

## Julie Chen: Thinking Outside the Book

“In my mind, I’m trying to give the viewer/reader an experience that has to do with reading, that has to do with a one-on-one physical experience with the object.”

“Even though I’m getting more and more away from physical book structures, it’s still solidly in my mind, a book.”

## Craft in America Theme: PROCESS

### Lesson Overview

In this lesson students will view the work of contemporary book artist Julie Chen. Through investigating Julie Chen’s non-traditional approach to bookmaking and the process she employs, students will contemplate and discuss the definition of a book, consider how books are made, collaborate and brainstorm ways to push the boundaries of books, and explore books as sculpture. Students will create their own art books that have personal meaning and go beyond the confines of a traditional book.

Grade Level (8-12)

Estimated Time (x 45 minute class periods)

### Background Information:

People have long found ways to record and communicate information, from writing on stone, wood, and clay tablets in the earliest times, to using papyrus and parchment for scrolls. Scrolls evolved into early forms of books. Rare and valued for their exquisite beauty, books were written and constructed by hand with handmade materials, and each book was a unique creation or a copy of an existing book. Multiple copies were handmade prior to the invention of the printing press in about 1440, which has evolved into the production methods we know today.

Despite available technology that allows for multiple copies and wide distribution, some artists still craft books by hand. Most handmade books fall within a continuum where, at one end you find more traditional forms and, at the other end, are structures that push the boundaries of what it means to be a book.

Julie Chen playfully pushes the conceptual limits of books. Always mindful of the reader who will interact with her structures, she selects papers to delight the eye and appeal to the touch, while creating forms that function as “vessels” for text, images, ideas and meaning. The element of surprise is integral to her books—what might be anticipated as a “page” emerges as three-dimensional sculptural space. In one work, *Bon Bon Mots*, a superbly crafted “candy” box opens to reveal five small sculptural forms; each is a book in its own right, albeit a book that seems much more like a toy than a book. Despite the nontraditional forms, the text in Chen’s creations is letterpress printed. Even as she explores unconventional structures, Julie Chen maintains the longstanding bookmaking tradition in which exquisite craftsmanship is the norm.

### Key Concepts

Artists sometimes explore conceptual boundaries of art forms.

During the process of making art, artists often consider how the viewer will experience the artwork.

A book can be considered a three-dimensional artwork—a sculpture—that has both content and form.

Some artists allow for new ideas and directions to gradually enter into the art-making process.

### Critical Questions

What is a book?

When is a book a work of visual art?

Why might it be important for the artist to consider the viewer when planning and creating an art book?

### Objectives

Students will:

Explore the parts and defining characteristics of a book.

Compare and contrast traditional books with the books of Julie Chen.

Investigate nontraditional structures for books.

Create a book with personal meaning that goes beyond the confines of a traditional book.

Interdisciplinary Connections: Language Arts, History/Social Studies

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard:

1: Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes

2: Using knowledge of structures and functions

3: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

5: Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Vocabulary

Artist's Book, Prototype

Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

Craft in America DVD, "Process"

Craft in America website: <http://www.craftinamerica.org/>

Julie Chen's Website: <http://www.flyingfishpress.com/index.html>

Vamp and Tramp Bookseller Website: <http://www.vampandtramp.com/html/home.html>

Worksheets:

"Amazing Books" NOTE: THIS SHOULD INCLUDE A LINK TO THE PDF

"From Prototype to Final Book" ALSO SHOULD INCLUDE A LINK TO PDF

Materials for Studio Production

Various packaging materials for students to consider as book structures

Old hardbound books to be "gutted" and used for structure

A variety of colors, textures, and weights of paper

Pencils, rulers, compasses

A variety of color writing implements

Paints, brushes

Newspapers, cardboard

Collage materials

Glue, rubber cement, double sided tape

Exacto knives and scissors

Instructional Strategies

Investigations #1 and #2 (two 45 minute classes)

Investigation #1: What Makes a Book a Book?

Invite students to discuss the parts and defining characteristics of a book. Make use of these and similar prompts: Must a book have pages, a cover, or a spine? Is there an optimal size or shape? What about how it “works?” Should it open and close? Does it need to tell a story or communicate ideas and/or information? Can something be a book without having text? Can something be a book without having images? What about materials? Are there certain materials out of which books must be made? As students address these and other questions, urge them to provide examples that they have seen or that are in the classroom. Prior to viewing the DVD, tell students that they will view a visit with Julie Chen, a contemporary book artist living in California. Explain that Julie Chen’s work challenges traditional definitions of books and bookmaking. Suggest that students keep in mind their discussion of the defining characteristics of a book as they view the video segment.

View the DVD segment about Julie Chen and then discuss the following:

In what ways are Julie Chen’s books traditional? In what ways do her books challenge traditional definitions of books and bookmaking?

Investigation #2: How are books made?

How does Julie Chen make her books?

Review the bookmaking materials, tools and techniques observed during the video segment. (The artist uses paper of different colors, weights, textures, and patterns; works with hand-operated and computer-generated cutting tools; a computer, and printing press). Review the process the artist engages in when creating a book. (While planning and designing, she allows her ideas to evolve and change; she creates a mock-up, prints the separate pieces and then puts them together for the final book, making 100 editions of each book.)

Refer to what the artist says about how she works with ideas. Help students understand that the artist often begins with an idea, but allows her ideas to change during the process of working.

What seems to be important to the artist in creating her books?

Return to the DVD and view segments where she describes her books. Consider her book, Panorama. Ask, How is it made? (three folded sections, alternates informative text with pop-ups for “meditations on the beauty of the planet...a break.”) How did the artist incorporate text in Panorama? (She added text to folded sections that alternate with pop-up pages.) How does she incorporate text in True to Life? (She created sliding pages, allowing the text to appear as the reader slides them up or down.)

Julie Chen says that it is important that every detail of the book contributes to the overall meaning. Ask students to talk about where they see evidence of this approach in the artist’s books.

Students will find other books by the artist at the Flying Fish Press website, <http://www.flyingfishpress.com/index.html>. Suggest that they pay attention to the construction of each book as well as how the artist incorporates text and images.

Julie Chen says that an artist’s book “is a book made by an artist with the intention that the book itself is the work of art.” Do you agree with this definition? Why or why not?

How do other artists make books?

Explore different book forms. Do an online search. For example, students can view a large collection of artists’ books at Vamp and Tramp Booksellers, LLC at <http://www.vampandtramp.com/html/home.html> Have students use the “Amazing Books” worksheet (NOTE: THIS SHOULD BE A LINK TO THE PDF WORKSHEET) as they engage in an online image search for the following book forms: accordion or concertina books, fan books, tunnel books, scrolls, altered books, miniature books, venetian blind books, and pop-up books. Students can also search online to find “how-to” sites for various book forms.

How can we push the “boundaries” of the book?

After students have viewed many different examples of artists’ books, suggest that they brainstorm answers to the following questions:

What can one do with the overall book? Think about shape, size, form and materials, for example.

Possible answers include:

Experiment with shape; for example, round, square, oblong, organic shape, geometric shapes, recognizable shapes such as a boat.

Experiment with size; for example, very, very large, very, very small, and everything in between.

Experiment with form; for example, a standard form (that is, it looks like a “regular” book) or all sorts of sculptural forms.

Use different materials; for example, cardboard, corrugated cardboard, paper of all weights and textures, fabric of all weights and textures, leather of different thicknesses, wood of different types and thicknesses, foam-core, metal foils such as copper or aluminum, etc.

What can one do with a page?

Possible answers include: Draw, paint and/or print on it. Make a collage of it. Create one or more pop-ups. Cut out windows to the page behind or before it. Emboss it. Make it an unusual shape. Fold it. Sew into it.

Finally, to help students push the boundaries of ordinary books even further, have them use objects from daily life as catalysts for ideas. For example, suggest that students consider the packaging that comes with cameras and other electronics, with CDs, toys, tools, kitchen matches and even certain foods. Suggest that they look to the packaging to find a framework for a book. If the class has created a collection of such items, have students select from the collection and work in small groups to brainstorm different ways these objects might be altered to create a book.

Studio Production (five or more 45 minute classes)

Have students create their own art books that have personal meaning and go beyond the confines of a traditional book. Remind students that their work should still retain the characteristics of a book and a cohesive theme. Students will need to identify an idea or theme with which they will work.

Finding Ideas

Remind students that their book might feature something they care about deeply, like the environment, animal rights, music, dance, athletics, politics, etc. The book can tell a story or engage the reader in a game. A student might take one favorite quote or statement and show it in many different ways, create separate “pages” to respond to the lines of a favorite poem, or create a poem or short essay that reveals itself within the book. Students could celebrate a local hero or someone in their family or community. Suggest that they return to Julie Chen’s website and pay attention to the ideas she has explored in her books. As they brainstorm for ideas and themes, they should also recall ideas that were the focus of the books they found during their web search for different book forms.

Once they’ve settled on an idea, have student sketch the form of their books with notes about how they will construct them.

Making a Prototype

Remind students that Julie Chen always creates a prototype before she creates her finished book. Why might a book artist create a prototype? (To try out different ways to create the structure, to identify potential construction problems, and/or to decide how the parts of the book will look when combined.)

Have students create a prototype. Remind them that the prototype need not be carefully crafted; its purpose is to explore possible ways to construct the book and to see how the parts will fit together. Provide paper and cardboard scraps, tape, glue, paperclips, wire, etc.

As students work on their prototypes, ask, Do the elements of the book support the meaning? Remind students that they need to be consistently aware of how the reader/viewer will experience and move through the book.

Provide students with the worksheet, “From Prototype to Final Book,” to create a construction guide to follow as they craft the final version of the book.

### Constructing the Book

Have students gather the materials they will need to complete the construction of their books. Remind them to refer to their individual construction guides as they proceed. Remind students that exquisite craftsmanship should be their goal. Suggest that they prepare a workspace with several layers of newspaper and as they drip or splatter glue or paint, they should remove the top layer and dispose of it. Provide waxed paper and/or foil to protect separate pages, if need be. Remind students to measure and cut carefully, etc.

The process for constructing the books will vary from student to student, so their needs for assistance will vary as well. In addition, each student will complete the book at a different pace.

### Reflection

Engage students in a discussion or have them write in their sketchbooks about their results. Are they pleased with how they turned out? What surprised them? Do they feel that every aspect of the book contributes to its meaning? In retrospect, what improvements do you think could be made?

Invite students to work in pairs to “read” each other’s books. Pairs should discuss what it is like to “experience” the artworks. In what ways did the viewer’s experience meet your expectations? What were you hoping for that did not happen?

### Assessment

By the end of this lesson students should be able to:

Articulate the parts and defining characteristics of a book.

Discuss the similarities and differences between traditional books and the books of Julie Chen.

Understand that nontraditional structures can form books.

Create a book with personal meaning that goes beyond the confines of a traditional book.

### Additional Resources

Ann Ayers and Ellen McMillan, *Sculptural Bookmaking*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications. <http://www.davisart.com/Portal/K-12-Curriculum/Sculptural-Bookmaking-179.aspx>

Jean Kropper, *Handmade Books and Cards*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications. <http://www.davisart.com/Portal/K-12-Curriculum/Handmade-Books-and-Cards-90.aspx>

Alice Sprintzen, *Crafts: Contemporary Design and Technique*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications. <http://www.davisart.com/Portal/K-12-Curriculum/Crafts/Contemporary-Design-and-Technique-89.aspx>

### Extensions

To continue the concept of artists “pushing boundaries” as part of their process, take a look at *Craft in America Educator Guide Community: Continuity And Change*.

## AMAZING BOOKS!

Go online to search for some amazing book forms. For each form you find, describe how you think it might have been made. Make other notes about how you might want to incorporate it in your own book making.

<b>Book Form</b>	<b>Website</b>	<b>Process?</b>	<b>How I might use it</b>
Accordion (also called Concertina)			
Fan book			
Tunnel Book			
Scroll			
Venetian Blind Book			
Pop-Up Book			
Miniature Book			

On the other side of this worksheet, list some "How-To" websites you've found.

## FROM PROTOTYPE TO FINAL BOOK

Use this sheet to create a “construction guide” to follow as you craft the final version of your book. You may wish to make a close-up drawing or photograph of the prototype’s details to better illustrate the particular step in the process. In addition, you may wish to add reminders or other comments—things to remember while involved in this step.

STEPS	ILLUSTRATION (optional)	COMMENTS
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		

Note that you may need to continue listing steps on the other side of this worksheet.