Books, photos shed light on macabre master

Illustrator and author Edward Gorey has sowed a seed of influence upon so much diverse media that his mention in disparate circles is no longer a surprise. Filmmaker Tim Burton owes the largest debt to Gorey—"The Nightmare Before Christmas," in particular, feels like one of Gorey’s illustrated novels brought to motion. But he’s also been referenced or homaged in “The Simpsons,” "Degrassi: The Next Generation," PBS’s "Mystery!" series and a Nine Inch Nails music video. A 1976 jazz album even provided musical adaptations of six of his most famous works.

So it should be no surprise that Gorey, a cult icon who arguably invented the gothic fairy tale, would have fans in the most unusual places. John Cutrone, curator of “Elephant House, or the Home of Edward Gorey,” which opened last week at Florida Atlantic University’s Wimberly Library in Boca Raton, has said Gorey fans have “come out of the woodwork” to show their excitement for the exhibition, including some FAU faculty. One longtime Gorey admirer is Arthur Jaffe, head of the Jaffe Center for the Book Arts on the third floor of the FAU library.

"[Gorey] was not comparable," Jaffe said. "He was unique in his art form and point of view. People try to imitate him, but they don’t have his soul."

The Jaffe Center is built on the idea of books as aesthetic art objects, a philosophy shared by Gorey. The exhibit, which begins on the library’s ground floor and ascends into the Jaffe Center, features groundbreaking movable books (sort of like pop-up books but for grownups) and so-called "tunnel books," in which the reader can peer through a hole on the cover and see through the entire book. There are also rare editions of popular works such as "The Gashlycrumb Tinies" and "The Insect God."

Gorey preferred a life of seclusion to show business, and his famous Cape Cod house (and now... 

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Gorey museum would befit Norma Desmond in "Sunset Blvd." A series of images by New York photographer Kevin McDermott acts as a supplement to the illustrated books on display, providing an intimate glimpse into the master artist’s home just a week after his 2006 death. "In a way, I just wanted to be surrounded by Edward's things again," McDermott recalls. "It was a way to say goodbye."

McDermott has known Gorey since he was an NYU theatre student and the two of them worked together on a theatrical production of Gorey works. They remained close, with McDermott going on to produce two off-Broadway productions of Gorey works. Granted exclusive access to the house before its contents were sold, McDermott provides a fascinating look at an artist through the world of his stuff. And Gorey had a lot of it: inkwells, irons, finials, garden tools, record, books, stuffed animals, the monstrous rings and necklaces that look like fishing rods in McDermott’s close-up. The foliage may be impossible overgrown and the interior walls cracked, but his collections of stuff were always meticulously organized: even his medicine bottles were lined up on a window sill with an artist's eye.

"I always thought the house said something about Edward the man," McDermott said. "It's a window into his intellect, his depth of knowledge, his humor. There was elegance and humor in the way he would gather objects and create relationships between those objects that I thought should be preserved."

"Elephant House, or the Home of Edward Gorey" is at the S.E. Wimberly Library at Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton, through Nov. 4. The exhibition is free. For information, call 361-297-0226.