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## **Libros de Artista @ Sonoma Valley Museum of Art**

Posted on 27 February 2018.

by **Maria Porges**



Victor Hugo Nunez, detail, "Código sur," 2002, serigraphy, 13 x 17 inches; installed and partially unfolded approximately 49.5 feet

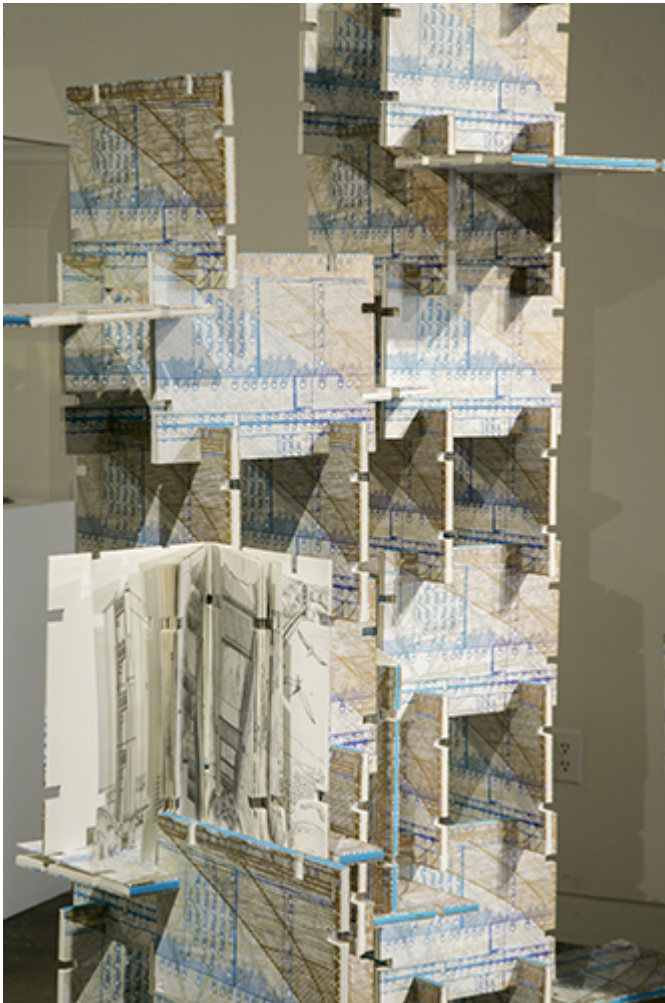
At the beginning of this handsome show, *Libros de Artista: Artist's Books from Mexico and the Mexican Diaspora*, a wall text presents visitors with the definition of artist's books used by the curator, Simon Blattner. "...it can look like a book or maybe not. It will be an attempt by the artist to urge us to look a little closer, be more observant, open the cover, and see what is inside. An artist's book may be beautiful, unusual or thought-provoking, but one thing for sure, it will invite us to go further."

Alas, as with most exhibitions of artist's books, going further is forbidden. Many of the objects on display — intended by the maker to be examined inside and out and appreciated for their look, feel and details — are open to a single page. "Do not touch" signs are everywhere. Fortunately, a substantial number of works have an accordion-fold design, making most, if not all of their pages, viewable. The first long gallery space contains some wonderful examples of this approach. **Victor Hugo Nunez's** 122-foot-long *Código Sur* (2002), for example, is displayed partially unfolded on a very long shelf. It took the artist, a Chilean who has lived in Mexico since



Franco Aceves Humana, *Tratado curioso de las cosas del balon pie en México* (Curious Trivia about Soccer in Mexico), 2008, lithograph on paper, 10 x 8 inches

1974, a year to complete the edition of 100, as each small section involved multiple passes of screen printing. On the opposite wall, there's a fascinating, funny and beautifully illustrated accordion-fold book about soccer by painter **Franco Aceves Humana**. The players pictured evoke ancient images of the sacred Mesoamerican ball game played hundreds of years ago, yet they are also incontestably modern. (Here, as in many other places in the show, labels— though well written by institutional standards, in both English and Spanish — are unequal to the task of communicating the book's contents. While the visual element is paramount, understanding at least some small part of the text would add greatly to the appreciation of works like this.)



Antonio Guerra González, *LIBRARIO* (El proceso de un libro de artista), 2014, installation composed of 100 books intervened, covers printed in serigraphy, 94 ½ x 47 x 79 inches

One of the most striking pieces on view functions as a kind of centerpiece. More sculpture than artist's book, **Antonio Guerra González' *LIBRARIO* (El proceso de un libro de artista)** (2014) invokes a giant house of cards, built out of found books: 100 copies of a volume commemorating the building of the Golden Gate Bridge, their edges notched to fit neatly together in a stable arrangement. As with the giant slotted cards produced by Charles and Ray Eames in the early '50s, any number of configurations are possible. Choosing a book about building seems to have been deliberate—González was trained as an architect— as does as the idea of constructing his own monument out of information, even if the piece does seem slightly out of place in a show that defines itself as reflecting the art and craft of fine book making and design.

The main gallery of the show is perplexing, as parts of the room are plunged into near darkness. Reading the labels of those dimly illuminated pieces with the aid of an iPhone flashlight, it becomes apparent that these are the 15 works (out of 40 included in the show) that are on loan from the Department of Special Collections at the Stanford University Libraries. During a curator's talk, Blattner explained that this penumbral atmosphere was one of the conditions set by the librarians for the works' inclusion to the exhibition. Still, it's better to see these pieces with difficulty than to not see them at all. Hint: Cell phone pictures — taken without flash — also help reveal what the naked eye cannot see.



Amber Past and Taller Leñateros, Portable mayan altar. 2007, 9" high x variable dimensions

These loans include works of fancy, like a delightful volume in the shape of a high-heeled shoe, also made by Guerra Gonzáles. Others connect to Mexico's long (precolonial) history of book making. An ingenious foldable printed shrine serves as a container for three exquisitely bound pocket-sized books of Mayan magic, printed in Tzotzil and English by poet **Ambar Past** (*Hex to Kill the Unfaithful Man; Mayan Love Charms, and Magic for a Long Life*). Also included inside the shrine/box is a packet of 12 ceremonial candles and three tiny ceramic sculptures of a ram, a goat and a pedestal that function as candleholders and an incense burner. Though the label doesn't make this clear, the work is a collaboration between Past and **Taller Leñateros**, a cooperative of Mayan papermakers.

Nearby, another history is addressed in the extraordinary and powerful *Esclavos* (Slaves) (2010). The work of one of Mexico's preeminent artists, **Francisco Toledo**, this diagram-like image of slaves, stacked like cordwood in the hold of a ship, was Toledo's response to a request for a work commemorating the centenary of Mexico's 1910 independence. Accompanying it with the remark, "there's nothing to celebrate," Toledo draws attention to the bicentennial of the country's abolition of slavery in 1810. The image, a meticulous cutout, is printed in a thick, shiny tar-like substance, adding to its disquieting impact.



Other books, like **Lorena Velazquez's** *Quarenta y tres* (Forty-Three) (2015) comment on recent issues of social justice. In September of 2014, 43 young students at a teacher's college disappeared in the Mexican state of Guerrero. While the government maintains a stubborn



Francisco Toledo, detail, *Esclavos*, 2010, 24 7/8 x 26 x 1/2"

silence about their deaths and who was responsible, Mexican artists and writers continue to keep the massacre in the public eye, as Velazquez does in this book, described as having photo illustrations. All we can see, however, is the word JUSTICIA, printed in white on a black background, stained with red.

Other better-lit works refer to emigration. In *Libro de botones* (Book of Buttons) (2015), Russian émigré **Ioulia Akhmadeeva** tells her grandmother's story through these homely, useful little objects, ending with the birth of the artist's mother. (In 1994 the family relocated to Mexico where Akhmadeeva now teaches book arts.)  
Accordion-fold pages, opened in a circle, picture



José Manuel Mateo and Javelor Martínez, detail, *Migrar*

clothes and memories linked to particular garments, with a piece of handmade lace adorning the cover. Marked “Artist’s Proof” on its final page, this hand-bound and decorated book might never be editioned (i.e. produced in larger numbers). The size of editions of other works presented in the exhibition varies substantially, from one to hundreds – or, in the case of one mass-produced volume, an unlimited number.

Hanging vertically in the first gallery, **José Manuel Mateo and Javelor Martínez’s *Migrar*** (*Migrant: the Journey of a Migrant Worker*) tells the story of a boy’s migration from Mexico to the US with his family, illustrated by a single long, continuous woodcut, its form evoking precolonial codices. Originally released in Spanish by the Mexican publisher [Ediciones Tecolote](#), it is now available in an English edition that — unlike the other beautiful, precious, works of art on view here — anyone can afford.

Speaking of which: The [Codex](#) book fair doesn’t return to Richmond until next February. In the meantime, there are many handmade books here worth examining. Just don’t forget your glasses and smartphone.

# # #

“*Libros de Artista: Artist’s Books from Mexico and the Mexican Diaspora*” @ [Sonoma Valley Museum of Art](#) through April 15, 2018.

#### About the Author:

[Maria Porges](#) is an artist and writer who lives and works in Oakland. For over two decades, her critical writing has appeared in many publications, including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Sculpture*, *American Craft*, *Glass*, the *New York Times Book Review* and many other publications. The author of more than 100 exhibition catalog essays, she presently serves as an associate professor at California College of the Arts.



## About David Roth

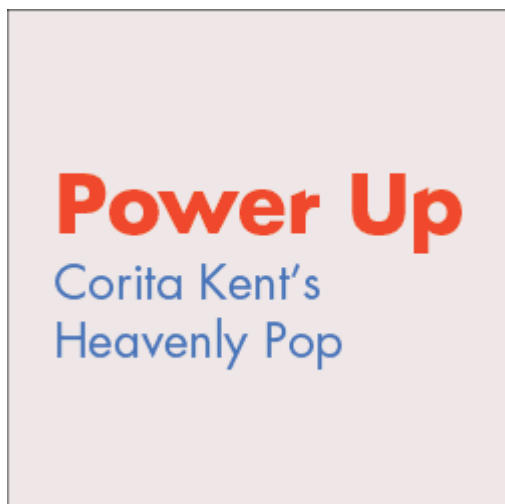
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