What do our shoes say about us? That is the simplest, most essential question posed by “Souls of Our Shoes,” a recently opened photography exhibition at FAU’s Wimberly Library.

The artist, a 20-year-old FAU junior named Maria Mor, “stalked” strangers for about a month, a process that required her to not only photograph their shoes from intimate, artistically specific vantage points, but to strike up conversations with them. The resulting photographs, accompanied by quotations from the shoes’ wearers, offer a window into their philosophies and cultures – going straight to their hearts through their boots, heels, sneakers and flip-flops.

The images’ titles speak to the personalities of her disembodied subjects. "Confidence" shows a pair of shiny new Nikes poised to sprint on a track, representing the wearer’s athleticism. "Best For Less" shows off a pair of blingy, budget-conscious shoes reflecting the subject’s stylish thriftiness.

I was especially fond of "Put Together," whose office-appropriate black heels are shot in a low angle and seemingly in mid-air, making them seem giant, ready to crush the Lilliputians below. Given that the subject is a teacher, perhaps the artist is saying something about the position of power she has.

Sometimes, the shoe owners’ testimonies provide all the difference, prompting us to view the image in a more enlightened way. The best example of this is "Wanderer," (pictured above) which shows a pair of raggedy, decrepit shoes riddled with holes and frayed stitching. But knowing that the owner wore these shoes during an entire adventure in Peru suddenly makes them seem cool, exotic – a keepsake to be memorialized, not discarded. The exhibition concludes with Mor’s own shoes: simple, comfortable, St. Patty’s Day-green slip-ons pointed toward the heavens, alive to the endless possibilities of her art. The entire project is enough to make you think twice about your next shoe purchase.

Just a few steps away in the same FAU Library, you have a couple more weeks to catch “We Are Dragon People,” an evocative exhibition of photographic pop-ups courtesy of the university’s Jaffe Center for the Book Arts. The 2009 series is the work of Philadelphia artist Colette Fu, sampled from a trip to China’s Yunnan Province to explore her tribal roots. Twenty-five of China’s 55’s minority tribes reside in the remote province, and Fu honors this small percentage of tribespeople by monitoring their customs while expanding her own photographic acumen.

It’s a wonderful bit of cultural ethnography in the cloak of art, as Fu excels in finding creative reasons to spring her images forward in three dimensions. In “Wa Hair Swinging Dance,” she shoots a celebration of Wa women dancing to the rhythms of divine drumming, their long black hair bursting forth as vibrant pop-ups. “Tibetan Bear” honors the Tibetan mastiff, its head blooming in multiple dimensions from the base of a flower, reflecting the beauty and respect bestowed on the dutiful guard dog.

In “Hani Rice Terraces,” I counted at least seven 3-D layers of terraces, suggesting the endless bounty of rice fields. But it has nothing on “Hani Long Table Dragon Banquet,” which depicts an autumn harvest of food, with 3,000 tables positioned end to end, the dishes springing from the tables, tempting us.

And you thought Savor the Avenue had a long dining table.

“We Are Dragon People” runs through May 19, and “Souls of Our Shoes” runs through Sept. 27 at FAU’s Wimberly Library, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton. Admission is free. For information, call 561/297-3770 or visit fau.edu.

Tags: fau, souls of our shoes, maria mor, colette fu, we are the dragon people, art, pop-up art