



Size of Life



Kylie Stillman

W. REYNOLDS & SON

HOWL



The weight of information that surrounds us in the contemporary world can be crippling. If the cumulative data we are obliged to process through the internet were translated into printed form, it would amount to literal towers of text; insurmountable peaks whose essential meaning had become buried in swathes of opaque, indecipherable symbols. Up until very recently the only means by which this data could travel was in the printed page. Men built places of worship for accumulations of these pages – called libraries – where we could be surrounded by these curious vessels of communication: books.

While the book is still with us, its days are numbered. Already we detect the aroma of old-worldliness when handling these archaic objects, which can impress their potential for wonder and knowledge upon us before even the first page is turned. Books are enchanting things; Jeanette Winterson writes of fleeing the outside world for the comfort of a bookshop: ‘There I would be safe, surrounded by things I understand, unchallenged, except by my own discipline. Books I know, endlessly, intimately. Their power over me is profound...’¹.

And so we encounter the work of artist Kylie Stillman, who inverts our very approach to books and other containers of information. She proposes that these ‘towers of text’, whether actual or symbolic of a greater body of knowledge (such as the internet) may unfold to us in other, less lateral ways. Through a practice established over the last decade, Stillman unearths an archaeology of secret imagery. She discovers an abundant cache of wondrous earthly delights residing within our everyday minutiae of endless lists and stacks of office labour. By elaborately cutting the

endless strata of pages one by one, she reveals a treasure trove of hidden things. The anonymous volumes of text become blocks of marble that are fastidiously fashioned into art objects, by exercising a process of selective reduction. Reborn, the books achieve a clarity of expression that transcends the printed language held therein.

Stillman decommissions books from their everyday use, denuding them of their intended purpose. Her works reappraise found and everyday materials with a view to investigating their visual appearance and conceptual possibilities. Like Duchamp’s urinal, once a utilitarian object is transformed into an artwork, it becomes a set of shapes to be synthesised instead of used. She acknowledges the cultural specificity of language, and works to overcome this by transforming books from mere paper and ink spots into dazzling sculptural forms. The book, thus, becomes a vehicle for expressing ideas beyond the capacity of language, and divines a pure means of communication.

Kylie Stillman’s art is one of reduction, where presence is born of absence. In this she contradicts the equation of aesthetic materiality, where substance equals meaning. She suggests, instead, that meaning can be born of a void. But where an artist such as celebrated British sculptor Rachel Whiteread might work solely with the negative space around an object, Stillman investigates what lies within. She explores the interiority of inert objects, specifically containers of communication, to lead us towards an alternative means of appraising content. To read a book is to navigate a conventional pathway to its purpose; but to turn the book itself into an object of contemplation allows the reader to escape the clutches of the



IMAGES

Cover
Yellow-throated Honeyeater
2002
Book carving
42 x 32cm (framed)

Back cover
Parrots of Open Forest & Scrublands
2009
250 sheets of Pacesetter laser paper
110 x 80 x 6cm (framed)

This page
Special Wren
2009
Paper carving; printed paper
21 x 16 x 4cm (framed)

Opposite page top
Finches of Australia
2008
Paper carving; 200 sheets cartridge paper
76 x 52 x 3cm (framed)

Opposite page bottom
European Goldfinch
2008
Book carving
42 x 32cm (framed)

Main image left
Flock
2007
Book carving; shelving overall size 240 x 450 x 30cm

Main image right
Red Maple
2007
197 sheets of plywood
300 x 240 x 120cm

author, and to formulate an entirely new appreciation of the printed page.

For Stillman, the physical size of her donor object is of paramount significance. She questions the need for artists to construct a blank canvas, 'made to size', when instead existing objects with an inbuilt history could provide a more meaningful starting point. 'I felt books from op-shops were good enough', she says ². More recently, Stillman has extended her reach beyond books to include reams of cartridge paper, stacks of 'sale' posters and other printed materials, multiplied on a great scale.

For her works *Red Maple* (2007) and *Flock* (2007), Stillman made use of large sheets of plywood and a life-size bookcase covered in rows of books respectively. While *Flock* reveals just that: a flock of birds passing through an ensemble of otherwise dormant volumes, *Red Maple* discloses a most unlikely inhabitant: a life-size maple tree. In her choice of materials and fathoming of a 1:1 scale tree, the work gives the curious impression of its occupant having always been there. And perhaps it has; while treated with chemicals and transformed into an unnatural compound, the spirit of the tree continues within the sheets of plywood. It has taken this act of reduction to allow us to observe what was always present.

Stillman selects her plants and animals according to the size of the donor material. We therefore encounter a variety of birds according to the size of the page they impregnate. In *Finches of Australia* (2008) she reveals a litany of bird forms, composed in a manner recalling natural history specimens. The reproduction and repetition of the 200 sheets of cartridge paper becomes transferred to the nomenclature of

wildlife. In both form and content Stillman invokes the archive, but rather than dryly prescribe systems for knowledge accumulation, she provides passage for our dreams, stories, souvenirs and other imaginings.

While the essential function of Kylie Stillman's art may be non-function, she proposes a means by which old-world artefacts may usher in a new-world cosmos. Her practice is one of transformation and transcendence, where the materials themselves become the conduits of contemplation, rather than perpetrating acts of representation. Within this process she courts error and unpredictable incidents; the act of cutting often produces imperfections that are themselves symptomatic of life's fallibility. Stillman says her work is 'about capturing life in a static form', but it is also much more than that; in invoking hidden worlds at life-size she at once transcends that scale, becoming greater than the sum of its parts and a measure of the size of life ³.

Simon Gregg
Curator



NOTES

1

Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects, Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1995, p.3

2

Kylie Stillman, in conversation with the author, 19 February 2010

3

ibid



ETT BRO
PTY





Kylie Stillman
Size of Life

20 November 2010 – 2 January 2011

A Cataloguing-in-Publication entry for this title is available from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN 978-0-9807371-6-5 (pbk.)

Other Authors/Contributors:
Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale

Edition: 1,000
First published 2010
Design: Simon Gregg/Lesley Scott

Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale
68-70 Foster Street
Sale 3850 Victoria
wellington.vic.gov.au/gallery

Director: Anton Vardy
Curator: Simon Gregg

Kylie Stillman appears courtesy of
Utopia Art Sydney

 GIPPSLAND ART GALLERY • SALE

