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Battered books

New NDMOA exhibit features books lost to flood waters in Minot

Story | Wade Rupard

When Micah Bloom was a child, he was taught to treat books well.

Books weren't meant stepped on, sat on or abused. They were meant to be treated well and be respected.

So in 2011, when he and his family moved to Minot shortly after a devastating flood ransacked the city, Bloom saw debris littered throughout.

While riding his bike to work each day, he saw hundreds of books out in the open and exposed to the wind and rain.

"It struck a visceral reaction in me seeing all of these books out in the elements," he said. "They were hanging in the trees, sitting in the ditches along the roads. It disturbed me. They were out of place, so I felt like I had to do something about it."

He knew he had to do something to express what he was feeling.

Bloom and a team of students created an art exhibit titled "Codex," which opens at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the North Dakota Museum of Art.

The atypical exhibit traces Bloom's pursuit to identify hundreds of books left scattered after the Souris River flooded the town.

Bloom, an artist who comes from a painting and drawing background, at first didn't know how to best represent what he was seeing and feeling.

He came up with the idea where he would treat the books similar to how a morgue would a dead body.

He and his team would go out and collect books and follow them as if they were human remains. Bloom would treat them, give them identification tags, take photos of where they were found and seek to find as much information about them as they could.

Instead of shooting photos or painting images he saw, Bloom chose to film his journey, directing and producing a feature on the team's progress.

In total, Bloom and his team have collected close to 780 books and have created a database about what is known about the items they've found. Some, however, were too bruised and battered from the elements that they were unrecognizable to the team.

"I was always taught to treat books well, and to see them in this shape was pretty shocking," he said.

The exhibit started as a way for Bloom to cope with what he was seeing when he moved to Minot. He said he felt he had to work through what he was seeing and "care for my soul."

"All of this is a metaphor," he said. "The loss that people have experienced when they go through a flood like this is extraordinary. There are historical things that are lost, family memories are lost, there's a great deal of financial loss. I used this as a way for me to work through how you deal with things you lose."

When first presented to the public in Minot, Bloom said some in the audience were filled with tears because of the representation of loss displayed in the exhibit.

Naturally, he felt his work should be shown in Grand Forks, which similarly had its town destroyed by the 1997 flood.

"It seemed like the perfect place to show the exhibit," he said. "Not only do both have universities, but they've each been devastated by floods."

On display at the North Dakota Museum of Art will be hundreds of books the crew found and a replication of the space where workers took books and places them on a shelving unit while being identified. A larger room will showcase photographs taken during Bloom's pursuit to find and identify the books.

The entire process has had a lasting impact on Bloom, he said. While it's not the type of art he typically does, he said he would like to do something similar to this in the future.

"I couldn't help but do this," he said. "I felt compelled."

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Examples of photography from Micah Bloom's "Codex" exhibit are shown in these courtesy photos from the artist. The North Dakota Museum of Art exhibit opens at 7 p.m. Tuesday with a reception and runs through June 7.