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## Turning Damaged Books Into Art

*Reversing Vandalism art exhibit*

By Kat Avila | Web Published 4.19.2004

The books have been recycled into bowls, scrolls, altars, mobiles, and origami cranes. They are part of the "Reversing Vandalism" art exhibit (Jan. 31-May 2) hosted by the James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center of the San Francisco Public Library at the main branch.



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Over 600 books – mostly on gay, lesbian, and women's concerns – were sliced and otherwise cut up by a deranged white man. Religious material was sometimes inserted into the subsequently hidden books. The damaged books were discovered at the Chinatown and Main Library branches of the San Francisco Public Library.

In 2001, the vandal - an apartment security guard - was caught. For his hate crimes, he was fined and sentenced to five years probation.

Book vandalism is not entirely unexpected when book burnings and library book censorship are applauded in some parts of the country. Only a few years ago I chatted with an individual who had just challenged the removal of a book series about notable gays and lesbians at an Anaheim junior high school library where he worked.

A "Reversing Vandalism" artist noticed how someone had stamped "The Holocaust is a lie!" in Judaic books at one library she visited. And on the same day I visited the exhibit at the San Francisco Public Library, I turned in a book where someone had used a razor to remove a picture, damaging adjacent pages.

From an author/reader's 2-D community to an artist/viewer's 3-D community, books were sent out to sympathetic artists. Artists from different artistic disciplines used their talents to recover meaning from the vandalized texts. The removal of the books from the public eye would have abetted the perpetrator's agenda. This way, through the exhibit, the books have been brought out to be "read" by a wider audience.

In the exhibit's introduction, Hormel Center program manager Jim Van Buskirk wrote, "It is appropriate that not all the artists involved identify as queer, because this was not just a crime against some of us, but a crime against all of us."

As Jessica White expressed in her artist statement, "This act is so against what books stand for. Why is this person hanging out in a library?"

Later in the week I walk over to the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts. The current art exhibit is "Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors: Looking at the World through the Eyes of the Youth" (April 3-April 23), curated by Luis Vasquez Gomez and Patricia Rodriguez. The artwork is by children and youth, K-26 years old, of all ethnicities.

One whimsical wall features simulated cave art paintings made by using charcoal against crumpled pieces of sketch paper and paper bags. A neighboring wall is filled with stuffed shapes of tan and brown colors ("representative of one's skin"). The pillows have the



children's questions pinned on them: "What color is your soul?"  
"Do you know what's under my bed?" and "Are mermaids real?"

In another part of the exhibit, a girls' group took Polaroid photos of each other and enlarged them on a copier. Each girl colorized and personalized her copied picture. On a card she wrote out what each letter in her first name stands for.

"The Shadow" mural is made up of panels that alternate traced shadows of the artists' upper torsos with panels of text. Across one of the shadows, an artist wrote in white paint: "I think differently...My thoughts are subtle...I work hard for respect...My heart is cold...My actions seems abstruse...I have no emotions."

Flying serpents, festival masks, heart mobiles, Egyptian headdresses, paintings on pizza boxes – there's a little something for everyone at the Mission Cultural Center exhibit.

*Kat regularly writes on affairs affecting the Chicano and APA communities. Her web site is <http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia>*

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