FAU library exhibits provocative printer

By John Thomason
STAFF WRITER

The controversy generated by the Jaffe Center for the Book Arts’ latest exhibition of Amos Kennedy Jr. poster prints has been surprisingly light, but the show still has a few weeks to provoke responses.

Since the exhibit, titled “Proceed and Be Bold” and on display on all three floors of Florida Atlantic University’s S.E. Wimberly Library, opened in mid-February, the Jaffe Center has received one formal complaint, voiced in a letter to the university’s dean, about a poster bearing the phrase “Coffee makes you queer.” (It’s part of Kennedy’s three-part “coffee” series, displayed alongside “Coffee makes you black” and “Coffee makes you hallucinate.”) In another instance, a student griped that a poster containing an unprintable statement about hell was overly fundamentalist.

Kennedy delights in pushing people’s buttons, tackling overtly the kind of subjects most artists wouldn’t approach subtextually: race, gender, sexuality, social justice. His posters speak in aphorisms, epigrams and borrowed texts, from Sartre’s sobering war assessment, “When the rich wage war, it’s the poor who die,” to Kennedy’s own popular exaltation, “I knew God was a woman, but I didn’t know she was black!”

And he presents all these views with bold, incisive lettering, bright colors and plenty of exclamation marks.

“He doesn’t have much of a filter,” said John Cutrone, programs coordinator at the Jaffe Center.

Kennedy used to work in the corporate hierarchy at AT&T, quitting his job at age 40 to pursue printing. Though many of his posters shout his enthusiasm for art, he doesn’t refer to himself as an artist, preferring the description “humble Negro printer.” He hates the term African-American but is not shy about proclaiming his black heritage through his work, including the election of Barack Obama, whose inauguration speech Kennedy printed in its entirety — on 100 separate panels, mounted chronologically on the FAU library’s third floor.

Contradictions like these exist within the man himself, too. He’s an erudite scholar, but he dresses like a country bumpkin, in pink shirts and denim overalls, prompting the curiosity of people he meets.

“He’s a bit like his work — frenzied, a little crazy and fun to be around,” Cutrone said.

And like the man, each of Kennedy’s pieces is a true original. Most printers make dozens of pressings of the same poster, but no two Kennedy prints are alike; he’s prone to changing letter coloring and even background color, shading and depth.

And despite the possibly controversial nature of many of the posters on display, there are plenty with positive messages anyone can get behind.

“Be happy while you’re alive,” reads one of them, “You’re dead for a lot longer.”

The exhibit is on display through May 9 at the library, 777 Glades Road.

Call 561-297-0226.

John Thomason can be reached at jthomason@tribune.com.