BOOK ARTS: A TRAVELING GALLERY

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As they sat patiently in a corner of the Rosenthal Library, the elderly couple waited for students and faculty to fill their seats to showcase the colorful books they had placed on the tables.

The books were not your average novel, or storybook. They had special binding and came wrapped in bubble wrap. Sitting on the table, the books did not look like any old reading material - they looked like art.

In an event organized by The Department of Special Collections and Archives of the Queens College Library, Vicky and Bill Stewart of Vamp and Tramp Booksellers presented what they call a "show-and-tell," on the world of contemporary Book Arts on Nov. 10. From mid-January to Thanksgiving, they drive around the U.S. taking the pieces and works of various artists, to institutions as well as private customers, making their minivan a traveling gallery.

With a growing collection of unique artists' books of their own, the QC Archives welcomed Vicky and Bill onto the campus for a second time.

Book Arts, or artists' books, is a contemporary art form where books and art intertwine. The author, or artist, has full control over the way a book is presented.

"It's about the way [the book] opens, doesn't open and the way it works," Bill Stewart said. "It becomes an expressive part of the experience, on par with any text, words or images that are there. The materials are inseparable from the experience."

Ranging from pop-up books to scrolls and comic books, the showcase included 20 artists' books, each one colorful and unique.

With charm and wit, the couple worked as a team, turning turns speaking and displaying the books. They emphasized that stories and books were about the content, regardless of whether they are paperback novels, or hardcover children's tales.

Holding a square, red box, Bill took out what seemed to be a sheet of canvas with plasters of rainbow colors thrown across it. Holding up the artists' book, "The Phoenix" by Linda Samson-Talleur, Stewart explained the mythology of the phoenix bird. This version was an early Anglo-Saxon version of the myth, with the text written in the old language.

However, what makes the book artistic is its role as a disguised accordion book. It opens up to show an image of the phoenix rising on the front, and falling in the back. "I think that's sort of magic," Bill said, as carefully put away the delicate piece of work.

Another crowd favorite was a book by John Hastings with the help of his granddaughter, Elizabeth Pendergrass, called, "r & j: the txt msg edition." The text came housed in a plastic cellphone cover, secured with magnetic clasps, which then slips into a sequined purse.

The book relays the balcony scene from William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, written in text messages, "LOLs" and smiley faces between two teenagers.

"y do u have 2 b romeo? if u change ur name & promise u luv me ill change mine," Juliet texts.

In his introduction to the piece, Hastings said he wanted to see if Shakespeare's plays really were timeless.

"Could [the language] survive a translation into text messages by a modern teenager?" Hastings asked.

Many of the books had strong political positions from undocumented immigrants, to lynching in the South. Julie Chen was one of the artists showcased whose work had deep political motivation. Her books "True to Life" and "Panorama" were elaborate in theme and size.

With phrases like, "You do not want to believe that time is running out," Panorama features pop-ups and is a call to action. It issues a warning about how fragile earth's environment is and how little humans are doing to help it.

Vicky and Bill are deeply moved by artists' books even after working with them for years. To them, art is in experiencing the book: touching, smelling and even tasting, if need be.

"I don't know how people imagine these things," Bill said. "But I'm glad they do."

Vicky and Bill with a pop-up from 'Panorama'.

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