

# Keanu Reeves is a publisher of the new L.A. press X Artists' Books



From left: artist Alexandra Grant, designer Jessica Fleischmann and actor Keanu Reeves, the creative forces behind X Artists' Books. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



By **Agatha French**

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**“W**hat are books to you?” read a slide projected at the launch for X Artists’ Books as three of its founders — Alexandra Grant, Jessica Fleischmann and, yes, that Keanu Reeves — took the stage at NeueHouse Hollywood last week to discuss their new independent press, which publishes unconventional, interdisciplinary and collaborative artists’ books.

In this private workspace for creatives, there isn’t a cappuccino-colored armchair in the screening room to spare; the small crowd spilled into seats in the aisles, some already clutching “High Winds” and “The Artists’ Prison,” X Artists’ first two titles.

Upstairs, preparing for the event, Grant, a visual artist, talked about how their creative differences feed into the press. “Your job is to read a script and figure out how to embody it,” she said to Reeves. “Mine is to embody text into painting, and yours,” she said to Fleischmann, “to embody into books.”

“I think that’s what X Artists’ Books is about,” Reeves added. “It’s people coming together with all their talents and creativity.” Seated around a table, the publishers were excited — almost disbelieving — that the launch had arrived. “All of that talent, passion, joy for books and for art, then to come back to the reader,” Reeves continued.

Grant agreed. “We’re going to put a book into the world, and someone’s going to take that as a jumping off point,” she said. “We’ve all had those moments where we’ve been in a library and it’s saved our lives.... I love imagining that encounter with our works.” Artists’ books, she said, are polyvalent, with multiple access points. “Different people will come to them through different doors,” drawn to the poetry, or images, or design. Fleischmann, a designer, parsed the genre’s appeal: “Ideas can be put forward in a context and in a form that isn’t necessarily expected.”

Grant, who works with writers and text as a source for her paintings, photography and sculpture, met Reeves a few years ago through a mutual friend for whom, early in their acquaintance, they threw a joint birthday party, cooking steaks. (“From the beginning we were collaborating,” she said.) Grant made two artist books with Reeves, “Ode to Happiness” and “Shadows,” published by Steidl. She knew [Still Room](#) designer Fleischmann socially before they too collaborated on a book, “Interior Forest.”

If the spirit of X Artists’ Books is creativity, dialogue and collaboration, its genesis began with Grant completing “The Artists’ Prison.” (In an inversion of their traditional roles, visual artist Grant wrote the text and Eve Wood, a poet, responded with images.) A Hollywood-type had showed interest in the rights; on stage Fleischmann recalled Grant telling her, “if [they] think these rights are valuable, then I’m going to make it myself.”

“It was wonderful to dream up the book and then dream up the imprint around a real need that I had.” As it turned out, “Jessica also had a hidden book project, and then [Keanu] had a hidden book project,” Grant said. “For me it’s really exciting thinking how many other creative people have these secret books.”

Fleischmann had already been working with Sylvan Oswald on “High Winds” for three years. Reeves brought in the forthcoming “(Zus)” by Benoit Fougereol.

Artist books are works of art that utilize the form of the book as their medium. Surrealist artist Max Ernst’s “Une Semaine de Bonté,” in which he collaged Victorian illustrations, and Ed Ruscha’s “Twentysix Gasoline Stations,” which is exactly as described, are artist books. A distinguishing feature of the books, Fleischmann noted, is “they’re made by artists.”

Unlike, say, children's books, Reeves said, where illustrations are often directly tied to the narrative, artists' books, which may not be narrative at all, are "more developed," their text and imagery "not quite a one-to-one experience," but a "launching point."

"In a way you're making a proposition with an artists' book," Grant said, "which is: I might surprise you, I might delight you, I might confuse you." That goes for collaborators — and readers.

Reeves cited a chapter from the book titled "Prisoner: 38," as exemplary. (The text alludes to a suicide by poison. The drawing contains a gun.) "It really helps to enhance the experience of reading and looking and seeing," he said.

Fleischmann added that X Artists' Books share an "emotional courage."

Grant agreed: "There is a strong sense of politics and social interest that goes through each single one of the books."

Reeves put it more simply: "They ain't all bedtime stories," he said; they may be beautiful, "but they're complicated."

X Artists' Books' first two titles cost \$35 each and reach a print run of 1,300 and 1,500, an amount, Grant explains, that "really allows the price point to be more reasonable and the quality to be higher," ensuring that X Artists' Books are democratically available and artists retain the copyright to their work. High-quality printing is a priority for such a haptic, tactile product, said Fleischmann. "We're making physical objects — the smell, the ink on paper."

Somewhat mysteriously, Fleischmann called "High Winds," her collaboration with Oswald, "a pillow book," then explained: "Part of what it's about is his transition from female to male, and testosterone, and the effects that that had on him.... He wrote this thing to try to sleep." She rested a palm on her cheek. "The size and the shape of [the book], you could put it here." What's more, "It's floppy so that you could be in bed with it."

"High Winds" as a collaborative text will continue in yet another permutation. "He just won a grant to turn it into a performance," Grant said. And why not? "We're giving ourselves permission," she explained, to create widely, with an open mind. "Hopefully as a reader you're receiving that permission too."

Permission received. At the afterparty, held at NeueHouse's rooftop bar, I watched the sunset over Sunset Boulevard, all palm trees and glowing gradient, before sneaking off to paw through "High Winds." Highly graphic, its pages are saturated in color, and while it's not explicit, I realized I was looking at a representation of what I'd just seen: a wash of soft pink and blue western light, in a book the author had told the audience moments earlier was written after moving to L.A. It was a glimpse of what artists' books can do

— expanding and elevating their form and content.

“Why we’re doing it and what it’s for,” Reeves had said earlier. “The pleasure of reading and thinking and imagining, and to go on a journey.”

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