

UP POP

BY VINKY WONG HIU-YING

A giant book lies on the stage. It is no ordinary book for it is not meant to be read. When it is opened, vivid characters pop up in a three-dimensional scenario; turn over a page and a mountain range may rise up, or an urban landscape, an African plain or a local fortune-teller's stall. The scenes are from special books hand-made for stage performance by lighting designer SunFool Lau Ming-hang.

Pop-up art, also known as paper engineering, is usually used for greetings cards and picture books. However, the first pop-up books were not made to cater for children or the general public. The first use of paper mechanics appeared in a European astrological book in 1306. After that, scholars made use of paper engineering to illustrate their theories on astrology, anatomy and astronomy throughout the centuries.

They found the three-dimensional illustrations helped to explain abstract ideas in a more concrete manner.

For SunFool Lau, pop-up provides an exciting medium for staging presentations of legends and fairy-tales. Lau, whose

debut was *Fire Kid* in 2006, makes the storybooks himself; most of them are around the height of a preschool child but some can be as tall as an adult. He tells stories by turning the pages, accompanied by actors, live music, lighting and special effects.

"The principles of making pop-up art are very simple, but the three-dimensional presentation produces great and impressive effects," says Lau.

There are six basic techniques used in pop-up art design, namely fanfold, gatefold, flip-flat, peepshow, pull-tab and carousel.

Fanfold involves die-cut images which are then folded into stair-like layers. Gatefold refers to folded mini-sized pages placed along the edges of a page. Flip-flat skills can be applied to show different content by turning over overlapping papers while peepshow enhances the depth of field and three-dimensional perspectives through parallel layers on different levels in a box.

Pull-tab and carousel techniques can be used if the performer wants more interaction with the audience. With the first technique, members of the audience can change scenes by pulling tabs connected to pulleys, spinners and levers and tracks. While carousel techniques produce books that are opened vertically like a cylinder, so audience members have to go-around in order to read them.

"Everything pops up from nothing, with a new surprise popping up from the one before it," says Lau enthusiastically. Lau has been fascinated by pop-up and by the

surprises sandwiched between flat pages since he was a child. He enjoys flipping through pages, not knowing what visual excitement will pop up as if by magic. Every time he reads a new pop-up book he is not just mesmerised by each surprise but also fascinated by the mechanics and techniques that have been used to produce it.

"Everything pops up from nothing, with a new surprise popping up from the one before it."

The obsession with pop-up art motivated Lau to study the subject in greater depth. He began to study the subject in 2004 and once pushed aside all his jobs in lighting design for two months so that he could devote his time to producing pop-up art. Lau reads reference books about pop-up art and studies pop-up works by others.

He says observation is crucial and he has been inspired by the famous pop-up veteran and children's book author Robert Sabuda. But he also keeps experimenting with combined effects and tries to invent new forms of the art.

Creating a successful pop-up book requires dexterity and patience. Every single step has to be made with precision. It involves, among other things, making small models for trials, checking angles and testing whether the design works. Each page usually takes more than a

day to complete, and Lau once took two months to complete a whole book. "The time-consuming trial-and-error process drove me crazy and made me distressed several times," Lau recalls. "But every time I see my work accomplished, the satisfaction far outweighs all the pain and costs of the production process."

As for the popularity of last year's *Hong Kong Pop Up*, the first pop-up book of its kind to be published in Hong Kong, Lau attributes it to the book's theme rather than any affection for pop-up art. *Hong Kong Pop-up* draws on local heritage and architecture. For Lau, the book's success should not be seen as an indication of the profitability of pop-up art itself. For one thing, the high production costs involved in pop-up diminish its competitiveness.

Lau is not the only one with a passion for pop-up. Ceci Liu Wai-yee is a photography artist who makes pop-up albums of local communities with photographs.



Sunfool Lau Ming-hang uses pop-up arts in stage performances.

COURTESY OF SUNFOOL LAU MING-HANG

Liu believes Hong Kong is a relative newcomer in the development of pop-up art. “Pop-up art has already been fully developed in the rest of the world and Taiwan has even got their unique pop-up stamps,” she says.

As a socially-engaged artist working in the community, she hopes she can help to spread the world about pop-up and popularise pop-up culture.

Liu holds workshops on photography at the Wan Chai College of Community Innovation run by the St James’ Settlement. In order to make the presentation of photos more interesting and vivid, she uses pop-up art to breathe life into the photos.

“Pop-up art could never be digitised.”

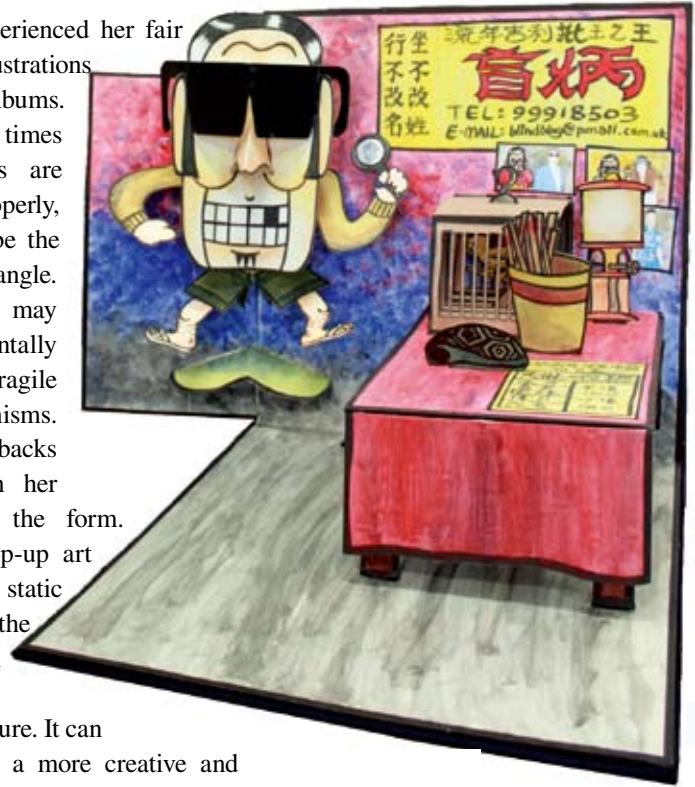
She takes people on tours around the community and takes photos. Then, she chooses those that best represent the flavour of that community to make her pop-up albums. “The process of walking around the community, observing the environment and chatting with residents is very enjoyable for me,” says Liu. “In addition, choosing photos for making pop-ups further familiarises me with the characteristics of our surroundings.”

Liu has experienced her fair share of frustrations making her albums. There are times when the folds are not made properly, sections might be the wrong size or angle. Sometimes she may even accidentally destroy the fragile paper mechanisms. But these setbacks do not dampen her enthusiasm for the form. She believes pop-up art can imbue her static photographs of the community with a stronger sense of space and texture. It can show society in a more creative and interesting way while helping to draw attention to local cultures.

Both SunFool Lau and Ceci Liu use pop-up to create art: stage performances and community art projects. But pop-up can also bring smaller pleasures.

Clara Chan Ping-ling, a 21-year-old university student, discovered her interest in making pop-up cards when she was still at secondary school.

She makes hand-made pop-up cards as gifts for her friends. “It shows more sincerity, (the cards) carry more meaning,” Chan says.



VINIKY WONG HIU-YING

Although she would like to take classes from an expert, Chan has found it is possible to learn through self-study. All it requires is patience, some basic stationary, reference books and video tutorials on the internet.

The internet is a great resource for learning about pop-up art and viewing spectacular pop-up works. But it is no substitute for making it yourself or holding the product in your hands. As pop-up performer SunFool Lau says: “Pop-up art could never be digitised.”



VINIKY WONG HIU-YING

Lau enthusiastically displays his gigantic pop-up storybooks.