

Hi, I'm Marieke Van Der Steenhoven, the Special Collections Education and Outreach Librarian at the Bowdoin College Library.

Today I'm going to read an artist book called "Tattoo" which was created by the book artist Martha Hall in 2001.

Martha Hall, who lived from 1949 to 2003, was a Maine-based book artist, writer, weaver, and business owner and executive whose creative work focused largely on themes related to her 15 year struggle with breast cancer, which included living with the fear of dying, creating an order to heal, understanding one's own legacy, and appreciating and living fully each day.

"Tattoo" interrogates the stereotypes and stigmas around tattoos and cancer. The work was one of Hall's earliest that received wide attention and it also informed her later works that all explore all aspects of living with and dying from cancer. In Special Collections, we're the caretakers of over 40 of Martha Hall's books as well as her papers.

"Tattoo" was the first book of Martha Hall's that I ever encountered but I later learned of a number of intersections between our lives. We both attended the same college and found an important friendship in the director of the rare book room there. For me, he introduced me to artist books which set me on the path of this career.

Martha Hall also owned a yarn and fiber arts store in Yarmouth, Maine in the 1980's and I later learned that both my mom and my grandmother were regulars at the store buying yarn and knitting and learning how to weave.

Here's "Tattoo," I hope you enjoy it.

Tattoo.

When I was a child, I would steal glances at my grandfather's tattooed blue anchor only sometimes visible on his tanned forearm just below his khaki sleeve. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to see it. I thought tattoos must have something to do with the Navy or going to sea or that war that happened long ago. I had seen them only on white-haired men.

Years ago, we took our small daughters to a lake and found it changed. The crowd was rough, loud, like the motorcycles they had arrived on. They were not like us. Even the women had tattoos. We called the beach Tattoo Beach and never went back.

A few years ago, my daughter, Danielle, gave me a postcard. It is a black and white photo of a nude woman with her arms outstretched. She has a vine with flowers tattooed on the scar across her missing breast. I hung the card up on my studio door. I admire the woman's courage, her joy, her beauty, her defiance.

This summer at Haystack, I shared a studio table with George from Philadelphia. I was afraid of him, a very tall, black man with a shaved head who made complex, powerful, angry art. He was loud, brash, gay. Then I heard him sing in a beautiful soprano voice as he worked and saw that the tattoo on his muscular, brown arm, was Curious George. One night he was looking at the book I was making called Living and told me that when he was 16, his mother had died of breast cancer.

Last month I sat in art class next to a young woman who had blue rubber bands wrapped around her middle finger. I was wrong. They were not rubber bands, but

tattoos. After class, our instructor admired this young woman's tattoos and bared her own self-inflicted art. The young woman had pricked a blue ring on her finger. The older woman, a wide blue bracelet on her wrist. The two women talked of the ink they'd used, the needles, the time it took, the pain. I couldn't believe any woman would do that to herself.

Thursday night at an art show opening, I stood in the gallery with two other artists. We talked about our tattoos. Blue dots to mark radiation's burn. Reminders that made us sad, angry, frightened, grateful to be alive. I have blue dots on my hip, one now even on my chin. There are three in a row above the scar on my blank, left chest. One of the women pulled down the neckline of her dress to show us a blue dot centered between her breasts, now gone. We compared our tattoos standing there in the art gallery among the guests as if this were an ordinary thing to do. Then we laughed. Maybe we should connect the dots.

Now, I think I want a real tattoo. A symbol used long ago by courageous female warriors. It could be my symbol of the courage, power, and strength I need to fight my cancer. It could be my prayer flag. Will I dare to prick the surface? Would it help to add another scar?