Illumination and Sculptural Invention in Maine

The Kate Cheney Chappell '83 Center for Book Arts at the University of Southern Maine is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. In its first decade, the center has established itself as the preeminent showcase for Maine's book arts community. Director Rebecca Goodale, an innovative maker of books herself, likes to mix it up. You might find Dutch-American writer Janwillem van de Wetering's books and artwork on display or a show of artists responding to the plight of migrants on the Greek island of Lesvos.

The current show, Contemporary Illuminated Manuscripts: The Work of Nancy Ruth Leavitt, highlights the art of a master of hand-lettered books. Leavitt, who lives in Stillwater, ME, is known for her calligraphic lettering and inventive illuminations. The exhibition includes 30 books and broadsides, along with 15 folders of studies for various book works and an assortment of craft tools.

Leavitt works with a range of literature, revisiting and reimagining classics such as Clement Moore's The Night Before Christmas and Celia Thaxter's An Island Garden, but also produces original work. For Plant Corridors (2014), she wrote and illustrated, in watercolor and gouache, a study of plant life found along northern Maine Interstate 95, drawing on the research of botanists, weed ecologists and the Maine DOT.

Some of Leavitt's designs relate to current events. In 2012, after a general call was made to send 20 snowflakes to Sandy Hook Elementary to welcome students back to school and honor the 20 children who were murdered there, Leavitt set out to cut a snowflake for every gun violence victim in the U.S. She has been unable to keep up with the numbers despite having cut thousands of snowflakes. Several pieces in the show, including Hope (2018) based on a poem by Emily Dickinson, incorporate her cut-out snowflake designs.

Across town, the 17 artists in ON BOOKS: Sculpture at the Portland Public Library approach the book as an invitation and inspiration to create sculpture. The 30 or so pieces include altered books, sculptural responses to books or literary experiences and pieces that employ language, words and other book elements.

Three 2018 sculptures by Lin Lisberger, who curated the exhibition, came from reading, respectively, an Ursula Hegi novel and poems by W.S. Merwin and Mary Oliver. The latter poet's White Owl Flies Into and Out of the Field, with its image of a “Buddha with wings” preying on an animal in the snow led to a resonant construction of painted poplar, chestnut and small animal bones.

Sculptor Duncan Hewitt likewise drew from poetry. His Falling Awake (2018) takes its title from British poet Alice Oswald's 2016 collection. The sculpture, made of carved wood that has been painted, consists of three versions of the book, one of them open and each with its own bookmark. As part of the exhibition, Hewitt will present a performance/reading of Oswald's poem Swan on March 14 at 5:30 p.m.

Lesley Dill created the skinny 32-inch-tall Black Long-Legged Crane Puppet with White Letters (2013) out of thread, fabric and wood. Along the length of it runs a line from a Tom Sleigh poem: “Then a moment happens like watching an icicle turn into a sword hanging above your head.”

The aforementioned Rebecca Goodale's La