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EXTRA

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[1/4] [Rocco Scary Your Very Own Personal Escape Route, 2006](#), handmade paper, steel, mixed media {h. 6 in, w. 36 in, open}.

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STORY BY **BEVERLY SANDERS**

The Center for Book Arts
Rocco Scary and Julie Chen
New York, New York
September 27 – December 6, 2008

Dropping in on the bustling [Center for Book Arts](#) at its opening reception for three exhibitions is to experience the special pleasure of viewing an intrinsically intimate art form in a venue where it is taught and made. As part of the center's fall exhibition program are two new Featured Artist Projects in a series that regularly presents a recent body of work by an individual artist or a collaborative. In addition to hailing from opposite coasts, Rocco Scary and Julie Chen would seem to occupy very different places on the book arts spectrum, but they each bring ingenuity,



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expressiveness and serious playfulness to their engagement with the book as both a repository of text and a form with sculptural interest.

For Scary, a tall, genial fellow from New Jersey, making works out of pulp paper and other materials has been a longtime, ardent preoccupation. Titled “The Last Place on Earth,” his exhibition is about place and memory and loss and danger. His basic format is a stacking book structure of handmade paper and steel that can be displayed closed or open. In a work like *Boardwalk Art*, the opened version reveals evocative, seaside vignettes. Infused with nostalgia, this piece and others like *Jersey Tomatoes* (its cover depicts the roof of *Rutts Hut*, an eatery seen from Route 3), *Meet Me Under the Lemon* (a carousel of handmade paper and wood lit with tiny battery-powered lights) and *Washington Newark Public* (a book in the shape of a house) are inspired by the artist’s love for his home state, which, he feels, is at risk of losing its character and history to overdevelopment. As he writes in an exhibition statement, “The house that one grew up in, the corner deli, the old movie theater, the amusement park, the grammar school building, that favorite street corner: these places play a significant role in a society’s daily functions, places where memories are created, shared, and relived. Many of these places are in the process of slowly disintegrating, giving way to the upheaval of mass construction.”

A darker memory piece, *Book Eleven*, Scary’s tribute to those who perished at the World Trade Center, consists of two stacked books that echo the lost twin towers. It is composed of handmade paper fabricated from cotton linters and computer paper, the stacks of pages interspersed with steel dividers. The pages contain the name, age and hometown of each victim of the disaster. Another work, *101 Causes*, a limited edition book made of handmade paper and digital prints, comments straightforwardly on the environmental causes of different cancers.

In strong contrast to Scary’s rough-textured, almost naïve style and plainspoken social commentary are the polished works of Chen, a nationally known book artist and teacher based in Berkeley California, who has been publishing limited edition artists’ books under her Flying Fish Press imprint since 1987. Her works, many of which resemble highly sophisticated games or puzzles with moving parts, combine the quality and craftsmanship of traditional letterpress printing with the innovation and visual excitement of contemporary book structures that can function both as books and sculpturally as objects to be displayed. “My goal,” Chen writes, “is to design books that engage the viewer in a comprehensive experience of discovery that goes beyond reading. The viewer must become involved not only with the text but with the physical presence of the book itself. I strive to merge the structure, materials, typography, illustration and binding into a seamless whole.”

Memory is an important theme for Chen as it is for Scary. *True to Life*, a letterpress work with elephant hide paper, Plexiglas and wood, is in the form of a tablet with sliding pages. The structure, the artist has written, “corresponds to the shifting nature of memory, allowing the reader to create different combinations of text and image and thus alter the content of the piece with each reading.” Interactivity with the reader is precisely the point of *Personal Paradigms: a Game of Human Experience*, a letterpress work in the form of a game that is played and the results recorded in a ledger book. Presented in a cloth-covered box, the set includes a letterpress printed game board and many laser-cut game pieces. The object of the game is to focus on the player’s life experiences and perceptions at the moment the game is played. Less

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complex but compelling for its simple beauty is Chen’s latest work in the show, the horizontal *Panorama*, a layered stylized landscape featuring a cluster of boulders in the middle. These three works and others in her show are made in editions of 100 and can be ordered. Chen did not attend the opening reception but is scheduled to give an artist talk at the center October 24 and a master class, October 24-26.

The Scary and Chen projects, proof positive that the book arts can encompass infinite variety, run concurrently with the center’s main exhibition, “Illustrated Fine Printing: Whittington & Matrix in America” (see Zoom in American Craft, December 2008-January 2009).

Gimme More!

<http://www.centerforbookarts.org/>

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