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The Art of the Book

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Simon Blattner and Barbara Wells

Contemporary Mexican artists combine passion and craft at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art

What, the exhibition “Libros de Artista” explores through 40 colorful, three-dimensional displays, is a book? The joy and impact of the show, opening at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art on January 20, is that there is no single answer.

The Mexican Artists community has been making Artist books for hundreds of years. Books created by contemporary Mexican artists have staged a renaissance, says show curator Simon Blattner. “They are very exciting, rich with color, robust, filled with energy and brilliantly conceived.”

Handmade artists books, when well constructed, bound, covered and messaged, are art of the highest order, Blattner believes. “They are craft at its best, and the ensemble performance of many parts.”

An art book is often a collaboration between artists working in several disciplines. There is the maker of the paper itself, and the printer. The graphic artist or painter, perhaps, and a writer of text. And someone to expertly bind it all together. “It’s like a ballet.”

“An artist book can either be the product of a single individual or a coordinated effort of a team of makers,” Blattner says. “It can look like a book or maybe not. It may beautiful or maybe even scary but one thing for sure, it will invite us to go further.”

If there’s one constant, it’s a true love of process. “They make art because they can’t stop themselves,” Blattner says. “It’s excitement and passion. You do it because you have to.”

The book as physical object has always fascinated Blattner. “Every book I ever picked up had some sort of beauty or

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feature that made me look at it as art. It could have been the paper, the type face, the ink, the binding, or even the heft and feel of the volume.”

Blattner once took a course in papermaking from Ron Farnsworth, who he considered the best papermaker in America. Blattner was successful at business, but felt a calling “to make stuff.” After the course ended, he cajoled Farnsworth into taking him on as an intern, and spent 10 years, three days a week, honing his craft. When he left in 1997 to open a studio in Sonoma, Farnsworth gave him a printing press as a going away gift.

The exhibition of 40 books two years to assemble. About one-third of the works are on loan from domestic collections, including [Stanford’s Latin American collection](#), a resource Blattner called the finest in the U.S. The bulk of the pieces come from artists in Mexico, many discovered by Blattner himself. “We were running around Mexico City like lunatics, exploring leads and making contacts.”

The forays (“many, many taxi and Uber rides”) paid off. In one small studio he met Antonio Guerra Gonzalez, whose piece “Librario” will be the striking center of the Sonoma exhibition. Blattner describes it as a brilliant and complicated construction project. Conceived as a tower that should be observed from all angles, it’s an impactful work of color, design, and size.



“Librario” by Antonio Guerra Gonzalez

With it, the artist has stretched the form to its limits, questioning, or perhaps redefining, the possibilities of what a book really is.

“The choices that were made for this exhibition were extremely difficult. I was able to view many wonderful and exciting pieces of work. This exhibition is merely the tip of the iceberg.”

The works differ in size, construction, and subject, says Barbara Wells, the show’s associate curator. “I love how the book format has been totally deconstructed and how this completely expands a book’s ability to communicate.”

The books tell personal stories, some of them are political statements, and some are about Mexican culture and history, Wells says. “They each give us a look into the lives of contemporary Mexican artists and what is important to them.”

Blattner speaks reverently of the art and the craft of such

books, the quality of paper, the inks and colors, the print process itself. What is a book? It's foremost a passion. The artists really must love this craft, he says, because there's not much money in it. Gonzalez, for example, gave up a career in law to concentrate on his art.

"It's a tiny niche," Blattner says, "but we have to honor it."

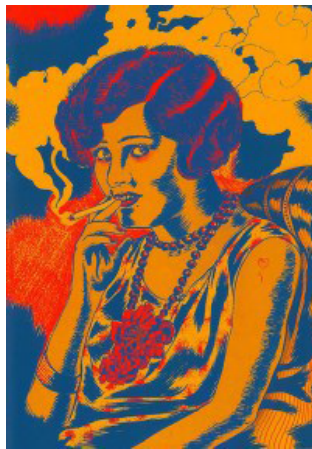
Libros de Artista

Forty contemporary limited edition books created by Latin American artists, sourced from both the original artists in Mexico and from the Latin American & Iberian Collections at Stanford University Libraries. On view from Saturday, January 20, to Sunday, April 15, 2018. Somoma Valley Museum of Art, 551 Broadway, in Sonoma.

Regular museum hours are 11a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Admission is \$10 for adults. Children k-12 are admitted free, as are SVMA members. Svma.org. 707.939.7862.

– Image on front page:

Dr. Lakra and Toño Camuñas, Misterios Cripticos del Konfucionismo, 2015, silkscreen print.



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