

# **National Museum of Women in the Arts**

## **Julie Chen: True to Life**

### **Large-Print Object Labels**

To follow this large print guide, begin at the case that is to your left where you enter the reading room and move to your right through the entry area. Then move to the cases in the center of the room.

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#### **Large-Print Object Labels**

Julie Chen, of Berkeley, California, has been creating artists' books since she launched Flying Fish Press in 1987. She approaches her art with the sensibilities of both a construction engineer and a philosopher/poet, and she is known for the innovative ways in which she marries text, imagery, and structure. She creates books that are highly interactive, sometimes openly mimicking the experience of hypertext. Chen teaches book arts at Mills College in Oakland, California, and at book arts workshops around the country.

Chen scrutinizes the liminal spaces we inhabit. (She gave Flying Fish Press its name because she was fascinated by this fish's existence between water and air.) She explores the ways we learn, the stories we tell ourselves, and the ways in which language can reveal and conceal. In her

book True to Life, she writes, “A life story must be invented and reinvented even as it is being told.”

Over more than three decades, her work, often semiautobiographical, has turned repeatedly to questions related to time, memory, and communication. She has said, “Giving order to personal experience through the use of mapping, charting, and numbering continues to be an important underlying theme that runs through much of my work.”

### **Panorama, 2008**

Letterpress on paper and woodblocks

Courtesy of James Branch Cabell Library Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University

Chen hopes that Panorama, with its varied architecture, will instill “wonder at the intricacy and splendor of the world around us.” Each passing year brings new threats from geophysical changes and natural disasters caused

by climate change. Chen mines her own terrors in Panorama, which she created after immersing herself in writings on the topic. This is one of the few books in Chen's portfolio that addresses contemporary sociopolitical issues.

### **Radio Silence, 1995**

Letterpress on paper, including aeronautical charts and embossed papers

Courtesy of James Branch Cabell Library Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University

The speaker in Chen's poem envisions traveling far away, where she can give voice to her anguish without the oppressive presence of the Other in her relationship. She's pursuing a place where she can scream without being heard. When fully extended, this small book measures seven feet.

## **Octopus, 1992**

Poem by Elizabeth McDevitt; Book design and construction by Julie Chen

Letterpress on handmade paper

Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, NMWA

The tunnel structure of Octopus illuminates the sensation described in McDevitt's poem of a person receding, moving further and further away. Chen explains the effect as "disappearing behind a screen of words that confuse rather than clarify the speaker's understanding of the relationship."

Move to the center of the reading room and follow the books in the cases by facing the windows and moving to your right.

## **View, 2006**

Letterpress on paper

Courtesy of the artist

Two vivid dreams experienced years apart inspired Chen to re-create the visions in this two-book set. As a bonus, the box housing the books also includes a secret diorama.

### **Domestic Science, 1990**

Text and prints by Nance O'Banion; Book design and printing by Julie Chen

Letterpress and linoleum block prints on paper

Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, NMWA

Chen designed this complex, two-sided artist book of linoleum block prints by Nance O'Banion using concertina folds, pop-ups, and fold-outs. One side features "Icons" and the other side "Idioms." The book explores language, imagery, and "the effect of context on meaning."

### **Listening, 1992**

Letterpress on handmade paper

Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, NMWA

Chen depicts hands “talking” and writes, “You raise your hands and you begin to speak and I am listening.” Inspired by the San Francisco Symphony, this book can be displayed in three ways, each mimicking a movement of music (allegro, adagio, and presto).

### **Chrysalis, 2014**

Letterpress on handmade paper

Courtesy of the artist

Grief marks and transforms us, much as the chrysalis signifies the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly. Chen frequently concerns herself with these interstitial states:

Everything inside of you  
dissolves and shifts, becomes a  
collection of new shapes that has  
no outward connection to the  
old shapes but contains a  
vast accumulation of memory

that can never be destroyed.

When Chrysalis is closed, its shape is an oloid, Chen says, which is “defined by the space created by two linked circles that intersect on perpendicular planes. It is the relationship of the circles that creates the shape.”

### **True to Life, 2004**

Letterpress on paper, Plexiglas, and wood

Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, NMWA

The pages of this book slide up and down. Depending on the position of the Venetian blind slats, a different version of the text and imagery is revealed, much like the ever-changing quality of personal memories. Here, Chen has returned to a recurrent theme—the interplay of time, truth, and narrative.



## **River of Stars, 1994**

Book design and construction by Edward H. Hutchins;

Book printing and construction by Julie Chen

Letterpress on paper

Courtesy of James Branch Cabell Library Special  
Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth  
University

This tiny double accordion book is the result of a  
collaboration with book artist Ed Hutchins, who first  
conceptualized the design. Chen called the concept “one  
of the coolest things I had ever seen.”

## **You Are Here, 1992**

Letterpress on paper

Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, NMWA

Reflecting Chen’s fascination with maps, this book unfolds  
in much the same way as a map included in the back of a  
book or journal. This structure complements the text,  
which reflects on the challenging journeys we undertake

when wracked by grief and sorrow. The poem begins, “I would make for you a map so that you could plot your course with care....” Its box includes an encased compass and tiny set of dice.

### **Family Tree, 2013**

Digitally printed and laser-cut wood

Courtesy of James Branch Cabell Library Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University

The arrangement and rearrangement of the blocks of Family Tree show how we shape and are shaped by family relations, which are never fixed; these ties are influenced by many internal and external factors.

After viewing Family Tree, move to the wall to your left near the library stacks to see Bon Bon Mots.

## **Bon Bon Mots, 1998**

Clay, Fimo, letterpress on paper, Plexiglas, and polymer  
Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center, NMWA

A collection of five miniature artists' books entitled Elegy, Social Graces, Either/Or, Life Cycle, and Labyrinth, assembled as a box of chocolates, reflects Chen's love of candy as well as her probing of life's myriad choices. She is concerned with the impact of the passage of time on those choices. The "candies" in Bon Bon Mots, Chen says, "mix sadness and sweetness in equal proportions."

Move to the other side of the reading room close to the windows, on the far side of the pillar, to view Wayfinding in the upright case.

## **Wayfinding, 2019**

Letterpress on handmade paper

Courtesy of the artist

Wayfinding, an intricate work with many features, includes paper pressed into three-dimensional, bas relief representations of flag semaphores. Three separate sections, “Abstract,” “Concrete,” and “Coalescent,” form a book that “examines the relationship between physical and mental learning through the context of navigation through time and space.”