

{meet}

COUPLE TURNS THE PAGE ON ART

The thing about Peter and Donna Thomas' art is that a lot of people don't quite understand it.

They look at one of the couple's handmade books filled with original drawings of mountain flowers or a history of ukuleles that's encased in a genuine ukulele and they're not sure what to do with it.

You can't hang it on a wall, they think. And if you leave it out on the coffee table, somebody will invariably spill red wine on it.

But there are enough people who get the idea behind the artists' books — "books that are more of an artistic expression than a literary book," Donna says — that the Santa Cruz couple's work is in demand.

Sitting in their multi-level house that looks out over a tidal marsh to the ocean, the pair says the idea of books as art is growing, and that buying one of their creations might just be the kind of investment

an art-minded person should make.

A long time ago, books were art, says Peter, a slender man with a shock of undisciplined blond hair. As an example, he pulls out a facsimile of *The Book of Kells*, which was produced by Celtic monks in 800 A.D., not so much so people could read the gospels but for its beauty, he says.

Then, books became more utilitarian, a way to entertain yourself or to learn. But with the rise of the computer as an information tool, books may very well return to being art again, Peter says.

If so, the Thomases, who are part of an active printing and book-art community in Santa Cruz, are ready.

Their books are beautiful and quirky, elegant and folksy.

Reading the opening lines to John Steinbeck's "Cannery Row" in which he describes the place as "a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light..." for instance, Peter and Donna were inspired to create a book.

Donna, an artist and book binder, went to the Steinbeck Institute and after studying a series of old photos, created drawings for the book. Peter, who studied papermaking and printing at UC Santa Cruz under master printer William Everson, made the paper.

Then, searching for the perfect cover, they found a machine at Dave's Tuna in Santa Cruz that would "can" their tome.

The result is art: A book that feels,



reads and looks like Cannery Row.

And, Peter's love of ukuleles — inspired by the summers he spent camping at San Onofre beach with his surfer parents — netted a series of books made out of ukuleles that are as beautiful as they are whimsical.

Their work, accomplished in a cramped, low-ceilinged room at their home, is, says Peter, "four-dimensional."

Paintings, he says, have two dimensions. Sculptures have three.

But fine-art books have another dimension.

"It's time — the time it takes to view it," Peter says. ♦

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Peter and Donna Thomas in their crowded print shop.

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