

Curator's Statement from Sue Sommers

Utopia/Dystopia: Inspiration and the Artist Book 2017

I am honored and delighted to be this year's guest curator for the Laramie County Library's third annual invitational, *Inspiration and the Artist's Book*. As in past years, the theme of our exhibit relates to the Summer Reading Celebration topic. *Build a Better World*, 2017's Reading Celebration, gave rise to the exhibit theme, *Utopia/Dystopia*. Building a better world is complicated, because my Utopia is probably your dystopia. But complications make for interesting art.

The sixteen artists from Wyoming, Arizona, Nebraska, Illinois, Florida, Ohio, New York, Virginia, and France use the book form as a starting point to explore ideas of perfection and failure. The need to imagine a better world, and to conjure nightmares of a much worse one, thrives in nearly all of us, maybe because as human beings we must have hope, but also caution, to survive.

These twin impulses – dreaming of improvement and keeping alert for danger – exercise our imaginations all the time, not just when we are deep in a *Star Trek* movie or *Hunger Games* novel. They help us navigate environments as basic as the grocery store and as complex as our highest goals in life.

In this exhibit, you will find pieces that propose alternative ideas about books, as they also propose alternative ideas about perfect or terrible worlds. You will find books that look like fossils, shrines, maps, sculpture, painting, and more. Some are traditional, familiar-looking books that reward close inspection. Indeed, the artists' observations upon the theme have resulted in an exhibit of beauty, scope, and depth that I find truly moving.

Nebraska artist Karen Kunc articulates the “experience of making and thinking” as a process of awakening to oneself and to the world, which strikes me as the basic architecture of every creative act. The artist must be alive to the nature of the materials, the way those materials come together with subtlety and power, and most of all, the important ideas one feels compelled to convey. I think of preschoolers, chefs, mathematicians, and even loving couples engaging in this

same process. It can in fact “build a better world” and can help us live more fully within that world, especially if we are seeing and listening to each other.

Responding to the voice of another is a major current in work submitted by half of the participating artists. These artist’s books collaborate in different ways with one or more published authors. Whether interpreting a Thomas Jefferson quote (Kerry McAleer-Keeler), enclosing a commercially printed text block within an expressive, finely crafted custom binding (Karen Hanmer), redacting a government pamphlet (Connor Mullen), reconstructing and illuminating beloved poetry (Karen Kunc, Ellen Sheffield, Sue Sommers), carving into an entire published book (Jenny Dowd), or processing disaster news through Google Translate into a handbound “hand” (Miriam Schaer), these works and others reinforce and extrapolate the ancient bond between words and their containers.

Narratives can inhabit unexpected forms in book art. A wonderful variety of structures and materials throughout this exhibit mirrors the artists’ great diversity of thought and focus.

Camellia El-Antably’s historical investigation into Utopian communities resulted in a neighborhood of imprinted, three-dimensional paper houses. Cristy Anspach pays respects to roadkill and questions driver hubris in an interactive reliquary/marionette. Wax-impregnated texts crushed or carved into organic remains by Jessica Drenk provoke ruminations on transformation and decay, while Mark Ritchie’s accordion-fold woodcut print stands as an elegy to our potentially Utopian relationships with animals. Nathan Abel’s inward-turning struggle with the exhibit theme became an accordion-fold stream-of-consciousness abstract collage. Family history and Manifest Destiny propelled Nyla Hurley to work with found objects that can fit in a shirt pocket or invade an entire room. Tawni Shuler’s felt animal shapes suggest a children’s fable about prey species that fight back. And Patricia Smith meticulously maps the topographies and urban zones of the interior world, where needs, emotions, and desires – high and low – receive their due.

In a book art Utopia, every artist's book would be available for hands-on enjoyment, because book art is designed to be experienced and "read" on multiple levels. In our imperfect world of glass cases and insurance, however, the library and I were limited in ways to achieve this. We selected particular works for visitors to touch and handle at designated locations in the library. We hope this opportunity to feel an artist's book resting in the hands, to explore it and inspect it closely, as intended, will inspire art enthusiasts and future book artists.

A number of our exhibitors reacted to current events, viewing today's political landscape through the lens of the Utopia/Dystopia binary. Rather than remain silent about a potentially divisive subject, I acknowledge that in our troubled world, extreme views from all sides cut off nuanced, empathetic, and productive discussion. This naturally worries many artists. By definition, artists treasure diverse perspectives and experiences. Thus it is no surprise that, throughout the exhibit, artist's books touch upon immigration, invented facts, fight-or-flight, revisionist history, feminism and motherhood, prejudice, censorship, the Internet, and George Orwell's novel, *1984*. The artworks do not tell us what to think. They only ask that we do think.

The ability to imagine alternatives is the spark of the creative process. This imaginative energy is in everyone, and it is one reason that *Inspiration and the Artist's Book* brings so many visitors to spend time with wildly creative book art displayed at the library each summer. I hope you enjoy spending time with the words and images in this catalog, considering the artists' choices, and discovering your own alternatives.