

Interview with Mike Hepher of Clawhammer Press in 2017 as part of the Post-Digital Book Arts Project:

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Do you want to introduce yourself and where we are today?

MIKE: Sure. My name is Mike Hepher and I'm the owner and proprietor of Clawhammer Letterpress and we're right here in my studio, right now in downtown Fernie, British Columbia.

Perfect. Why did you start Clawhammer Letterpress in this day and age?

MIKE: Well, funny you should ask. I actually, if I go back a little further, I moved to small town BC and I'd done a lot of degree work, working towards graphic design, but never had actually worked as a graphic designer. So I moved to a small town and was looking to get back into a creative field, but was taking my time sort of finding a spot. I ran into a fellow at a coffee shop and he said, "what are you doing for work?" and I said, "I don't know, something creative". And he said, "well, have you ever wanted to be a blacksmith?" And I said, "I didn't know you could be a blacksmith". And he said, "well come up to the shop tomorrow. I'm looking for someone sort of creative." So I ended up working as a blacksmith for a couple of years and was really fascinated with the historic nature and the really tactile qualities of that work that was largely architectural ironwork. And what I ended up doing was a lot of drawing for him because he could make anything out of steel but he couldn't draw it to save his life and I had a really strong drawing background. So, knowing how steel worked and being able to draw it led me to draw architectural ironwork for clients to sell ideas basically. And that led me back into design. And so I got into design work and really, the easiest way to make any kind of progress in the design world was to do digital design. So I learned how to - re learned - how to do all the computer software and ended up falling in love with typography again. But I really missed that real tangible, working with the materials that blacksmithing gave me. So there was a time there where I was working two days as a blacksmith and 3 days as a graphic artist in two very different worlds. One was digital and one was very analog. And eventually, I chose the digital world and for several years, I worked exclusively as a graphic artist in the digital realm, but realized I needed to get back to something hands on. Because you - what I realized is that, everything that I designed ended up being a PDF in an e-mail off to somewhere else, printed somewhere else or as zero and one on a hard drive somewhere. And I never really saw anything. I never really made anything. It was always very theoretical design work and once in awhile you'd see a poster or a business card out in the real world or in the "wild", as they say. But, it felt very insubstantial. So I started thinking about the historic part of graphic design and if you go back one hundred years, there were no graphic artists, there was just printers. So, I went down to my local print shop and I knew the owner had been in business awhile and he had an old Chandler Price platen press just in front of the shop, bolted to the curb, kind of a thing, in the elements.

Cause that's all they were worth.

MIKE: Yeah. That's right. He had it painted bright red, including the rollers. And had it sitting in front there. So I went down and I said, "do you know anyone who could teach me to handset type?" I was really just curious about trying it for a couple days, to feel that hands on connection again. And his answer was, "well I don't know anyone who could teach you, but how much room do you have?" And so three weeks later I was hiring a big crane truck and hauling the press to my garage. And enough sort of type and supplies to get a start on the process. But no one showed me how to do it. So I ended up ordering on Amazon, this used platen press operation to print manual. Like, this old leather bound thing from the 50's. Just starting at the beginning and making my way through it. Took me three days and a toothbrush to get the centimeter of dirt and grime

off of the press and then I just kind of chipped away at it over the next two or three years 'til I got my mind around the process and got the press up and running.

All while still working?

MIKE: Oh yeah. Actually my garage - I had framed out an office - so, the press was literally beside my digital workstation. But the funniest thing is that, when, in the summer, when the garage warmed up, there was this ink smell. Because all of the oil-based inks are linseed oil based or natural organic oils - they smell wonderful. So I would go into my digital design studio and smell this ink and it's like walking into a house where you're making a good curry, like, you just want to eat it. But I had so much going on in the digital studio that it was this tension, right? And I felt the pull towards this analog. And as soon as I kind of got a couple print projects under my belt, I realized that what I wanted to go back to was back in time, not forward. You know, the graphic design world was so heavily immersed in web design at the time and, I mean, I hated it. For a graphic artist, print is the ultimate goal. But there was just so little paper design available. I ended up designing websites and apps and learning to coding and all this stuff. But what you realize about a website is you never finish a web project. It is never done. You can never set it aside. So what I ended up having was 115 ongoing clients that needed update to their websites and it was like, "change this text in this paragraph" and "we need a new tab on this with this page text" and "we need these photos changed on that". There was no end to these projects and I became a service technician, rather than an artist. And it was killing my soul, so I realized I had to move towards making this analog thing my life. And so I - we - looked around. I lived in Cranbrook and looked around, sort of, spaces where I could have side by side and maybe balance my life - part analog and part whatever. But I knew I had to make my own products and sell them because no one was hiring me to print anything. So I did some asking around in Cranbrook and I always got this sort of hazy, glazed over sort of look like, "why would you do that?" People just didn't get it. So I realized I needed to go somewhere with a little bit more of a cosmopolitan view and maybe a bigger tourism base. So we started looking around at other mountain towns. Didn't want to - was born on the prairies. I lived in Alberta my whole life until I moved to Vancouver and I've slowly been working my way backwards, I guess. But I still wanted to live in the mountains. I couldn't, sort of, see myself back on the prairies just yet. So it was Nelson or Fernie. We spent a bit of time in Fernie and thought there's a great arts scene here and there's already a tourism base and everyone we talked to said, "there's a great idea! You should do that!" so we moved to Fernie with the idea of just, sort of scoping out a space to set up Clawhammer press, not actually setting it up yet. Just kind of, change of life and shut down the graphic design firm and went back to freelancing. And ten days after we moved to Fernie, the server that I hosted was hacked by Turkish hackers. So we had one hundred plus websites that were all wrecked. And so I spent the next three weeks doing sixteen hours days rebuilding every single one of those websites from scratch and then I said, "enough". And we went on holidays for a week and then we came back and signed a lease at our new spot and started setting up Clawhammer Press. So, it was a journey. I got my first press in 2003 and it was 2011 when we moved to Fernie. So it was eight years of learning and working towards making this a goal. And even when we opened Clawhammer Press, I was still working part time as a freelance digital designer. And then in afternoons and evenings, coming in and printing things and trying to build up a stock of things to sell. And that's really the long story. Ultimately, it was digital fatigue that has led me back to the analog. But, everything feels so much more meaningful in my life, but also the products. There's a humanity to it that you just can't achieve in the digital realm.

This is kind of an out there question. What's your first memory of a book?

MIKE: First memory of a book. My grandmother, who was British, had these little books at her house that were the original Thomas the Tank Engine. They were these little tiny things and as a kid, they felt perfect. And they weren't the - I don't know, when ours kinds were in the Thomas the Tank Engine phase, we watched an amount of Thomas the Tank Engine and it's pretty inane. It's

insipid crap. But the original ones were actually - the little trains were quite rude to each other and it was this British thing. They were stodgy and mean to each other. Henry didn't want to come out of the tunnel, so they bricked him in there and left him there for a year. They were conniving little trains. But I think that was my first memory, was the illustrations, which were so vivid and colored and then the little bit of text. They were, yeah, they were wonderful little books. And then that segwayed into another British series by Arthur Ransome, the *Swallows and Amazons* series, that I read voraciously as a kid. There were about thirteen different books in the series and they're all about kids who go sailing in the Lake District in Northern England and they have all these adventures. So they were adventure novels for kids. And I've since tried to read them to our kids, but because the language is fairly 1940's British English and there's no contextual kind of reference for the kids. It's difficult for them to understand even what's going on. So it's kind of an interesting thing. But I love those books. So those are my first real memories with books, were those. But I read a lot and I'm glad that my kids now - I don't know if you're familiar with the *Wildwood* series? With Colin Meloy?

No.

MIKE: It's sort of a young adult fiction that's modern. It's written by the lead singer of the band, the Decemberists. So it's a series of three books. And they're like, six, seven hundred pages - written for teens or young teens or whatever. Adventure stories, set in Portland. And my son just finished all three of them in the span of a week.

How old's your son?

MIKE: He just turned twelve.

My son just turned thirteen while we were here.

MIKE: Good. Yeah, can't get enough books. It's unusual. Both our kids love to read. And so I'm glad that they've captured that because there's so much about reading that I value.

You don't end up where I end up without loving books. On that front, do you ever read an e-book?

MIKE: I haven't. I've never. I don't like actually reading on a screen. I don't - there's something about the tactile quality of a book that's missing, but also just the glow. I've read some - my mom has one of the digital papers ones. Is that a Kindle?

Yeah. I think. There's a couple of them.

MIKE: Yeah. The original one. Anyway, on a holiday she had a couple of novels on there and I read part of one and that was acceptable. But it wasn't like this - I feel this glow of radiation from so much screens in our world. It's not just the glow. It's that candy. I don't know if you see with your kids too, the moment there's a screen on, they have to come over. There's something about it that sets the dopamine firing in our brains. We want the shiny, toy candy-screen-thing. It's almost impossible to regulate in ourselves, let alone in our kids. So yeah, I resent the eBook almost because it forces me to spend more time in front of the screen when I actually want to be doing something real.

Well on that same note, again, you moved to Fernie here. Obviously it was really important because it allows you to have an in-presence or in person presence. There's a tourist base, lots of new people coming through constantly. Does much of your business rely on e-commerce?

MIKE: No, it doesn't actually. Some people have a real success with that and I have been scratching my head about it for a long time because we've run an etsy shop for years and had sporadic success. Actually, this last November/December was one of the more successful, kind of, months of our e, kind of, commerce lives. But, I feel like one of the reasons, and this is very personal, I don't think it's very general to the whole e-commerce industry, one of the things that I've discovered about myself is that I'm not a very good salesman, but, I love to talk to people about art. And about my art, and the process, and that sort of thing. And it's just another level of value that I can offer people in person. And so when they're here in the shop and see the machines and see - I can talk to them for a minute. I can't bring myself to be, "You should buy this over here. This definitely is for you." I'm just like, "this is what I do. Here's some products. Have a look around". If you don't like anything, then have a great day. But I think my personality is so integral to this business and what I make and the products are part of my character. And so I think without that connection, people just don't see them the same way. And so that's the only thing I can think of that's obstructing an e-commerce business in a really niche, personal trade like mine is. That, you know, I'm not there. You can do your best to show people you life on the website and write a bio on your Etsy page and write descriptions that are witty and whatever. But ultimately, if people don't know me, I find they don't connect with my product a little bit.

No, that's really interesting, Because, there's a couple models now where - there's kind of your model, and there's the people that almost exclusively - they're a workshop and all the sales are online.

MIKE: And I think, I mean, I have lots of friends in the industry that see it a different way. And they have different skills and different skillsets and different style. You know, I have a couple of friends that they exclusively make posters and they're so well known in the industry and their style is quite contemporary. So they have a lot of big names, right? It's additional - so, if you design a poster for Wilco, for instance, then people are going to buy that at a Wilco concert, which is what they're for, but also, all these artists keep a chunk to sell. So there, the marketing is not just people that like letterpress or like handmade things, but people that like Wilco. And I don't have a lot of those in my product. I have things that I'm passionate about, that I'm making prints for. Some of them are local. Very Fernie-centric because I know there's people coming through and one of my side goals is to make souvenirs that are not made in China. That are not little bears holding signs that say Fernie, B.C. on them. You know, like, something that really reflects the character of the town and is not something people need to feel corny about buying as a thank you or taking home to remember their time here. So, you know, those are a couple of things where I feel like I can connect with people. But, you know, again, there's cheaper and easier ways you can buy a postcard if you really want something that says Fernie on it. If you want something handmade, that's handprinted and hand carved here, then, you know, people want it a little more.

Two last questions here and then I'll let you get on with your work. Talk about inspirations. What inspires you to come to work and print? Or who?

MIKE: Well, this might sound a little defeatist, but honestly, some of its inspiration - but that's sort of on again, off again. It's like the romantic love part, right? But for me, the art-life, hashtag art-life, is more like a committed relationship. I honestly can't imagine doing something else. I'm highly unemployable. You know, I have lots of skills that nobody really needs except for myself. So, you know, my boss is sort of a jerk, and he orders me to work everyday. But also, I can't imagine working for anyone else. Being that I'm self-employed, all those things are left up to me. But I like that responsibility. I like deciding what I'm doing now, or today, or next week. Or planning for six months from now. Or coming in and saying, I just need to do something for me today. You know, there's lots of ups and downs. These last six weeks of my life, I have these two projects - this one here [motions to press], that's on press is waiting for type, and then one other one, which I should be finishing this week. But I got them to the point they're at before Christmas.

Here we are, almost March. And so, the print shop hasn't been really busy, but I've been focused on other things and sometimes you just end up in this planning cycle. But you have to go through that in order to create space for the inspiration to roll in, right? So I'm trying to give myself patience. And say, this is a thing that you go through once a year or every nine months or something. You just have to tie a bunch of loose ends off. So, coming back to inspiration, some of it is just work and creating a space and then some kind of inspiration rolls in from somewhere - from other work or from Instagram or from, you know, someone says something and you take it home and it germinates and it blossoms into some fireworks in your brain or something. One of the things about our new studio too is working beside other artists, and that's inspiring too. My studio mate, Angela, is such a hard worker. She paints, I don't know, ten, twelve hours a day. And she's killing it. That's just to keep up with her galleries, let alone, moving forward on her own work and stuff. So just seeing that in action. Seeing someone work hard and love what she does is inspiring too. The other day we were sitting here, eating cake over the counter. We both had a fork and she had a cake and we were just chowing down. And we were like, "We have a pretty good job." I think she might've had a glass of Prosecco in her hand too. Where else could you do that? It's just inspiring and every time someone buys something I'm grateful. Or someone comes and says, 'I like your work enough to lay down some of my hard earned cash', then go home with it. It keeps me moving forward.

Okay. Last question. This one comes from John Maxwell, who's at - he's the head of the publishing program at Simon Fraser. He wants to know what music people listen to when they print. So what do you listen to?

MIKE: Hm. My music tastes are so diverse, I don't know if I could pick one. But, Clawhammer is an old-time banjo-picking style. And my wife and I play old-time and bluegrass music, sort of weekend warriors, you know? So we've done a little bit of touring with our music. So we're fairly serious about our music too. And clawhammer resonates from an era, kind of stand point. You know, the old time - the story, as I understand it, is that, back in the Blue Ridge Mountains, in the 1800's or late 1800's or whatever, the miners would go to the mine and work their fourteen hour shifts or whatever and come home and want to play their music, and the music came from all over the world. But, it kind of solidified in this sort of hillbilly mountain. But they couldn't uncurl their fingers. So they had to find a way to play their banjos by sort of striking their hand. They strike with their finger and then pluck with the thumb. And it's this rhythmic, plucking, thumping motion that they call clawhammer. And not only is it era appropriate for the equipment and stuff that I have, but when you're running a platen press, there's this clawing motion that the hand printer does and then the hammer of the press. So it feels like an onomatopoeia also. So I feel like that whole - the press name - felt very resonant with the business. Again, this is the sarcooidosis root to the answer of the question, when I'm printing I feel like old-time music is where I generally do to. Default. So, clawhammer banjo pickin'. But if I'm not in the mood, then some ambient techno. Sometimes you just need something clean and clean, right? Because open-ness of mind is an important thing. I feel like if you can't have your spirit open or your mind open to what you're doing in art, then it feels pretty jumble-y in there. And in this time of life, with kids and work and projects coming in and different things to do, sometimes I just need to clear it out. And so silence or something that is - has a lot of space in it.

Thanks Mike, that was absolutely spectacular.

MIKE: Thanks for coming. I appreciate it.