

Tamar Stone: Telling Women's Stories

by Deborah Kogan



Tamar Stone creates bookworks that present narratives from the lives of women from the 1800s to the present day, embodied in artifacts associated with the domestic sphere (traditionally considered both woman's domain and her destiny). In this article I describe how Stone has developed two major bodies of work—the Corset Series and the Bed Series—to give voice to the varied experiences of women.

During her undergraduate studies in the 1980s as a photography major and graphics minor at Pratt Institute in New York City, Tamar Stone took a book-making class. Of her initial experience with the book arts, she says,

I realized that I didn't have the patience and personality to be so picky about making right angles and using my bone folder and all those special glues. For my final project, I sort of gave up on the traditional route and chose to make a book out of plastic pages—where I sewed things into the pages (using rubber fish and blue hair gel)...I can't even remember what the teacher thought at the time, since everyone else in the class was making beautiful books with fine papers.

However, looking back at her first student book now, Stone says, "...I'm just realizing

that in that book I began to take a look at women's bodies—juxtaposing a bunch of 'cheesecake' pinup post cards I [had] collected—and contrasting them with things like a chicken leg/rubber dog chew toy." This first book project, then, hinted at one of the themes that would become a major interest driving Stone's subsequent art—exploring how our male-dominated culture has attempted to influence women's self-image through advertising and the marketing of "beauty aids."

It was over ten years after that initial book arts class that Stone rediscovered her interest in artists' books. In the interim, she studied film and television at NYU, where she completed an MFA in film production in 1990, and began working in the film industry. She describes her undergraduate studies in photography and her graduate studies in film as evidence of her interest in narrative storytelling. After making her first few artists'

Above, Stone's *untitled Pink Corset Book* (2000)

On her website, Stone documents 15 corset books completed between 2000 and 2007. web.mac.com/picturetown/iWeb/TStoneArtistBks/Home.html or Google 'Tamar Stone'

books in 1998 and 1999, Stone realized that bookmaking was a natural extension of narrative storytelling and allowed her to draw further elements of her personal experience into the art process. Furthermore, making artists' books gave her more intellectual control over her art, unlike filmmaking, which was often more of a group effort.

Stone's first artists' books explored her personal experiences as a child growing up with scoliosis (curvature of the spine) using translucent pages and layering of images to superimpose personal feelings and medical/ anatomical texts and images. Stone explained, "Much of my identity—physical and otherwise—has come from having to wear...a metal and leather brace from the time I was 13 until I was 18 [for 23 hours a day]." While doing research on the history of braces to correct scoliosis, Stone got caught up in reading women's history. She was struck by the similarity of some of her feelings growing up—feeling isolated and insecure and being told she was deformed and had to be reshaped—and the experiences of the women 100 years ago that she was reading about.

Stone continued exploring the historical record. "...I learned that you can learn a lot by reading all those footnotes in the back of the books along with the bibliographies—which then got me to the original sources from the 19th century literature about housework, etiquette, sex and on and on." Once Stone immersed herself in original historical documents about women's lives—including both instructional manuals and advertising directed at women and the diaries and letters of the women themselves—she found a wealth of personal narratives that she wanted to include in her artists' books. As Stone explains it, "Inspired by my own experiences, my books capture moments in women's lives when issues of appearance, self-esteem and assimilation become paramount due to physical restrictions placed on the body, either by fashion or by medical necessity."

Priscilla Juvelis, a seller of rare and fine books who specializes in both contemporary book arts and books about women, summarizes the impact of Stone's book works by saying, "...[Stone] makes [women's his-

tory]... personal and intimate." For example, in one of her bed books, Stone tells the story of Elizabeth Packard, who was confined to a mental institution, without examination and without redress, based on the word of her husband and two doctors. Juvelis says, "Mrs. Packard wrote a book about her incarceration and is credited with changing the national laws regarding confining women to mental institutions... I have had a first edition of this work and knew its importance, but seeing [Tamar Stone's book in the form of a doll-size iron bed] and reading the text stitched on ticking and sheets gave it a sense of immediacy that stunned even me—who knew the work well."

When she first started making artists' books, Stone didn't know very much about the history of artists' books or what other book artists were doing. After Printed Matter (a major distributor and retailer of artists' books in New York City) indicated that it wanted to sell one of her early books in 1999, she was reassured that her work could find an audience. She began volunteering at Printed Matter, where she had time to look at other artists' books. She says, "I know of Booklyn, and Purgatory Pie Press...and I am a great fan of Lisa Kokin and Julie Chen. However, I've learned that when I stop to take a look at what is around me—in the art world or book world—I tend to get overwhelmed and then I won't do my work. So I realized that what works for me is just to sort of stay 'out of the loop' with the book world."

Most often, Stone works on several books at one time. Doing the research for one book seems to generate ideas for six more books. Priscilla Juvelis comments, "Tammy has so many ideas I think that she only wants the encouragement and time and money to keep creating. I don't think she has even begun to explore all her possibilities...UNmarginalizing [*sic*] the story of half the world's population. Tammy has plenty of history to explore and bring to our attention!"

The Corset Series

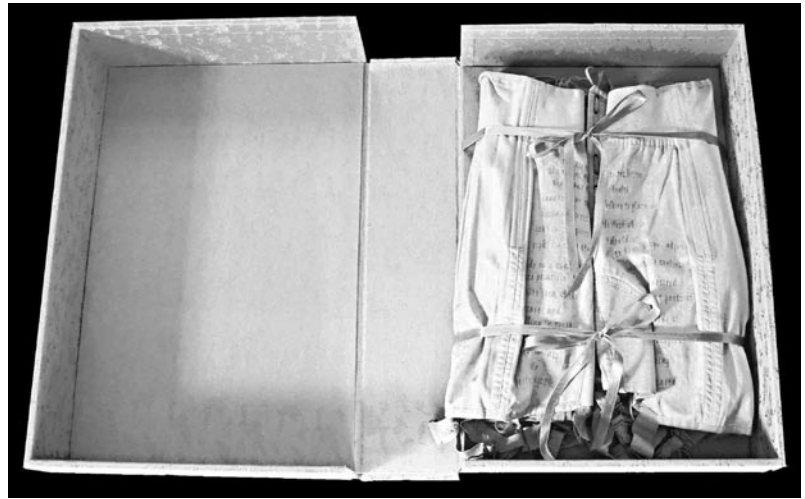
Starting with *untitled Pink Corset Book* (2000), Stone decided that she wanted to talk about women's history using a 3-dimensional fabric book structure that "helped tell

the story of women who were confined by their clothing and various social mores.” In the *Corset Series*, the material structure of the book is derived from vintage women’s and children’s undergarments purchased at flea markets or from on-line auctions. The text is sewn into the fabric of the books using machine embroidery. Because each underlying garment is unique (and each has a different story to tell) each book is unique. (Stone has experimented with making multiples of the “same book” using the same text on similar garments—but found that she still needed to customize the design of each book so as to fit the text to the exact dimensions of each garment.)

In the *Corset Series*, Stone interweaves texts that describe the ideal woman—taken from 19th and 20th century instructional manuals about female comportment and fashion advertisements—with personal memoirs written by women of the time. She presents these contrasting perspectives without comment and lets readers draw their own conclusions. As they read about how women were instructed to reshape their own bodies and the bodies of their children to fit societal norms (even when it meant deforming their bodies), readers are made complicit by the fact that they are lacing and unlacing the fastenings of the books. Stone also sees the undoing of ties, laces, and buckles as part of a “slowing down,” initiating a contemplative process for the reader that “echoes what women have been experiencing for a century of dressing and undressing.” Stone often interweaves multiple points of view in the same book. For example, in the book *Curvatures* (2005), Stone combines excerpts from advertisements for scoliosis braces, medical textbooks describing the condition and its treatment, and writings by women who have worn braces. In reading the text, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the multiple voices, but the reader quickly becomes aware that we are seeing the world of scoliosis from jarringly different perspectives:

“It does away with the slouching figure, gives a good erect carriage; you’ll appreciate its attractive lines...”

is followed by



In *Untitled Pink Corset Book* (2000) (also p. 1) Stone used text from a variety of sources from behavioral manuals of the 19th and 20th centuries, to personal narratives written by modern women. The book is constructed from five different vintage garments connected together. The various layers of garments peel open to reveal both their own backside and the front of the garment within. The garments include, from outside to inside, a pink corset for the cover, a maternity corset, and a coral waist cincher. Like all of Stone’s works, every possible free surface contains some embroidered text. Excerpts from the text include such advertising claims as “the ease of movement and natural grace it allows a charm and certain youthful air” and the counter-response (under the laces)—“the pressure of the laced corset in this general area largely inhibits abdominal breathing.”



In *Gracefulness of Motion is Delightful* (2003), above, Stone used a vintage child’s adjustable “waist” (undershirt) as the landscape on which she embroidered texts with opinions about how to guide the development of young girls’ figures. Inside the vest is a pocket containing 13 handmade cotton dolls each wearing her own removable “waist.” The dolls are attached to each other with vintage satin ribbons. Most of the texts included in this book talk about the need to let girls develop without constriction, “with only the minimum support needed to aid graceful development,” but at least one refers to the benefits of early support to prevent the need for later corrective action.

“... pushing unforgivingly on my ribs with any movement and demand[ing] a most erect posture to prevent my shoulder braces cutting into me...”

Stone says, “I have an open call to any girl or woman that has a bed story, I would love to hear it!” You can contact her at tamarstone@pipeline.com. However, she realizes that there might be a problem using text from someone who is recognizable and still alive, which is why she tends to use anonymous texts or stories that are over 50 years old.

The effect of reading these multi-voiced texts can be disconcerting, something like being in a hall of mirrors where it is difficult to assess where each of the different overlapping images originates and which images provide accurate and which distorted views of reality. Stone herself describes how, when she was a child, she thought “that if something was in print it must be true—why else would someone print it?” She goes on to explain, “Of course I now realize that is not the case, and that the power of advertising is something that has had a hold over us since the day of its inception.”

In making the corset books, Stone draws on notebooks filled with potential texts that she has researched over the years. For each book, she selects particular texts to match the theme she has in mind and the garments she wants to use. In the earlier books in the *Corset Series*, between 2000 and 2003, the primary design elements included the garment, the text embroidered into the garment, and, on occasion, embroidered images stitched by machine. To design how the text would work on the different surfaces of the garment, Stone would photocopy the image of the corset and then glue selections of text onto that image. She then sent the paper dummy to the embroidery person, who she says, “has been working with me for years and knows what I am trying to do,” and who lets her know what is technically and not possible to do with computer-driven machine embroidery.

In later works in the *Corset Series*, Stone adds digital photographic images printed directly onto old cotton bed sheet material with a commercial (Iris) inkjet printer. Most recently, she has used her own Epson printer and Durabrite inks to print images onto a variety of fabrics that have been pre-treated for inkjet printing and backed with paper. For the embroidered texts, she still proofs a paper printout and checks how it will look when printed.

The Bed Series

Starting in 2003, Stone began working on a second series of sculptural books that consist of doll-size beds with text embroidered on each layer of the bed coverings—including the front and back sides of the pillow and pillow case, the coverlet, the sheets, and the mattress. Stone explains, “The *Bed Books* were created out of my interest in the history of housework [and the home]. Because women have always been associated with the home, hearth and all the domestic duties that belong to them, this project was an extension of my fascination of women being confined and defined within certain societal walls—but this time, within what has been referred to in Victorian times as the ‘Gilded Cage’—their homes...”

Stone sees the bed as a central image in women’s lives. She says, “Historically our life cycle begins and ends in the bed, from being born in a bed, and then dying in one. As children we used the bed as an impromptu trampoline or tent. As we got older, it became the place in which intimacies are shared with significant others. It used to be that all of our life cycles (birth, sickness, and death) occurred in our beds, in the family home.”

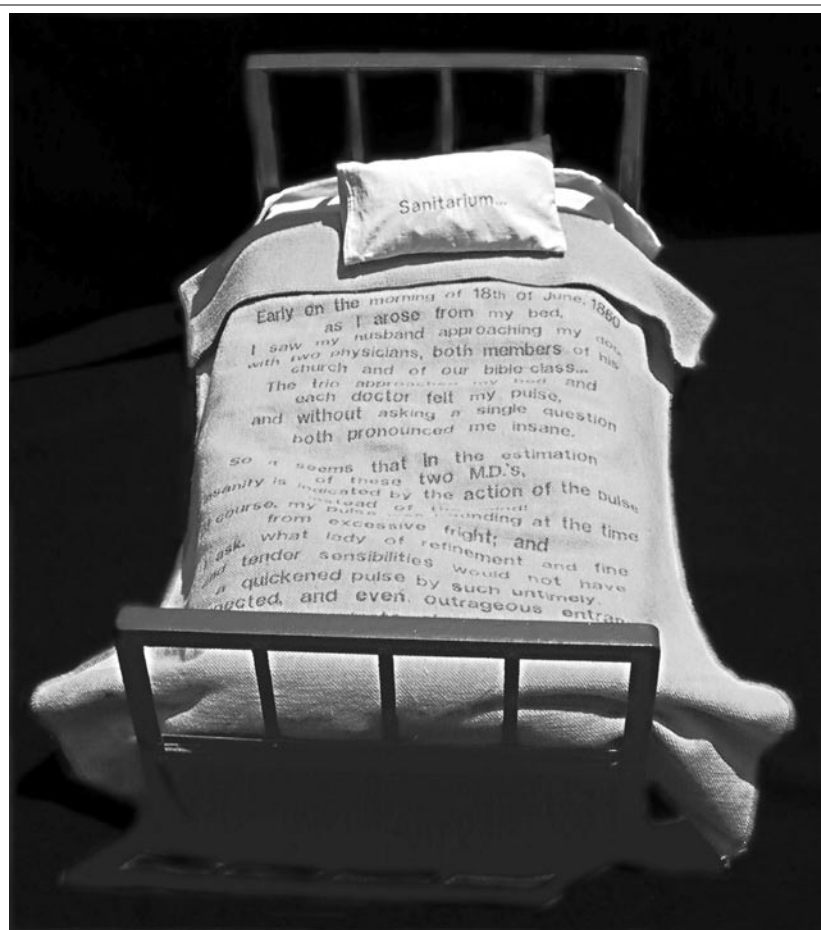
Like the readers of the *Corset Series*, readers of the bed books must become intimately involved with these books in order to read the stories. To read a book, the viewer has to pull back the covers to turn the pages, thereby unmaking the bed. As Stone notes, “The only way to close the story is to re-make the bed, mimicking the actions of housework that women have been doing for centuries.” When she started making the books in the *Bed Series*, Stone originally wanted to do the entire series using life-size beds, because it would have strengthened the effect of the reader having to “do the housework” when they read the book. However, financial and logistical considerations with a series of life-size beds were mind-boggling, so she decided to “start small.” She found she liked the intimacy of the small beds, as well as the idea of girls playing with doll-size items in order to prepare them for being wives and mothers.

The books in the *Bed Series* tell a variety of intimate stories from women’s lives anchored

by the bed image—about women’s experiences working as homemakers [in *Household Comfort* (2004)], giving birth [in *Brought to Bed* (2006) and *A Case of Confinement* (2005)], and surviving a variety of relationships with men [in *He Said, She Said* (2003)]. Some of the most poignant stories tell of a women’s confinement to bed because of illness [in *Taking to Bed* (2007)] or the involuntary institutionalization of wives because their husbands claimed that they were insane [in *Asylum ... Institution ... Sanitarium* (2004)].

In the bed books, we hear about the messages women received about themselves from the surrounding culture, but we also get to hear about how individual women understood the meaning of their lives and their identities as separate from their societal roles. For example, an anonymous speaker in *It’s Where I am Now* (2006) (photo, p. 6) says, “When I wake up early I like to lie in bed and have a think about my life. It’s the only time I have to myself and what I need to get me through my day.” There are also brief moments of humor to lighten the generally serious tone of these stories. For example, in *Household Comfort*, after repeating the advice (from an instructional manual for women dated 1837) that “It is a good plan to strip the clothes off your bed and shake it up as soon as you rise from it”, Stone tells the story of Mrs. B. of Chicago, who in 1947 dropped her bed on a car parked beneath her window, and then explained: “When I shake my bedding, I shake it bed and all. It just slipped out of my hands.”

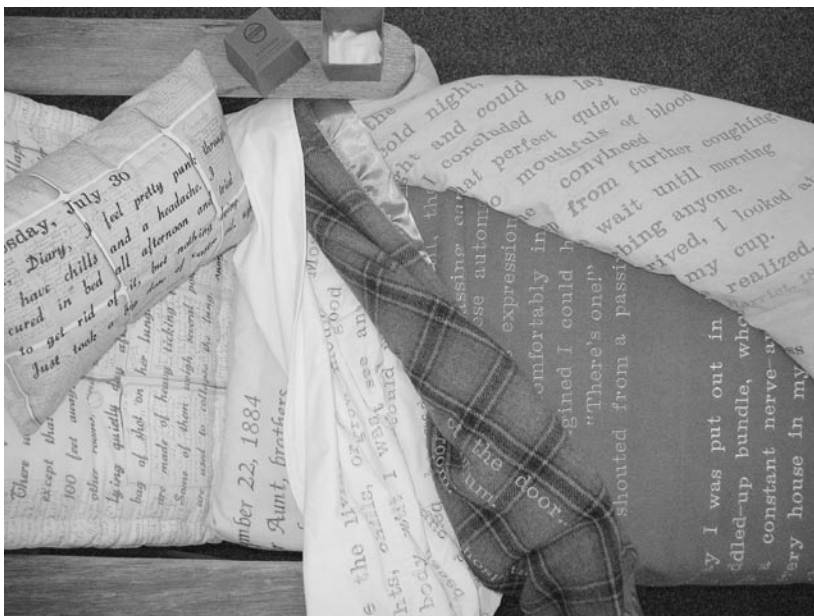
This year, Stone completed and exhibited her first life-size bed book/installation, titled “I’ve sat and lain in bed for months,” which tells the stories of girls and women who spent their days “curing” in tuberculosis (TB) sanatoriums across America from the late 1880s to the mid-1940s. In this piece, Stone uses the diary of a 16 year old girl who stayed at a TB sanitarium in the Adirondacks in 1918 as a unifying theme, with a chorus of additional voices from diaries and letters written by other women tuberculosis patients. Made from an antique Adirondack “cure bed” with coiled springs and vintage sheets and blankets, the “cure bed” book has many pages—because the women taking the



In *Asylum...Institution...Sanitarium* (2004), a doll-sized bed, Stone tells the stories of women who were incarcerated and forced to live in a prison and sleep in a prison bed—even if it was sometimes called by another name. In one of the stories, Elizabeth Packard described how she came to be in such an institution: “I saw my husband approaching my door with two physicians, both members of his church and of our bible-class....The trio approached my bed, and each doctor felt my pulse, and without asking a single question both pronounced me insane.”

cure lay under many layers of blankets on their porches breathing the cold mountain air. The tedium of these stories reflects the tedium of their days, as one girl says: “Same old routine...I’m sick and tired of it. Get up, eat, cure, eat, cure, go to bed...” As part of this installation, Stone included some of the other objects that would be found on a sanitarium’s curing porch, next to the bed—including a 25 pound “Bullseye Brand” bag of lead shot that would be laid over a patient’s chest to temporarily collapse her diseased lung, and a vintage “Burnitol” sputum cup.

Stone says, “I still dream of doing a large size/scale piece using something like a warehouse—where different rooms are put up all with different themed beds....but after [the



Both photos above: *The Cure Bed: "I've sat and lain in bed for months"* (2008). Stone's first life-size bed, tells the stories of women who spent months "curing" at TB sanitariums in the Adirondacks.

"cure bed"] life-sized bed— which I paid for myself— I can't see myself being able to pay for a large multi-bed installation in the near future." Meanwhile, she continues to tell the stories of girls and women using the doll-size beds.

Among the bed book projects that Stone is currently working on are doll-size bed books "about girls and their beds," and "girls and housework." She reports, "I have another bed ready to go about the history of housework...and then there are the stories of women who went west on the Overland Trail in covered wagons and other covered wagon/pioneer stories, and various nurse stories—from the civil war through WWII." It sounds like Stone is not in any danger of running out of stories to tell in her bed books. ☞

Deborah Kogan is a photographer and book artist who lives in Santa Cruz County, CA.

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It's Where I am Now (2006-2007), a doll-sized bed, tells the stories of women for whom their bed becomes a place of privacy and solace. In the embroidered text, one woman explains, "My bed is the place where my mind forms the greatest beliefs in myself... and at different times the greatest doubt."