



The Frans Masereel Centrum is a Flemish government organization that hosts printmaking residencies and workshops in Kasterlee, Belgium. The Centrum is named after and dedicated to the well-known Belgian painter, printmaker and pacifist, Frans Masereel, who created beautiful woodcut prints in the style of wordless comics.

www.fransmasereelcentrum.be

Printing Comics in Belgium *by Marlene Yuen*

IN APRIL 2010 I DID A RESIDENCY at the Frans Masereel Centrum in Belgium, where I printed a limited edition comic book, *Gingerbread Blahs*. This comic book is based on a short, humorous comic that I made in 2007 for a Portland, Oregon publication called Puddleville. At that time, I was one of a group of seven artists who contributed to two short volumes put out by a comic book collective of the same name. Unfortunately, Puddleville disbanded in 2008, but before it did we managed to publish a last volume with a fairy tale theme. And it was for this that I came up with my modern version of *The Gingerbread Man*, or in my case *Gingerbread Blahs*, which focuses on the main character, a gingerbread cookie, who is dealing with the dilemmas of growing older: getting married, having children and aging gracefully.

Clear, plastic polymer plates are light and durable for travelling and excellent for depicting fine text and illustrations. Although I had little working knowledge of them, I felt they were ideal for this comic book. And because the residency was only three weeks long, I decided to prepare my plates well in advance. I finished illustrating the 14 pages of strips with ink on paper in January. Then, working with Bowen Island printmaker Vanessa Hall-Patch, I learned how to expose and develop my strips and put them onto polymer plates. Thus, upon arriving at the Frans Masereel Centrum, I was all set to print.

The Belgian manual relief press made by C. Fremaux et Fils that I was assigned to was very similar to a Vandercook press, except that the front rollers had been removed and the power was off due to



(Top, left to right) Comic illustrations on photopolymer plates ready to be printed. Editioning plate #2 on the manual relief press. The cookie cutter on the front cover. (Right) Accordion-folded pages.

Marlene Yuen's books can be seen at www.marleneyuen.com.

safety concerns. Initially, I was apprehensive about hand-inking each plate with a brayer, but the results were surprisingly good. The press worked well with my polymer plates and produced nice, crisp black prints. I had great fun printing this book. Every morning, studio mates and residency staff would come down to my drying rack to read the next page of the comic and would chuckle and ask what was going to happen next.

Once all the pages were printed, I handset lead type for printing the title page and colophon. The typeface I chose was a bit of a mystery as it had been donated by the Jan Van Eyck Academy of the Netherlands. However, after some research with Ivan Durt, the artistic director of the Frans Masereel Centrum, we figured out that it was called Halbf. Shakespeare (meaning “half Shakespeare”). I attached the pages (made of Revere silk ivory 250 gsm paper) together with a pH neutral, permanent PVA glue to form an accordion-fold book, which opens out as a long comic

strip. I printed an edition of ten and finished the covers with bookcloth glued onto thick millboard. In the nearby town of Turnhout, I purchased a small cookie cutter, carved a hole in the middle of the front cover, and fitted the cookie cutter into it to frame the front page image of the gingerbread character. (The Canadian version of the book does not have a hole; instead has a gingerbread cutter and ribbon closure.)

I loved learning about Belgian culture while I was at the Centrum. Half of the residents were Belgian and we socialized, ate deliciously rich foods (e.g., endives baked in cheese sauce), and talked about each other's art practices. The residency was also crazy and exciting because the Icelandic volcano, Eyjafjallajökull, erupted midway during my stay. As a result, European airspace was closed for six days, which prevented my husband from visiting me, but also allowed me to linger a few days longer and participate in the print shop's annual open house, *opendeurdag*. •