



Gene Valentine and “The Paper Project”

by Pamela Wood

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When you think about it, just about everything in our lives is viewed on the surface. Rarely do we ever get below this level. With the miracle of science and Gene Valentine's curiosity, however, we get to go inside paper, yes, inside paper. This is a real treat, for paper perhaps more than anything is always dealt with on the surface.

Gene Valentine is Professor Emeritus of English at Arizona State University. And he has been proprietor since 1979 of Almond Tree Press and Paper Mill in Tempe, Arizona. Gene has been part of many fine press and paper pieces. For example, I recently viewed his broadside series on ASU Centennial Lecturers being exhibited at a local bookstore. His work is exceptional.

I asked Gene how he started “The Paper Project.” He told me that when he and Charles Kazilek, a colleague from the Biology Department, met for coffee one day, Gene asked him if he could see what his handmade silk paper looked like under the Leica scanning laser confocal microscope at ASU's W.M. Keck Bioimaging Laboratory. With the images that were produced, the project was born.

The best part of “The Paper Project” is that it can be viewed 24-7 on the Internet. So grab something refreshing to drink, open the web site (<http://lifesciences.asu.edu/paperproject/>) and enjoy the colors and text. There is a prerequisite for viewing some of the images in the gallery where all the great photos of paper innards are posted. You will need 3-D viewing glasses. For this there is a special link to Technology at the site. Click the title “Make your Own 3-D Glasses.” When you have completed this phase, you are be ready to view the entire gallery the way it was intended, as well as looking so very cool in two-color shades. If you don't have a set of glasses, or you can't make them, send Gene your request for a pair at gene.valentine@asu.edu.

When I first saw “The Paper Project,” I was reminded of “The Fantastic Voyage,” a movie I saw a while back, where the people entered the human body and experienced it from the inside. The photos of all the various papers are colorful and by themselves make wonderful stand-alone works of abstract art. The web site for the Project has several extras to help people explore the confocal microscope and the history of paper, as well as cookbooks for home papermaking and classroom and teaching ideas.

“The Paper Project” was featured in a dance program underwritten by the ASU Institute for Studies in the Arts in 2002. The images of paper interiors were projected on stage, and the dancers moved through the virtual environment of fiber images as the audience viewed the dance and images through the 3-D glasses. This winter, a variation of the dance project was developed by Gene, Charles Kazelik, Jennifer Tsukayama, and Kristofer T. Hill for the Museum for Youth in Mesa, Arizona. There the kids, as well as most of the adults, put on 3-D glasses and had a blast walking among the projected images and dancing to music as if they were inside the paper.

During the time I met with Gene it was easy to see why the project is never-ending. On the Internet, Gene and Charles have created a digital book that all can open and explore. Check it out for yourself. And I know you will be glad you opened it, because it will open to you the amazing world inside paper.

