

Kylie Stillman: Not fully or properly either of two things

11 July – 30 August 2020

Growth rings: capturing life in a static form

'Not fully or properly either of two things' is one definition for the phrase 'betwixt and between': to be in a midway position; neither here nor there; and not definitely belonging to any of several possibilities. Melbourne artist Kylie Stillman applies this notion to her work, to consider the nature of things and how we construct and articulate the world around us. By framing everyday materials through layers of contrast: light and shadow, presence and absence, nature and artifice, Stillman asks us to examine the individual parts that make up the whole. She illuminates the interplay of plurality that exists within our natural and constructed environments, to create artworks that appear spontaneous but have been properly and meticulously prepared.

Not fully or properly either of two things is Kylie Stillman's latest solo exhibition on display at Town Hall Gallery, featuring highlights from her 20-year artistic career, alongside new sculptural works and sewn paper drawings. Best known for transforming books and stacks of wood into beautiful works of art, this exhibition illustrates the broader trajectory and evolution of Stillman's multidisciplinary arts practice. On display are some of the artist's earliest 'invented landscapes' and new works that further her exploration of the relationship between trees and mark making.

Stillman says her work is about 'capturing life in a static form.'¹ She sources dynamic patterns and complex structures from science, art and nature² and depicts 'signs of life' including trees, birds, leaves and feathers. Interested in the lived experiences of humans and our immersed or cropped encounters with nature, her work is self-reflexive. She depicts her own scribbles and bark rubbings and draws influence from her previous works.

Her toolkit comprises scalpel blades, jigsaws, sewing materials and drills which Stillman takes to discarded sheets of plywood, aluminium window furnishings, furniture and books. Oscillating between highly physical, broad, carved strokes and intricately focused, fine needle pricks, negative space is often the mechanism for detailing her subjects.

Drawing broadly from modern art and craft traditions, Stillman has a playful sensibility for signs and symbols paired with a complex understanding of sculptural forms that she credits to her mother, who introduced her to garment making as a child. In the late 90s, Stillman attended the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) as a painting student, an experience that informed the foundation for her arts practice today. She pursued an interest in mark making, using everyday objects and materials such as burnt toast, discoloured grass, match sticks and hand-embroidered plastic bottles as more meaningful alternatives to traditional pigments and 'made to size' canvases.³

Park Views (2003) is the earliest work presented in *Not fully or properly either of two things*, created soon after Stillman graduated from art school and was living in Surrey Hills. This was one of the first projects the artist worked on with her husband, the beginning of his studio assistant role that still exists today. *Park Views* is an installation of four venetian blinds, penetrated with thousands of tiny drilled holes that depict an invented landscape. Suspended from the gallery ceiling, dramatic light passes through each puncture to illuminate a view of a fictional parkland, its shadow landing on the surrounding walls and floor.

First created as a site-specific installation, Stillman was drawn to four standard-sized windows and the opportunity to incorporate light as part of her mark making process. She sourced and altered discarded window furnishings, including venetian blinds that were similar to those she had in her childhood family home. 'I felt I knew the materials quite intimately. I drew up the 'imagined scene,' creating stipple stencils to centre punch, then I drilled and de-burred each of the tens of thousands of individual holes.'

'Looking back on them now, I enjoy how they talk about what many of my works have in common: light, everyday materials and framing.'⁴

Around the same time, Stillman began creating artworks from books she sourced from opshops and deaccessioned library collections. Drawn to the pre-existing features and dimensions of the found object, Stillman used a scalpel to extricate shapes of birds

and trees from their pages. In 2016, the artist created a series of embroidered book works with a patterned or structural component sewn into the covers. Each of the non-fiction paperbacks (designed for self improvers and autodidacts) is presented atop a music stand tripod, displayed with the covers open to allow the viewer to see both the neat, sensical pattern side and the messy 'working' side. Together, they formed an installation called *Morning Pages* (2016), exploring the intricate patterns, aesthetic forms and complex systems of the natural and constructed world, including the shapes of hexagonal webbing, fractal branching and wave patterns.⁵

Interested in the ways that humans engage with nature in urban environments, Stillman's *Scape* (2018) is a freestanding slither of an imagined landscape that has been captured and placed inside the gallery.⁶ In her signature style, the forms of tree trunks and branches have been carved into a free-standing stack of more than 200 hand-cut plywood panels.

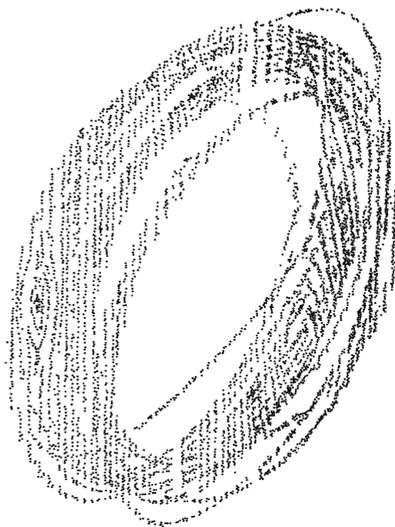


Removed through deliberate and laborious gestures with a jigsaw, the negative space created in the block becomes a shadow that illuminates the filigreed shapes and textures of the forest. This minimalist stack of raw materials is a prompt to consider the origins of the materials used to assemble our constructed world.⁷

The newest sculptural work is *Verso* (2020), created from over 200 books sourced from the Boroondara Library Service's deaccessioned book collection. Stillman has stacked the assorted paperbacks into a number of white timber boxes. For the page side, she has hand-carved flocks of stencilled birds which fly in a singular migratory direction across the stack. For the spine side, Stillman observed the library staff scribbling out the barcode of the retired books, and has applied this method to the titles. Using a permanent marker, the artist has isolated words that relate to nature and to life, such as air, dust, melt, mother, robin, alien and hill.⁸

A small series of beautiful and delicate hand-sewn paper works are the newest iterations of Stillman's musing upon trees and mark making. 'I have been pondering their connections to the other pieces in the exhibition and this ongoing relationship between trees (leaves, birds, feathers, webs, air, fractal patterns, veins) and mark making (scribbles, cuts, stitches, shadows).'⁹ Applying intricate needlework, thread and beading, each work is a labour of love, with some taking more than three months to create.

Each title offers a clue to the artist's current preoccupations with the patterns and systems found in nature, maths and philosophy. *Honeycomb Conjecture* (2019) illustrates the pattern created by honeybees that is also the most effective mathematical method to divide a surface into regions of equal area.¹⁰ *Growth Rings* (2019) captures a dynamic circular scribble and bark rubbing through fine, beaded embroidery, and is



named after the visual representation of the growth story of a tree.

Similarly, *Not fully of properly either of two things* is a tableau of Stillman's arts practice to date, captured in a static form.

- 1 Simon Gregg, *Size of Life*, Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale, Victoria, 2010.
- 2 Penny Teale, *The Opposite of Wild*, Linden New Art, Melbourne, Victoria, 2017.
- 3 *Size of Life*, 2010.
- 4 Kylie Stillman, email correspondence with the author, 24 May 2020.
- 5 Kylie Stillman, email correspondence with the author, 1 July 2020.
- 6 Stillman, email correspondence.
- 7 Alexie Glass, 'Kylie Stillman: Red Maple' in *Handle with Care*, Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2008.
- 8 Stillman, email correspondence.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 'Hexagonal Pattern of Beehives,' Illustrative Mathematics, accessed 27 May 2020 at <https://tasks.illustrativemathematics.org/content-standards/HSG/MG/A/1/tasks/1126>



Cover:

Kylie STILLMAN, detail from *Leaf Margin* (2020), hand-stitched work on paper, 76 x 56 cm (90 x 70 cm framed).
Image courtesy of the artist and Utopia Art Sydney.

Centre spread:

Kylie STILLMAN, *Scape* (2017), hand-cut plywood, 200 x 240 x 30cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Utopia Art Sydney.
Photography by Christian Capurro.

Kylie STILLMAN, *Growth Rings* (2019), hand-beaded work on paper, 76 x 56 cm (90 x 70 cm framed). Image courtesy of the artist and Utopia Art Sydney.

Above:

Kylie STILLMAN, *Verso* (2020), hand-cut paperback books, five timber boxes approx. 80 x 50 x 20 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist and Utopia Art Sydney.

Back cover:

Kylie STILLMAN, *Park Views* (2003), hand-laced Venetian blinds, four blinds: 180 x 95 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist and Utopia Art Sydney.



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