IN THE MODERN pastime of thinking about Keanu Reeves, a few images endure: the monastic undercover F.B.I. agent in “Point Break,” the monastic prophesied savior of an oppressed future in “The Matrix,” the monastic emissary from an alien planet in “The Day the Earth Stood Still.” Of these, “monastic art-book publisher” is perhaps less immediate, though, as of last year, it’s no less
accurate. Since the summer, X Artists’ Books, a small press that Reeves launched in Los Angeles with the visual artist Alexandra Grant, has been producing aggressively esoteric titles of the kind that wouldn’t fly at larger imprints.

Not long after Grant and Reeves met at a dinner party in 2009, they began collaborating on their first book, for which the 45-year-old Grant — who makes text-based paintings about linguistic connections — created washed-ink drawings inspired by a winkingly morose poem that Reeves, 53, had written. The result, “Ode to Happiness,” released by the renowned German publisher Steidl, was an archly sullen self-care guide in the Sendakian mode, with a regimen that included “I hate myself face cream” and “alone again silk pajamas.” A few years later, they reunited with Steidl for “Shadows,” which paired Grant’s chromatic images of Reeves’s own silhouette with his gnomic meditation on loss, impermanence and acceptance. (It’s lighter than it sounds.)

Hollywood is lousy with actors’ vanity projects and left-field dalliances — burger joints and artisanal tequilas and cultish lifestyle companies that may or may not be pyramid schemes. But Reeves’s extracurriculurs feel more in sync with his persona: They’re rooted in artless sincerity, whether he’s playing bass and supplying backing vocals for the mid-90s alt-rock band Dogstar or cofounding a California motorcycle manufacturer called Arch. Instead of feeling like a departure from acting, these projects — along with bookmaking — express a genuine interest in not just creating objects but in the process of creation itself. “Not that we’re reinventing anything,” Reeves says. “But the idea of a quality book is definitely our ambition.”
REEVES HAS BEEN acting since the mid-80s, embodying characters that have shaped American popular culture, yet he usually seems at odds with his celebrity. These days, his public identity — which combines the reticence of a downbeat bodhisattva with a penchant for glowering — occupies more of the collective imagination than his oeuvre does, or perhaps it’s just that his persona and his characters have become inextricable: The concepts for both “Ode to Happiness” and “Shadows” feel borne out of an indelible 2010 meme of Sad Keanu, photographed on a New York City park bench staring morosely into his sandwich.

That latter book, which was also presented as a series of gallery exhibitions, first at the erstwhile Acme gallery in Los Angeles and last year as part of PhotoSaintGermain in Paris, prompted Grant and Reeves to consider the experimental capabilities of book publishing. “Part of the genesis of X Artists’ Books was that these projects might become a performance or an exhibition,” Grant says. They tested this theory with the first full English translation of “The Words of Others” — the Argentine artist León Ferrari’s 1967 polemic against the Vietnam War and American imperial politics — which became a seven-hour staged reading at L.A.’s Redcat theater last year.

They recently released “(Zus),” a visual essay by the French photographer Benoît Faugeirol with text by Jean-Christophe Bailly, structured around the 11 “Zones urbaines sensibles” of Paris’s banlieues that presents the Brutalist peripheries as a failure of both the state and imagination. Reeves had been working with Faugeirol, whom he met through family friends, on that book before launching his imprint, helping finance things like helicopters for the aerial shots as well as bodyguards for the team when visiting the neighborhood’s rougher quarters.
Not that Reeves is simply X’s money man. He and Grant make most business decisions together, including what to publish. They don’t accept submissions and haven’t worked with agents, preferring instead to unearth what Grant calls “secret books” — knotty concepts that might seem unpublishable. Their titles are stocked at art bookstores like Otherwild in Los Angeles, Printed Matter in New York and Yvon Lambert in Paris, as well as through an online subscription program ($130 for the first four releases; there are five more in the works).

In many ways, this model was inspired by working with Steidl, yet X Artists’ Books also feels indigenous to Los Angeles, its books the spiritual descendants of Ed Ruscha’s inexpensive self-published ones or the work of Mike Kelley, whose art delights in the weirder reaches of society’s margins. (The ‘X’ in X Artists’ Books is meant in the collaborative sense, but it also, as their website notes, “stands for treasure, uncharted territory, the core of infinity.”) For the main run of “(Zus),” they enlisted a communally owned printer in Rennes, France, but also produced a limited-edition series of prints that have been acquired by the permanent collections of the Centre Pompidou and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. “In terms of where the printing happens, the quality of the paper, the haptic feel, that’s something that’s important to us,” Reeves says.

And if there is something comic in the idea of one of our generation’s most successful movie stars running a micropublishing house that produces recherché objets d’art, that feeling is dispelled in listening to Reeves, who is almost excruciatingly thoughtful — it’s not uncommon for him to take minute-long pauses before responding to a question — discuss the intricacies of paper stock or international distribution. “The challenge is how we get these artists’ work into the world,” he says. “It’s a responsibility of ours as the publisher to do the best we can.”

“What to add to that?” he asks. And then, a minute later: “I love me a good book.”