

Artists
redefine
the
world
of
books



page

When is a book not a book? When you can wear it around your wrist? When it's written on the wings of a butterfly? When it's a circular arc without words?

If this sounds a little like a Zen riddle it's because "artists' books" are hard to define. For instance, they're not books about an artist's work. They are the artist's work. They're art in book form even when the form doesn't look much like any book you've ever read.

BY SHERYL SEYFERT



A life-size artist's book, titled "Journey (Monarch Butterfly)" by Johanna Finnegan-Topitzer

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If you're a little confused, you might want to see the new exhibit at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, which runs now through January 25, 2009. The show, *Artists and Books*, offers the opportunity to look at books in a new way: to step out of our traditional mindset and explore what books mean to us as individuals and as a society.

While the exhibit isn't entirely about artists' books, they're an extremely important part of it because they remind us that a book is much more than the sum of its parts. For artists such as Johanna Finnegan-Topitzer of New Hampshire, the structure of the book offers endless possibilities for "conveying a story or emotion," which, after all, is what good art is about.

The three-dimensional nature of the book also allows artists to create works that have a second life as sculpture. For instance, works by artist

Marcia Ciro, of Watertown, are made of Plexiglas, wood, or metal. One of her books in the exhibit is made of thin aluminum plates covered with images she created using pigmented inks. She then wrapped the separate plates around cardboard tubes and riveted them together to create arcs. Open, the sections reveal images; closed they form a complete circle with a cover image.

Is it sculpture? Definitely. Is it a book? Think of it this way, an artists' book shares a number of attributes with the traditional codex (books that are paper-based and bound): they're generally small and portable; their parts open consecutively; they only reveal their hidden wonders when manipulated by the viewer or reader; and most importantly, they communicate an idea or story which provides the reader or viewer with a sense of closure (even if it's only the physical state).

page turners

Not all artists' books use text. Ciro's books, for instance, use images drawn from photographs she's taken of the world around her. A recurring theme in her work is the relationship people have with the environment, both natural and man-made, and the way they separate themselves from it and try to control it. "I don't look at the environment in a 'save the whales' sort of way," Ciro says, "but more in how we transform the environment and how the environment transforms us."

Another book, by Boston artist Joyce McDaniel, is made from handmade and pattern paper, steel, and stones. It conveys—in the visual language of form, texture, and materials—the story of how Virginia Woolf killed herself by filling her pockets with rocks and walking into the pond near her home. And like any book, it can be opened and the pages turned.

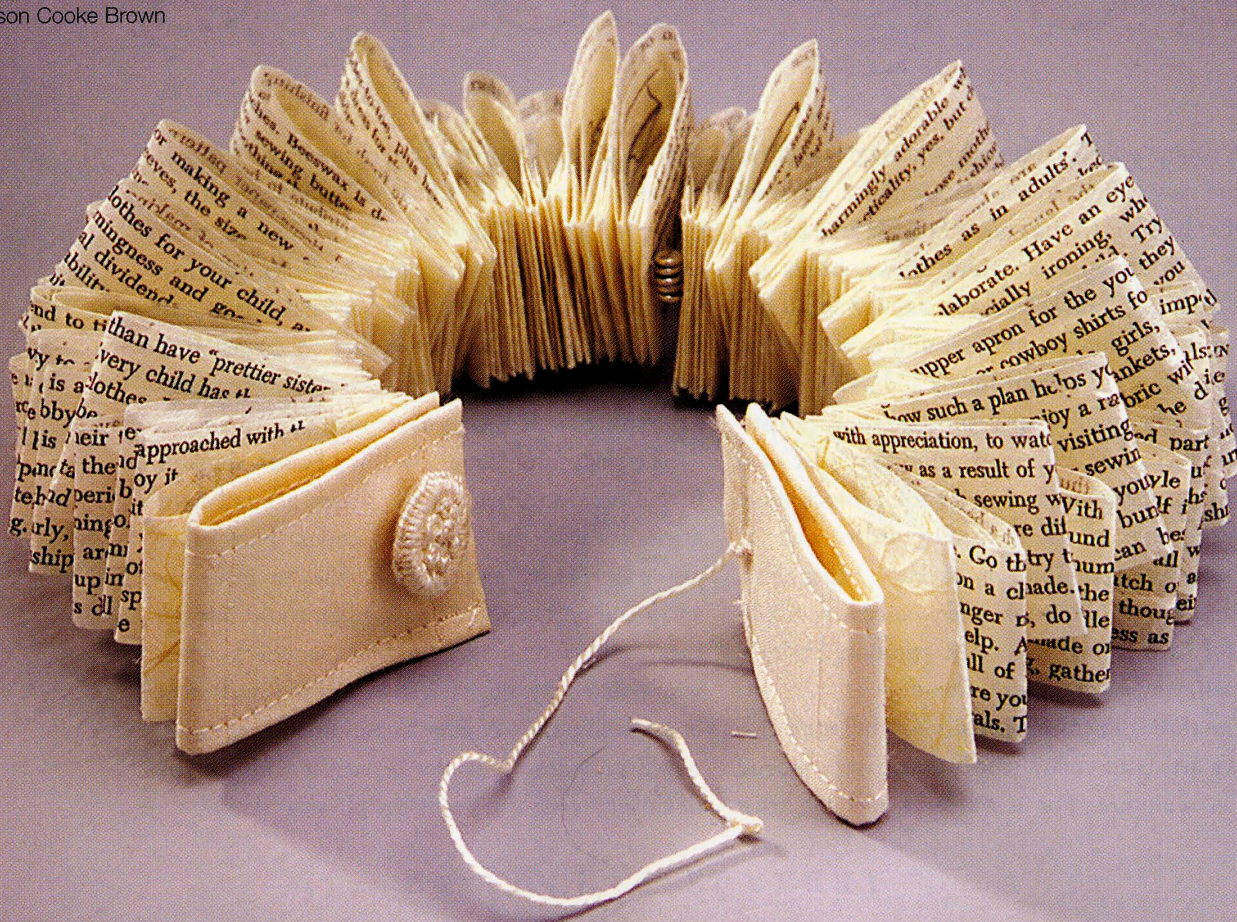
The concept of artists' books is not really new. According to Craig Bloodgood, contemporary curator at the Art Complex Museum, one of the earliest examples is the Irish Book of Kells. Created in the late 8th- or early

9th- century, the book consists of pages of intricate and brightly-colored designs as well as comic representations of animals, birds, insects and human figures that drift between lines, peer from behind letters, lurk in the corners of pages and hover in the margins.

It wasn't until the second half of the 20th century, though, that contemporary artists began to focus on books as an art form and it became a distinct genre. It has only been in the last 15 years that the books have become more diverse and popular with collectors, especially museums and well-endowed libraries.

Ciro, whose work is in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, created an early form of the artist's book (more journal than sculpture) in 1989 when she was living in Manhattan. It had a collaged Plexiglas cover bound with cord which set it apart from other journals of the time. "I rented space at the Center for Books Arts and didn't sell one," she admits, "but I did have a lot of people who wanted to know how I'd made it." Five years later the market for the books grew and all of hers sold. "They no longer looked

A wearable "Cuff" book
by Allison Cooke Brown





"Eat Your..." A woodcut with watercolor by Stephanie Stigliano

weird," Ciro says. "People finally began to get the idea."

Not all of the works in the Art Complex's exhibit can be considered artists' books. Instead, they're art that asks us to look at our relationship with books—to think about their place in our lives and our feelings for them—and to contemplate the evolving nature of their structure in this electronic age.

According to Boston artist and photographer Jeseca Ferguson (whose work is in the show), books are becoming increasingly "disembodied" as people read novels and non-fiction texts on everything from laptops, handheld PDA's, and Tablet PC systems. Virtual books, though, only make Ferguson more nostalgic for the traditional bound books with their texture, intriguing jackets, and pages that rustle

when you thumb through them.

Ferguson particularly loves old books "that have been tossed in the dust heap somewhere. These books have history," she says. "Inside are the names of previous owners, notations in the margins, and pages that have been dog-eared. They've meant something to somebody." She haunts flea markets, used bookstores, and yard sales looking for them. It's a search and rescue mission in which the goal is to give the cast-offs new life as art.

Ferguson's pieces are collages or, as she calls them, "constructions." She creates a still life of objects, which often include a book or pages of a book, and photographs it with a pinhole camera (whose invention dates back to 1021 A.D.). She prints the photograph using



Inca's Passage (left) and Shuttered (right) included in the show but are not original to this article as published by South Shore Living.

page turners

19th-century techniques, which create either blue or brown prints, and then mounts the image onto a tattered book cover.

“The reading of a book enables the mind’s eye to make an image, an odd sort of paperless photograph,” Ferguson says in her artist’s statement. It typifies what she has done for this exhibit: transferred images from her “museum of memory” onto the skeletons of old books.



A collage piece by Jesseca Ferguson

Where Ferguson’s art utilizes equipment and processes that date back to earlier centuries, artist Mary Taylor, of Marshfield Hills, uses high tech methods to help us see books as historic and meaningful objects. “I’ve been fascinated with books ever since I was young,” Taylor says. “I see them as containers that hold all sorts of things. They’re wise and wonderful and interactive.” Her work in this exhibit is from her Sacred Valley Souls series in which she digitally collaged photographs she took while in the Sacred Valley area of Peru with parts of the

scanned pages from the 16th-century chronicler Guaman Poma.

“His drawing and text have provided historians with a magnificent and detailed perspective of both the ancient Inca customs and the civil and cultural clash with the Spanish conquistadors,” Taylor says. “The chronicler’s style, where he combined text with his drawings, fascinated me...I deal with text as image and as content, and in his primitive style he accomplished so much more than I have ever done with any of my own work.”

Taylor’s current art focuses on doors, which she says are passages just as books are. “Doors are covers with the same hinged quality as books.” And, she adds, once opened both lead to all sorts of wonderful places. [SSL](#)



“Letter to a Young Poet” by Joyce McDaniel

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*The Art Complex Museum is located at 189 Alden Street, in Duxbury.
For more information, call (781) 934-6634.*