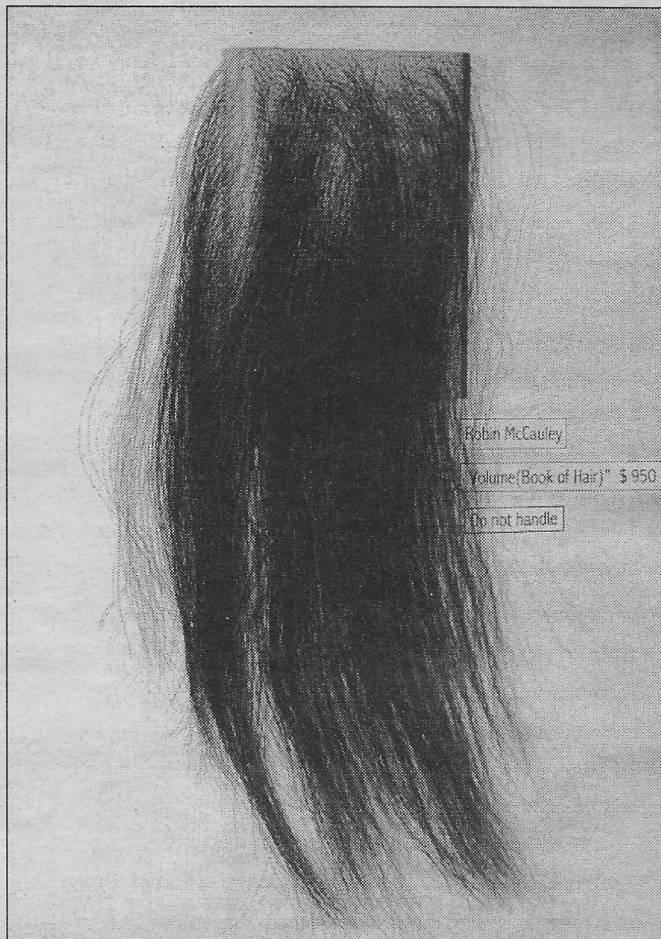


LEAVES OF HAIR
 Artist Robin McCauley's entry in the show now on display at Butte College, "Volume (Book of Hair)," bends the definition of "book."



Reading art

The Coyote Gallery's Conceptually Bound 2 examines the book as art form

In the late 1960s the conceptual art movement had its brief moment of notoriety. Within a couple of years it went the way of other 1960s art fads. The problem with conceptual art was that it tried very hard not to make anything that would look like art. Above all, conceptual artists tried to make art that wasn't a commodity, that couldn't be bought and sold. One of the most notorious pieces was Joseph Kosuth's "One of Three Chairs," which displayed an actual chair, a photograph of the same chair, and a dictionary definition of a chair.

by
 Scott
 rennan-Smith

photo by
 Tom
 Angel

Unfortunately, the public wasn't ready for such philosophical art, and conceptual art faded away. Yet in its own quiet way it had a huge impact, not so much on the public, but on other artists. Because of conceptual art, what a piece said came to be as important as what it looked like. The rules for art had changed.

Nearly all of the art works in *Conceptually Bound 2*, a show of artists' books at the Coyote Gallery at Butte College, bear the stamp of conceptual art. True, many of the works are for sale, and this technically disqualifies them, at least for purists, from the label "conceptual art." The show as a whole, however, is bound together by a concept, which asks, "What are the limits of what a book can be?" and "How are form and meaning fused in a book?"

Many of the pieces do look like books. They have front and back covers and pages in between. Jody Alexander's beautiful books of handmade paper, such as "Palace at Knossos," evoke ancient codices with inscrutable signs. Such books cannot be read, but clearly they are books, at least in form. At the other extreme are objects that could be called "books" only by bending the definition. Robin McCauley's "Volume (Book of Hair)" is a

white plaque on the wall sprouting horsehair that cascades in black waves toward the floor. No one looking at this piece by itself would think "book."

Most of the pieces fall between these two extremes, but each in its own way redefines what a book is and what it can do. A piece like "The Susan O'Malley Research Team" comes closest to conceptual art. In O'Malley's piece, five ordinary business folders present "data" collected from the public. Research questions solicited on Post-It notes asked, "What do you want?" (many responses were simply, "love"), but also, "What euphemisms do you call your private parts?" (responses here were "wee wee," "bug" and others, as you can imagine).

Like ordinary books, many tell a story. "Totality" by Penny Nii is a beautifully crafted book with text and images about an eclipse. Hidden in a compartment behind a sun-like metal disk is a book within a book with circular celestial diagrams. The feeling of discovery and wonder the artist experienced during an eclipse is recreated here for the viewer.

In "Totality," as in others in the show, meaning determines form. Alicia Bailey's "Lipsticks" and "Compact Beauty" remake beauty products into "books." Inside an ordinary compact case is a tiny round book that reveals the costs paid by women striving to be beautiful for men. Like so much art since the 1960s, pieces like Bailey's ground their inquiry not in philosophy but in social issues.

The diverse works in the show are by nationally recognized artists. What binds these pieces together is their commitment to redefine the book as an art form, asking in what ways form and meaning are linked. Instead of closing off the discussion, they've opened it even wider.

Conceptually Bound 2
 Through Oct. 24
 Coyote Gallery
 Butte College