

The library, illuminated anew, in bold Mass MoCA show

By Stacey Kors

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 27, 2015

NORTH ADAMS — In the basement of Mass MoCA, artist Jena Priebe and an assistant stand at a wooden worktable, carefully gluing vintage book pages onto long, narrow strips of flexible metal covered in construction paper.

“There will be a room with an easy chair and ottoman, a lamp and a rug,” says Priebe, describing “The Secret Lives of Books,” her new installation. “And there’s an open book on the ottoman erupting with pages — spilling onto the floor and climbing up the walls. There’s so much energy in books, so much knowledge, so much power. You can put down your book and get up for a moment, but you’re still in the story, still on a different plane.”



GEORGE LEON

Jena Priebe's "Diagnosis."

Priebe's installation is featured in the exhibit "Bibliotecaphilia," which opened on Saturday. Also included are works by Clayton Cubitt, Jonathan Gitelson, Meg Hitchcock, Susan Hefuna, and Dan Peterman. An exploration of libraries and their continued relevance, "Bibliotecaphilia" is the brainchild of Allie Foradas, an art history graduate student at Williams College with a two-year curatorial internship at Mass MoCA that culminates in a solo exhibition.

"Like the artists in the exhibition, I grew up during the transition from no Internet to Internet," Foradas says. "There was a shift to a new way of gathering information that wasn't the same as a library; and that shift is something that a lot of people are grappling with right now."

A week before the opening, Foradas surveys the busy gallery space. In one area, an assistant sits on the floor, wiping down the book-size boards that compose Dan Peterman's "The Polymer Catalog: one-ton archive."

"The piece is about 30 feet long and four rows high," Foradas says. "It's all recycled plastic, extruded and cut to dimensions to make them look like books."

On the opposite wall, Jonathan Gitelson is stacking a different kind of recycled book for "Marginalia."

"I was thinking about the fact that when I'd buy used books, they'd have all kinds of previous histories, something important enough to underline or mark," he says. "The book would then re-enter the world and be recycled. Every book on these shelves — nearly 2,000 of them — has markings from their previous owners."

Gitelson encourages viewers to pull books off the shelves and flip through them, and even add bookmarks that he provides in the pages that most interest them, thereby making their

imprint as well. “It plays again into this idea of the cycles of books and their multiple lives,” he says.

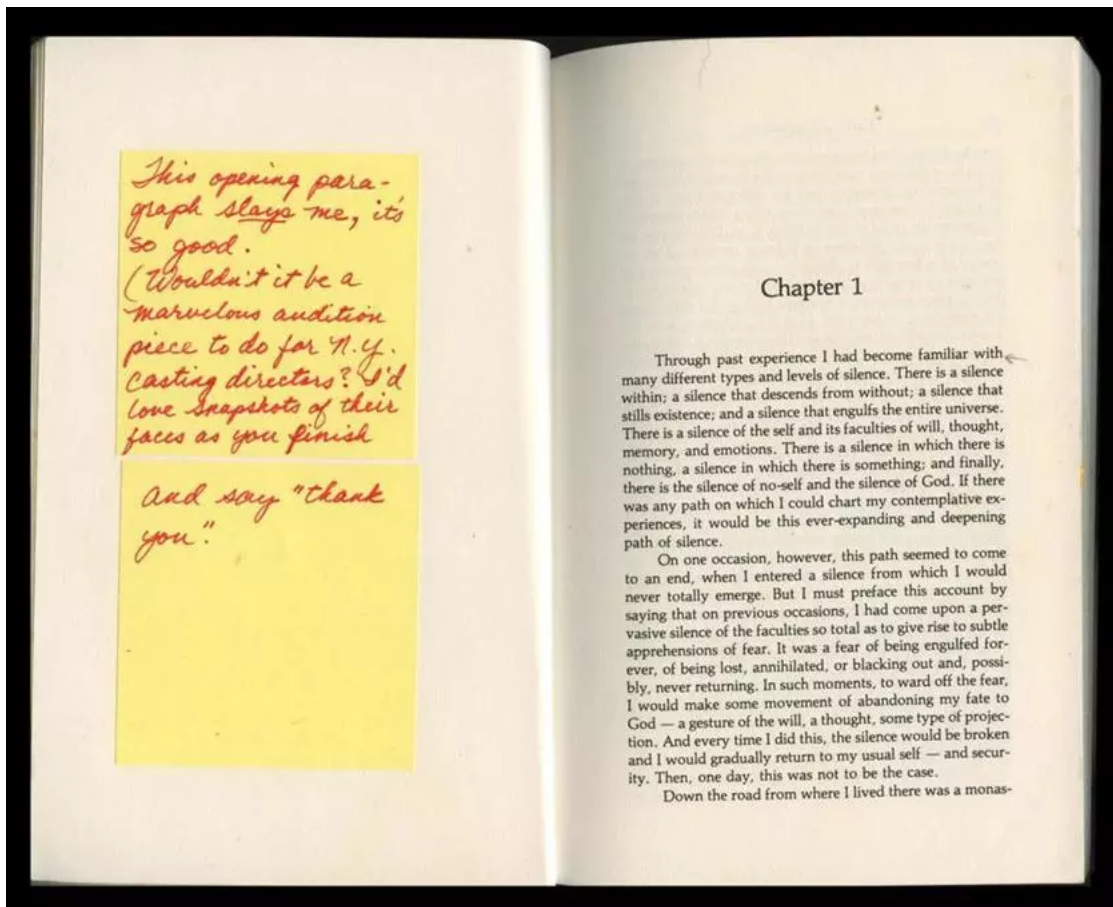
Foradas likes the idea of having Peterman’s and Gitelson’s work on opposite walls, “not just because the juxtaposition is appealing visually, but also because it points to a deeper difference concerning what it is exactly that makes up a library.”

For a modest-size exhibit, Foradas has cast a wide conceptual net. Along with questioning the continued relevance of libraries, “Bibliotecaphilia” explores ideas of the institution as a space that’s physical and philosophical, public and private, a storehouse not only for books and knowledge but personal experiences, with each work in the exhibit touching, sometimes tangentially, on a different theme.

“This is my favorite of Meg Hitchcock’s pieces,” Foradas says, unwrapping a framed work on paper with individual, hand-cut letters painstakingly arranged in tight, concentric squares to form Walt Whitman’s religious poem “Chanting the Square Deific.”

“She reuses and repurposes texts,” says Foradas, “cutting letters from one holy text and using them to assemble passages from another in beautiful patterns. These,” she says, pointing to the Whitman, “are from a German bible.” Also in the exhibition are “Tarastakam: Hymn to Tara,” a Hindu prayer assembled from the same German bible, and “Shoonya,” a prayer from the Bhagavad Gita with letters cut from the book of Deuteronomy. “Hitchcock explores questions of translation, from one faith to another, one language to another, and the incomprehensibility that sometimes results.”

As with Hitchcock’s work, it’s the subtext of Susan Hefuna’s creations that speaks to Foradas’s interest in libraries. Hefuna handcrafts mashrabiya — large-scale, carved wooden screens typically found in homes in the Middle East — and dyes them with ink, weaving words and phrases into the pattern of the screen. Hefuna was drawn to the meditative aspects that mashrabiya afford: allowing women to look upon the commotion of the outside world, while being shielded from public view.



JONATHAN GITELSON

Jonathan Gitelson's "Marginalia."

"They exist on the doorstep between public and private," Foradas says, "in a similar way to how libraries function. There's an element of libraries where the private thirst for knowledge and desire for external experiences allows for a certain amount of anonymity."

Foradas intentionally placed Hefuna's mashrabiya on the opposite side of the wall from Clayton Cubitt's "Hysterical Literature," which illustrates a very different aspect of women in their private moments. Shown in its own space due to its sexual content, "Hysterical Literature" is a series of filmed "sessions" featuring a woman sitting at a table, reading aloud from a book of her choosing. Underneath the table, unseen by the viewer, an assistant pleasures the woman with a vibrator. It's a battle between mind and body as she struggles to read on; ultimately, she gasps and cries out as the body wins.

"In a way," says Cubitt, "each of these sessions becomes that sitter's idea of herself, idealized through what she's chosen to read." (A choice, no doubt, that she'll never read the same way again.)

“It’s definitely taking a chance,” says Foradas of her choice to include the explicit, Internet-native work, which went viral soon after she proposed it for the exhibit. “But I was interested in exploring the library as a philosophical space, and the ways it could be defined outside of its capacity as a collection of books. One of the things that Clayton is doing is creating a digital archive, not only of literary experiences, but of experiences, period, which is one of the ways a library functions.

“Libraries and reading are about the full spectrum of the human experience,” she adds. “Pleasure and sexuality are a huge part of that experience.”

Stacey Kors is a freelance arts writer.