Sacred Texts/Contemporary Forms exhibit explores spiritual traditions in the digital age

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Summary: Sacred Texts/Contemporary Forms: Spiritual Traditions in the Digital Age, Jan. 16 – Feb. 24, 2007; Reception, Winter Gallery Night, Friday, Jan. 19; Panel Discussions, Feb. 7, 14, 21; 7 – 9 p.m. Frederick Layton Gallery, 273 E. Erie St. Tues. – Sat. 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. Free. 414.847.3200.

MILWAUKEE… In a globe-spanning exhibition, MIAD professor and curator Leslie Fedorchuk has brought together 30 artists who examine and reveal sacred texts in both revolutionary and traditional ways amid our rapidly changing digital culture. MIAD is Wisconsin’s only independent, four-year college of art and design.

The artists’ interpretations of timeless and varied spiritual messages through 70 plus works raise questions that art and faith often pose – a search for meaning and connections to both the past and the future.

The works in Sacred Texts/Contemporary Forms represent such faith traditions as Buddhism, Christianity, Baha’ism, Hmong shamanism, Islam, Judaism, Maya and Wicca. They are as simple as penned books in an indigenous Spanish dialect by a shaman from Chiapas, Mexico, and feather “books” by an Ojibwa from St. Ignace, Michigan, that are more sculptural objects than traditional books.

But they are also as detailed and crafted as seven digital facsimiles from the Saint John’s Bible, the first bible to be written and illustrated in the Benedictine monastic tradition in more than 500 years. Commissioned by Saint John’s Abbey and Saint John’s University, the bible has been created using ancient techniques (eggs, quills, calf-skins, and hand-ground inks with gold, silver and platinum) combined with modern touches, such as strands of DNA gracefully entwined up the branches of Jesus’ ancestral tree, to produce a contemporary masterpiece.

And they include the idea of the book as an interactive object in a variety of ways, including four ancient texts that viewers can manipulate on a kiosk.

According to Fedorchuk, who traveled the country for a year doing research, “The exhibition engages the viewer through varied access points, both familiar and unfamiliar, in exploring sacred texts as interpreted by contemporary artists working with digital and traditional media. The processes of thought and physical action that are the artists’ methods of creation compel viewers to ‘bear witness’ to the journey of the text. This journey is one of history, of the solitary works of the artists, and finally, of a personal response.”

Other exhibition works, which are on loan from artists, library collections and fine book dealers, include:

Root Words: An Alphabetic Exploration, by Lynne Avadenka in collaboration with Mohamed Zakariya, of the Hebrew and Arabic languages through seven calligraphically rendered words whose meanings are the same and whose pronunciations are close. The words are framed by images made by Avadenka inspired by the combined beauty of the Hebrew and Arabic letterforms. The book opens to 77 inches; its 16 leaves are bound concertina style with 28 folios. Avadenka will participate in the first of three panel discussions accompanying the exhibit in February (see next page – MORE).
Midnight Song: by Caren Heft with text by Alan Govenar: A six-page narrative on Hmong shaman Boua Xou Mua; the spiritual leader of his people who was a mercenary for the French and the CIA in Laos. The book is printed in an eclectic page size and includes one of the shaman’s poems. Laid in a fitted compartment is a CD “The Music of the Hmong People of Laos: Documentary Arts” by the shaman.

Incantations by Mayan Women: Amber Past and the Taller Leñateros paper and bookmaking collective: the first book Mayan people have created and bound in paper of their own making in nearly 500 years. A strikingly beautiful volume made from 295 pages with silk-screen illustrations. The cover is a three-dimensional rendering of the face of Kaxall, Mayan goddess of the wilderness, in recycled cardboard mixed with corn silk and coffee. The book contains spells and hymns recorded by the women that are transcribed and translated from Tzotzil into Spanish and English.

Fragments of Light II: conceived and designed by Kelly Driscoll; translated by Zahra Partove. One of only 35 copies, each comprising seven plates of Depp Glass, each plate with a laser etch of the English translation of the verse of 13th century Sufi philosopher and poet Jalaluddin Mohammad Rumi. The laser etches of this extraordinarily beautiful book sculpture, which includes a laser etch of the original Persian verse, are visible to the viewer through to the bottom from the top.

Sacred Geography: Poems of the Himalaya and Tibet, by Mary Heebner in collaboration with her daughter, Sienna Craig, whose 12 sonnets are printed on handmade pulp-painted paper by the artist. The book’s format depicts the loose-leafed books of Buddhist sutra and classical texts of Nepal’s Mustang district and Tibet. It was inspired by Heebner’s visits to her daughter in Nepal and Tibet, by the sacred colors of striped mani (Tibetan prayers) etched into a wall of boulders, and by ammonite fossils known as saligram in Sanskrit and Nepali.

Sacred Texts/Contemporary Forms continues the Culture in Transition series inaugurated by MIAD’s Director of Galleries Mark Lawson in 2006 to explore the rapidly changing nature of our global culture. It and its three accompanying panel discussions are supported in part by grants from the Milwaukee Arts Board and the Wisconsin Humanities Council. The panels will be held at MIAD, Wednesdays, February 7, 14, 21; 7 – 9 p.m. (separate release to follow): They are:

Contemporary Book Arts, 2/7/07 – An historical perspective of the exhibit’s contemporary books and how and why they were made (Artist Avadenka will participate in this panel).
Sacred Texts, 2/14/07 – Representatives of the exhibition’s myriad faith traditions will discuss the roles of historical texts and their current use.
The Digital Future of Books, 2/21/07 – A discussion of how digital technology is changing the dissemination of information using sacred texts to move toward broader issues.

For a list of participating artists, visit miad.edu. An online catalogue will be available in January at STCF.miad.edu.

MIAD is Wisconsin’s only college devoted exclusively to the education of professional artists and designers. Founded in 1974, it is accredited to award the bachelor of fine arts degree in 11 majors. With 80 percent of its 2,000 graduates living and working in Wisconsin, the college contributes a vital “brain gain” to the state that shapes its creative and economic future.