

Cleveland Scene

Big Little Books

Morgan Conservatory launches a seminal show

by Douglas Max Utter

April 15, 2009

What is a book exactly? It enjoys its own mixed status among man-made things as both a matter-of-fact object and a portable altar for the manifestation of mind. The deceptively slight treasures called artists' books embody this contradiction, bundling the limitless range of words with the talisman-like fascination for finely wrought, hand-held things. At least since the 1876 publication of Stéphane Mallarmé's "L'après-midi d'un faune," with its wood engravings created by Édouard Manet, artists and poets have concocted such potent, essentially pre-modern objects, through all the technological and aesthetic revolutions of the past century and a half.

The 137 contemporary small works of art at Monumental Ideas in Miniature Books (MIMB as it's called at flickr.com where the whole show is documented), painstakingly assembled by Hui-Chu Ying, associate professor at the University of Akron's Myers School of Art, constantly surprise the viewer with innovative combinations of materials, presentation and subject matter. Pinned to Morgan's walls, arrayed on long shelves, spread over tables and perched atop pedestals, these "books" (many of them are more like folded drawings or origami-inspired sculptures, sometimes consisting entirely of images, or combined with stories, captions or phrases) display the wit and poetic power of intimate statements, outweighing most monuments on the scales of emotional impact.

Images vary from the horrific to the delightful; deadly serious subjects rub shoulders with whimsy. Relatively conventional fold-out formats predominate, seeming a little fusty (though often exquisitely well-constructed) next to the delicious funkiness of a piece like Leticia Bajuyo's "A Wonderful Toy," with text handwritten along the curls of a fuchsia-colored Slinky. Another unusual work by Rabeya Jalil is made of half-inch-wide stitched-cloth "tag rolls" unspooling from a box pierced with a small square window crisscrossed with thread, like an amorous whisper in an ancient alleyway. Then there's Jessica White's "The Bad Sparrow." About three inches high and nine feet long, it shows opposing armies of squirrels and rabbits, a raccoon, a ferret, several deer, an emu, an elephant, camels and a catapult, drawn in outline as if to be colored. It's a story (a little like The Iliad) of offense and incommensurate response, and about the questions asked of justice by accident and fate.

There's no shortage of large questions here, nor of small ones that burrow into the understanding, ultimately carrying an outsize wallop. War and love and getting through the day are represented by artists from 14 countries, including a number of well-known Ohioans. Each produced five copies of a work slated to appear at venues around the U.S. and, so far, in nine other countries (including Sweden, Japan, Spain, Italy and Mexico) over the next three years.

Two other excellent shows, also on view in Morgan's massive ground-floor factory space, feature work by Zygote Press artists and a selection of masterful artists' books made by members of ABC (Artists' Book Club). Don't miss any of it.

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