a simple book. The pages were simply bound.

Howard: I like having other artists involved in books in the making of artist books. When Margaret said she was going on a trip, it gave me an opportunity to make her a book. Perhaps I'm sharing the trip with her.

She'll tell me what country she's going to visit, and then I try to think about that as far as the way it's made and I try to make a book that relates to that country, also one that is challenging for her.

Margaret: Just a blank book in itself is challenging. There's something about the first thing you put in it. You don't just start the first few days that you're there. It takes awhile to decide what kind of a book you want it to be and whether it's going to be one theme or you're going to carry one idea throughout the book or is each page going to be a separate entity. The construction of the book dictates that. They're not all simple books.

I actually am very fond of the single-page books. The later ones, have gotten increasingly complex and they're challenging and I like them, but some of my favorites are the earlier books.

Howard: This is the first book that I made. And I tried to give it a feeling of Turkey. It was one of the simplest ones to construct.

Margaret: It's far from the simplest inside. It's one of the most complex and involved books of them all, and it's the simplest structure.

Nicholas: *You are a calligrapher.*

Margaret: Yes, and one of the ideas that interests me in travel is

Turkey, 1990. *Interior center double-gatefold matches the tile motif of the cover (see small photo at top of page). Ribbon ties.*



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using the script of the country and trying to modify it so that it may look like a different alphabet but it reads in English if you take the trouble to figure it out.

Nicholas: *There's a fair amount of collage in here. Were these items that you found locally?*

Margaret: I took some with me. I've been a collage artist since the '60s and I was very struck on that Turkey trip that there little graphic material there. I was forced to do more original artwork that I never would have done because I like to fall back on collage. But that was very good for me.

What I used (for inspiration) was the *Koran*. I became very involved with various copies of the *Koran*, particularly those in the Tokapi Museum in Istanbul.

Nicholas: *When you were making this book, you obviously spent a lot of time on it. Was all the work done while you were on your trip?*

Margaret: Oh, yes. The books are always finished before I come home. If I waited, if I brought them home unfinished, they would never be finished.

Nicholas: *Do you have a routine? Do you work every night? Do you just work when it takes you? Do you work when you come back home?*

Margaret: I always travel alone so the books are my companion. I'm always thinking of the book. I never work on the book when I'm out, though. It stays in the room. I take sketch books and I'm always looking for things for the book, so it dictates to a great deal the kinds of shops I go into, the kinds of things I look at. I'm always thinking of the book, how it gives a focal point, which is very enriching.

Kate: *In a way it's a collaborative work. Howard has built the structure. And I just have this feeling, we didn't ask about your backgrounds, but that you're old friends.*

Margaret: Yes, we were friends many years before this started.

Kate: *When you come back do you show the book to Howard? Is it always a surprise to see how the book has been filled?*

Howard: Yes, it is. I always look forward to it.

Kate: *Do you give Howard any elements to incorporate in the structure?*

Margaret: The trip to Varanasi with the burning ghats that was the first really complicated book. And it actually had foldout steps and was a continuous thing. Although I was going other

places I thought I should just do the ghats because they had steps. He knew I was going there and the formation of the steps. That must have been in his mind when he made the book, although he didn't say anything.

The trip before last I said I wanted to write more. I had never done a book that had as much writing as this one (the Turkey book). So, he took me at my word and he put six little books inside the big book. I cursed him a few times on that one. I sent him a card saying what were you expecting, that I would never leave my room?

Nicholas: *Is that what you expected?*

Howard: No.

Kate: *It sounds like in the background you take in a lot of information, that you actually build a structure for her to travel on.*

Margaret: I have a friend who tells me, "He's controlling your trip. He's just dictating your trip with the book. He tells you how you're going to look at things."

Nicholas: *And is that true, Howard?*

Howard: No, I don't think so.

Kate: *Do you feel that way, Margaret?*

Margaret: Not really, although that element is there. The book opens out and has some folds as well. There's a backside. And he said, "you don't have to do anything with the backside."

Howard: But you did.

Margaret: Well, yes. The backside is a completely different format. It's all the things that struck me in the newspaper. They're all news items combined with bits of scrap paper which I found on the street.

In the front there are the little books. And you have these big foldouts, too. In this sense the book *can* dictate the experience.

It dictates, what the experience is that you're going to want to have. You are able to spread it out and see a continual vision. You can see what the images are that stand on their own—if you want to use some single pages. I didn't paste much

in this book except on the backside. There was enough going on in the front with the little books.

Kate: *It reminds me of Indian circuses, the way all these different environments keep coming out and folding out. It's amazing.*

Margaret: Well, that's India.

Kate: *Yes, yes. Everything, all the time, everywhere.*

Margaret: And it's more, everything and more. It's



Varanasi, 1997

Hand-cut accordion-style interior pages featuring a pop down step structure. Slipcased with tassel ties.

constantly unfolding. So it's kind of spoiled me for traveling to other countries because there really is no country, that is that rich for me. I have a friend whose motto is: "Too much is just enough." And that works for me with India.

Nicholas: *I have a question for Howard. You've created this elaborate book that is a trip in and of itself, and you are a speed book artist.*

Kate: *Do you make these in a day?*

Howard: Do I make them in a day? No. Well, first of all, it takes a little time to think it out. I get the image in my head. Once I have the image, I can whip it out.

Nicholas: *Howard, you're not dedicated to travel like Margaret?*

Howard: Well, no, I have traveled a great deal. I traveled in the 60's and the 70's when it was very, very cheap. The last major trip was India.

Kate: *Howard, did your work with Margaret—doing books for Margaret—grow as your own practice as a book artist grew? Some of these works remind me of later books of yours—the way your structures kept evolving.*

Howard: I learn something new every single time I make a book. And I always like to try new things. I get bored fairly quickly, so I have to make books that are always different.

Margaret: I shudder to think what he's going to do next.

Kate: *Well, you're just going to have to match him with a destination, Margaret. You're going to have to get the right destination.*

Nicholas: *How long before you leave do you announce your destination?*

Margaret: Usually three or four months.

Nicholas: *Do you spend that whole three or four months just percolating ideas?*

Howard: No, usually as soon as she tells me. It takes about a week and I get it. Then I'll take only a few days to make the book.

Nicholas: *Do you do any research...read up on that country?*

Howard: Well, most of the countries I know a little bit about already. I experienced India.

Nicholas: *Let's take a book that you have that Howard hasn't been to the country.*

Margaret: Burma?



India, 2001

Accordion structure with single pamphlets. Inside pages feature collages from newspaper clippings and other ephemera. Outside pages feature original illustration. Cover spine hand-decorated by the artist.

Kate: *Did you do the cover on this, Howard, or did you, Margaret?*

Nicholas: *The Burmese book Howard decorated. And this is a screw post binding with hinged tabs.*

Margaret: He did that so that I could put in collage things without harming the binding or anything.

Howard: We were also thinking that we may be able to take it apart and reproduce it.

Margaret: And this is actually the fabric that these characters wear when they're doing these dances, lots of sequins and things.

Kate: *Did you actually go find a fabric store in Burma?*

Margaret: Oh, yes, definitely.

These are the little offering flags they use on the pagodas. You know, I got this paper there, the sequins and rick-rack...I tried to make the writing look Burmese. This says "edible pagoda." They do the big pillars that are mirrors so I cut up paper, trying to make it look like those images.

This is the centerfold, which is a 360-degree view from a spot where I stood on top of one of these pagodas and did a turn around, the moon to the sun and back.

Kate: *The kit that you're traveling with is your pens, inks, watercolor?*

Margaret: I take acrylics. And different kinds of pens.

Nicholas: *I'm curious about your calligraphic work. Did you study calligraphy at one point?*

Margaret: Yes, I worked with students of Lloyd Reynolds. Not very intensively, but enough to have to change my driver's license signature and things like that.

I try to get the rhythm of the language. I always learn the alphabet (of a country) so that I can read. I don't like feeling illiterate. I only go to one country on each two-month trip, so it gives me time to become somewhat literate. I don't know what I'm reading, but I can sound it out. So if I'm looking at a bus or sign or something like that, I can read it. I try to find what the characteristics are of that particular script, like the horizontal is really wide...or curved...or straight...what the rhythm is... I buy a lot of kid's books that try teaching the language. And I buy charts that go on the wall that teach little kids to read. I really get into the scripts and the way in which people change it. It's still the same language, but there are different styles.

Kate: *It's an audio as well as a visual journey that you take when you go.*

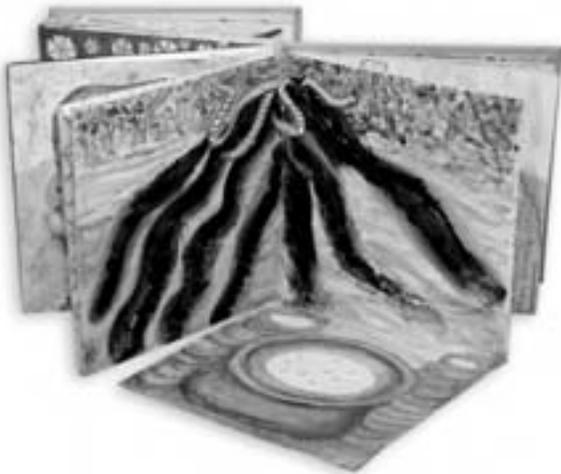


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Sri Lanka, 2002

Double-latched saffron cover decorated with silver colored scroll work. Interior pages (below) feature drop down structures. Fold the flap up for text and down to create a small room filled with original drawings.



You're getting the whole flavor of sound and language. You said that you traveled primarily at one time of year, which sounds like the winter months?

Margaret: Yes, I go at that time because I'm affronted by the Christmas activities in this culture. So I like to escape that. I also teach and most of my students peter out during the holiday season, so it seems like a good time to abandon them rather than when they're in work mode.

Nicholas: *What do you teach?*

Margaret: I teach harpsichord and piano. I've been a musician my whole life. That was my profession.

Nicholas: *Do you have another book?*

Kate: *Yes, take us somewhere else.*

Margaret: This is the Shiva Lingum. It's about eight years ago. When I got to Varanasi in 1997, that's the city known for its constant cremation ceremonies—if you get cremated there you are home free.

Kate: *It's on the Ganges, right?*

Margaret: Yes. I get the most out of life when I narrow my focus. I stayed there for two weeks and I went everyday to Manikarnika, which is the main burning ghat. I found a place where I could climb up and be not very visible. I stood up there every day for the whole day and I sketched. If you're watching them cremate—and they cremate 24 hours a day—it gives you a chance to see patterns and aspects.

I went other places, but they never made it into the book. I felt this book needed to be made of one subject.

Kate: *That's a very dark cover...a very dark book.*

Margaret: In that way it does dictate where I put my energy and focus or influence me. Not dictate but influence.

Kate: *The cover becomes like a door that you go through every night. When you're working, it would seem that you're working kind of linear. I mean, you're going through the book as you work. Do you go back and look at what you've done and try and match that?*

Margaret: I don't try to match it. Well, some books. But no, not that one. Each little spread was its own world.

Nicholas: *Do you have another one?*

Margaret: Yes, this is another India book but it's much earlier. This is one of my favorites.

Kate: *Howard, how did you do that hand? Is that an inset?*

Howard: They're made for applying henna.

Nicholas: *And so you just cut an inset?*

Howard: Inset and placed it inside. I choose black because the books are going to go through a lot of rough treatment and they have to stand up.

Margaret: You're traveling in one of the dirtiest countries, India, and just keeping your own hands clean is a challenge. I leave them in the room, I don't take them out.

Nicholas: *When you're working on the books, do you interact with anybody? Like if you meet somebody and you show them what you're doing?*

Margaret: I very seldom show them the books. But they see me sketching and that of course really enhances my trip. People are often rightly unhappy with cameras pointed at them, but they're very appreciative when I'm drawing. I've had wonderful encounters with people that were so flattered that I was doing the book or doing the sketching. I have them say, well, you're seeing things we've never even seen, really. You get used to living in a certain ambiance and kind of shut down what you're seeing.

Nicholas: *You work that (the text) out?*

Margaret: I work that out ahead of time...very often, before I write it first. I was writing about the whirling dervishes. I knew I wanted to



Burma, 2000

Inlaid cover and slipcase. Screwpost binding. Interior pages open to triple gatefold structures filled with original drawings and calligraphy.

use the writing as an artistic element. I had written it first and then I had to find out what size, how to get it so that it would work there.

I'm writing my impression of what I saw. Then I think well, what can I do with those words in this image?

Nicholas: *When you're thinking of that, is it in the handwriting you normally do everything in?*

Margaret: I change my handwriting a lot when I'm writing. It's sometimes subjective. I have a lot of different scripts.

Kate: *My sense is that because of your study about the words and the visuals of the words, it's changed the way you see things when you come home. Do you find yourself looking or writing differently after a trip? You're talking about a visual explosion on the page. Does that work into your life?*

Margaret: Well, I do many things. When I'm traveling I'm only traveling and having a receptive experience and making the book. I'm not working in the forest felling trees (I do a lot of that). I'm not preparing for a concert...making a film...making a quilt—all those things that I do when I'm home. When I'm there, I'm only being there and only have the book. I don't have the luxury when I'm home of having nothing much to do except just experience life and make one work of art.

Here's a specific answer. I was home from a trip. I was down in North Beach shopping at an Italian deli, and I heard a sound coming from the periphery, a wild sound; gongs and bells and explosions. But I was shopping for dinner, period, end of story. I had only been home maybe a few weeks. I thought, "if I were on a trip I'd be over there now. I would have high-tailed right to that sound; what's my problem?"

So I did. I caught myself shutting down. I went over there and it was fantastic. They were opening a new bank—a Chinese bank. My first instinct was to not uncover it, not go there.

Nicholas: *Do you have another book?*

Margaret: I have one more—most recent one—the Sri Lanka book. We'll probably need the whole table for this one

Kate: *Readers aren't going to be able to see this in black and white. It's a*



very diminutive square book with a saffron cover and a remarkable kind of double Chinese bone latch.

On one side of the page there are birds and plants brilliantly painted in; it's all wildlife. But the other side of the page, the accordions open out into rooms.

Margaret: It's several different experiences. This is like maybe one experience you can have with the book. I used one theme for the whole book. I mean, one way of working with the book. The text on all these is on that side. Then when you have the book open, there is no text. In that sense I think of it as two books because the text parts are about the image. They explain or they hopefully enhance the image.

What I could have done was to make a lot of different shapes. I kept to a regular plan with my shapes on this.

Nicholas: *Did you curse Howard much?*

Margaret: Something that is this specific in its form, you are stuck with, not in a negative way, but you're bound to that form. It's there all the time. Once you realize that you're bound to the form, then the question is how much mileage can you get out of it. That's why I tried to have a motif. Those flaps have a motif both on the top and on the bottom. They have the text motif on the bottoms.

Next to the alphabetical scripts, my next passions is for local designs. All the designs in my books are based on those I see in the area. I don't dream up designs. I see these on the ceiling in a cave. These patterns I was trying to make really look like little floors, little tile floors. So that it became like a little world made up of small rooms.

Nicholas: *Do you find it difficult to start working in this sort of non-page linear method?*

Margaret: No, but you don't rush into it because the book will become a commitment. I'm rather an orderly-mad person. Form interests me a lot, pattern interests me, but I also like to be able to stretch it and break it.

Kate: *Howard, what inspired you to do this form?*

Howard: I think Margaret does like challenges. Her whole life is nothing but challenge...one challenge after another. Why give her a boring book.



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Nicholas: *Are you planning any more trips?*

Margaret: Yes.

Kate: *When is the next?*

Margaret: December, January.

Nicholas: *You don't know where?*

Margaret: I'm not sure. I'm not sure yet...You told me one month after I was back from Sri Lanka, you said "oh, I've got the idea for the next book."

Howard: It actually is true.

Margaret: Oh, I better get ready.

Nicholas: *And then you're going to spring it on her in the last minute?*

Howard: I'll spring it on her in the last minute, yes.

Margaret: You had a question that I think is an interesting one. You said "What happens when you show the book?" When I have shown my books to people in those countries, unless they were very active in the art world—museums, galleries, things like that—they miss it completely. They leaf through. They look. It takes two seconds and they're finished with it. They don't know how to experience it. It's always strange. I don't bother showing them anymore.

Nicholas: *When you show your other friends here, do they take time and look at it and read and get fascinated and ask you questions?*

Margaret: Some. I've had friends really interested in trying to figure out what's going on, because some of them are pretty complex. I have actually let them take a book home.

I'm very much in love with these books. They enrich my travel experience immensely and in a way that taking pictures never did. I used to take slides. I had a million slides and I never looked at them. I love the books. I can look at them. It's almost a form of narcissism.

Nicholas: *Or maybe meditation on your part.*

Margaret: Yes, that's better.

Kate: *Do you think it's narcissism?*

Margaret: I'm looking at myself. That's kind of narcissistic. I just love the fact that I did them. It doesn't sound very modest, but it gives me great pleasure knowing that I did them and that was my trip...something really concrete and beautiful. I've enriched my own life thanks to Howard.

Howard: I also think when I do a travel book it's very close to you.



India, 1996

Cover (top) featuring a henna stencil inset and embroidered ribbon hinges. Interior spread with drawings, Indian motifs and postcard ephemera.

Margaret: Very close, it's very close.

Nicholas: *So Howard, you make books for yourself when you do travel?*

Howard: I make travel books, yes. Mine are very personal. I think the same thing: I don't like to get rid of them. I look at them over and over again. They're just like a personal friend.

Margaret: The art that's put into them isn't about how many hours can you spend on two pages. Mine is. I don't travel the way I did when I was in my twenties. I don't have to be out beating the pavement all day long. I can get enough input by going out in the early morning, maybe up till 10 or so spending the middle of the day when it's hot in my room, and going out again in late afternoon. I

have one little book and two months. I don't want to use it all up so I don't do fast things. I take time on pages because I want to have it still there to be worked on. I have weeks more of experiences to have. Where will I put them if I'm working fast and filling up the book?

Nicholas: *It's kind of interesting that Mr. Speed here has done a book in a week for a trip that you cherish for two months. The pages are a finite number of surfaces and you don't want to get to the end before you get to the end of the trip.*

Margaret: That's right, I don't. I could get near the end and get more fancy with it. But you don't really know what's going to happen on a trip.

Nicholas: *It seems to me that you have an internal structure about your experience that allows you to fill the space allotted and fill the emotion allotted. Your two months are about being present fully and recording it as much as you can.*

Margaret: It may not be what you think. Look at that image (in *India, 2001*), and then look at those images. I was not happy. I had a very hard time adjusting physically. My body was not adapting and that's what this is all about.

Nicholas: *A fish out of water?*

Margaret: Yes. It's all about the pain, the difficulty. My body was not letting India in. I wanted it to come in. I was ready, but my body wasn't. It was about that state of being.

Nicholas: *So, I get that a pleasurable trip may or may not happen?*

Margaret: It's like life. You don't get what you thought you were going to, you know. Anything can be book material, good or bad, painful or ecstatic.