



Media Release

NSW State Library reveals the books that 'break all the rules' in new exhibition

What if a book wasn't just something you read, but something you experienced?

A little-known and unlikely collection of art by leading contemporary artists — including Ed Ruscha, Judy Watson, Wendy Sharpe and Bill Henson — takes centre stage in a bold new exhibition opening at the State Library of NSW.

Paper Universe: The book as art showcases almost 100 rarely seen works from the State Library's extraordinary collection of artists' books. Featuring striking and innovative creations, the exhibition reveals how artists transform the idea of a book into works of art.

According to State Librarian Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon: "*Paper Universe* offer a rare chance to experience some of the most inventive, thought-provoking and surprising works in the Library's collection – many by some of Australia's most celebrated artists – all in the one place."

Curator Maria Savvidis has spent years delving into the more than 700 artists' books — collected since the 1990s — housed across nine underground storage areas of the Library. The exhibition highlights pioneering works from the 1960s and 70s, including Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), an accordion-fold masterpiece that photo-documented LA's most famous boulevard 40 years before Google Street View got there.



Proof (detail) 2015, by Penny Evans



Paper Universe is one of the most challenging exhibitions the Library has ever staged, with works ranging in size from just 5 centimetres to a monumental 40 metres and made from an array of materials and techniques.

“Artists’ books break all the rules. They stretch, fold, sculpt and reimagine the book as an object — not just something to read, but something to experience,” says Maria.

David Frazer’s interpretation of Nick Cave’s song ‘Love Letter’ uses 18 wood engravings to explore his ongoing and sentimental “fascination for hopeless men dreaming of the time they once had a girlfriend” but blew it!

“The works are bold, beautiful, and often deeply moving — responding to music and poetry, politics, the natural world, and the complexities of personal identity,” Maria added.

Liz Powell’s striking landscape painted with hand-ground ochre — the artwork unfolds through a concertina book, is bound with sticks gathered on her travels through the Northern Territory.

Proof 2015, the richly collaged and sewn artist’s book by Penny Evans, combines cloth binding, digital prints, stitching and long loose threads to reflect “my family’s journey of piecing together our history before and after the invasion of Australia, drawing from her Gamilaroi, Welsh, Irish and German heritage,” says Penny.

“After spending time in the exhibition, we hope that our visitors feel inspired to start their own creative project, whatever form that may take,” says Dr Butler-Bowdon.

Exhibition visitors are invited to create their own paper art in a dedicated maker’s space adjacent to the exhibition. There’ll also be workshops with featured artists as part of a dynamic program of talks and events connected to the exhibition.

Paper Universe: The book as art is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW (until 3 May 2026), open until 8pm Monday to Thursday, and until 5 pm Friday to Sunday.

Learn more: sl.nsw.gov.au/paperuniverse

MEDIA INQUIRIES:

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