FAU Book Exhibition Pops in Three Dimensions

May 11th 2012

The first incarnation of what we know of as pop-up books was developed in the 14th century to supplement an astrological tome. But the ones we grew up were developed between the '60s to the '90s, and they were mostly functional kids' stuff. Images of sprung lions, dragons and houses aimed at increasing childhood literacy by seducing tykes with a three-dimensional novelty.

Today, the field is justifiably recognized as another area of book art. The paper designers who toil in the field have their own glossary, with terms like armature, base page, fulcrum and glue knock-out, and subgenres of movable books include volvelles, tunnel books and pull-downs. To understand the evolution of the pop-up book over the past half-century, look no further than "Pop! The Arthur J. Williams Pop-up Collection," running at FAU’s Wimberly Library in Boca through Aug. 12. The exhibition represents just a portion of the 425 pop-up books Williams recently donated to FAU's Jaffe Center for the Book Arts.

“One thing that we keep hearing from students is how elaborate and intricate and exciting these pop-up books are," says Jon's McCaffrey, an FAU student who helped curate the exhibit. "We couldn’t show them, but we even got a few pop-up books of sex." 

There are, of course, children’s books on display, with creative, three-dimensional re-imaginings of "Moby-Dick," "Alice in Wonderland" and other classic tales. Matthew Reinhart’s "Jungle Book" is a tour de force, with a five-story tower inhabited by primates, creating with simple paper an object that rivals, in its own way, a Frank Gehry masterpiece or an edible masterpiece from a French pastry chef. To stick with the food theme, the pop-up form doesn’t get much more inventive than James Diaz’s "Popigami," a Chinese restaurant menu with a 3-D take-out box spilling forth noodles and fortune-cookie slips. It’s brilliantly kitschy: an indispensable artwork created from the most dispensable dining materials.

And like many works on display here, it has an inspired sense of humor. Check out "Phantoms," in which pop-up images support an entire deep-sea universe developed by comedian Ricky Gervais, and don’t miss "Menopop," Andrew Baron’s menopause guidebook, with its pop-up fallopian tubes surrounded by witty signage and humorous quiz questions.

But my favorite pieces are the ones that define themselves firstly as art – where the object drives the words, and not the other way around. As their names suggest, David A. Carter’s "600 Black Spots," "Blue 2" and "One Red Dot" firmly inhabit the realm of contemporary, geometric abstract art, the paper creations that spring from the blank pages resemble any number of sculptures that could display at MoMA.

With all its splinter genres and disparate artistic pursuits, the world of pop-up books is a vast tent that can accommodate both the blocky, austere minimalism of Reina Jasma’s "Stairs" – a textless compendium of 3-D staircase designs – and the blockbuster shine of Robert Sabuda’s "Wonderful World of Oz," which even includes decoder glasses, long before 3-D caught on in movie theaters.

Pop-up books are not just children’s stuff anymore.

"Pop! The Arthur J. Williams Pop-up Collection" is at FAU’s Wimberly Library, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton, through Aug. 12. Admission is free. Call 561/297-0226 or visit library.fau.edu.

Tags: fau, jaffe center for the book arts, pop, pop-up books