Revising the way we think about books and reading

BY CONNIE OGLE
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Arthur Jaffe wants to change the way you think about books
"If you leave here thinking the same way you did when you came in, then I flunked," he says.

The shelves at the Arthur St. Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton are filled with books, of course, but not books that look or feel on, for that matter, even necessarily work as most of us expect they should. Known as artists' books because they were constructed by hand, with the time, imagination and painstaking exactitude that characterizes all fine craftsmanship, they offer a dizzying array of subject matter and form. Though almost all were produced in editions of one, they share a common thread, Jaffe says: "The element of surprise."

Some of these artists' books are constructed of peacock feathers or potato sackings, mud or metal. They can stretch these fea..."
If you go
What: Arthur & Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts
Where: Wimberly Library at Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Rd, Boca Raton, FL
When: Open daily
Contact:
Info: 561-297-0455 or www.jaffececlection. goog

I first really was a collector, Jaffe says, of books, of his own and of others, which is an eclectical mix, and eclectical is very difficult to get rid of. In the end, that turned out to be part of the appeal.

Touching work
So did the fact that this is a hands-on collection. Jaffe might ask visitors to squat on a bit of hard sunlight before they stroke a silk binding or turn an exquisite delicately page, and the center is climate-controlled to combat mildew. But unlike most collectors, Jaffe doesn't imprison his treasures behind glass or wrap them in plastic.

"Books are meant to be handled," he says, "and if you remember the story of the first book, you'll see that it doesn't become real until he's been handled. One can't be used and loved and handled.

Though they still occupy only a small niche within the art world, artists' books aren't new. The Book of Kells, an illuminated gospel created by Celtic monks around 800 A.D. and one of the Irish national treasures displayed at Trinity College in Dublin, could be considered an artist's book. The Sarajevo Haggadah, a work of 14th-century Spain now housed in the National Museum of Bona and Herzegovina, is another spectacular example.

A new perspective
The demand for modern artists' books is growing, says Vicki Stewart, proprietor with her husband Bill of Vamp & Trump Bookellers in Birmingham, Ala. The Stewart's, who visited the Jaffe Center this summer, were once in the antiquarian book business but now focus exclusively on selling artists' books.

"The confluence of art and intellectual currents is to them, Bill Stewart says. "I saw the books as a con
tinue for story and information, and I didn't care about the container." He says, "Just give me a paper-
back to read. I liked hard-
backs, too, I liked old leather-bound tomes, but it was still the story that was important." The first book he saw was Ron King's Antony and Cleopatra on this suspicious paper. It's illustrated by these brilli-
antly-colored screen prints, with letterpress printing. It combines images and text, but the entire physical nature of the book becomes an expressive quality. I can't say how strong it was about my place in the work. Too many years at school, too many graduate

ART BOOKS: John Cutrone, above right, lays out photographer Chuck Close's A Couple of Ways of DoingSomething for Arthur Jaffe. Below, Cutrone prepares Iraqi bookmaker Dia Ali-azzam's Poetry Book (Arabic) for exhibit at the Arthur & Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts. Susan Allis's Colours of Persia, bottom left, is a completely handmade book from letterpress to illustration to binding to inks in arts botanica. A Collection of Poems, Lithographs by Emi Marki, bottom right, each poem is preceded by a translucent page with a drawing and a page with a photograph.

PHOTO BY JOHN VANBERGEN/PHOTO HERALD STAFF

The artist who coordinates programs for the center, assists researchers, leads tours and teaches courses in bookbinding, printing and other related subjects.

"I get excited by the whole process," says Cutrone, who has an M.P.A. from the Book Arts Program at the University of Alabama. "I love printing. I get into such a good state when I'm doing that. Book-binding is satisfying, too, seeing that stack of books growing on your table as you're binding them."

Cutrone is busy with the collection's latest installation, scheduled to open Aug. 21. The moody, atmospher-
spheric Dafna: Contempo-
ary Drops Book Art, which runs through Nov. 25, fea-
tures handmade books on a coalition of artists, poets and bookmakers that formed after a car bomb killed 10 people and injured 100 on Kadmiel Street in Bagh-

dad in March of 2007.

On the road
Hosting travelling exhib-
its is another method the center uses to educate. Last year Ruth Edwards of Brooklyn, longtime teacher of bookmaking in New York, brought to the center her exhibition Books in Black: A New Page! Its arti-

late's books pay tribute to lesser-known African-American inventors and testivantes.

"I've seen kids with trou-
bles in math or reading, and these kids make books, and their world changes," Edwards says. "The kids are so proud, their crafts stick out a mile. This is their book. They made it. And even if they have trouble reading and writing, they want to add words to it. In fact, one first grader had one mother call me and say, Mike Edwards, I'm not complaining, but my kid has books piled up under my bed, in the kitchen, in the bathroom. ... He can't stop."