





Handwritten signature or scribble in dark ink on a light-colored, textured paper surface. The signature is highly stylized and illegible, featuring several large, overlapping loops and a long, sweeping tail extending to the right. The paper is mounted on a wooden base.

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# Taking things apart and putting them back together again

by Chloe Watson

Something new has happened in Kylie Stillman's work. It is not a departure. Perhaps a better way of explaining it would be an inward looking, a reflection on process and purpose. In the twelve small book stacks that make up part of this show, we find not birds or trees – the forms that have become familiar tropes in Kylie's art – but a stroke, a scribble, a loop, a weave.

In Kylie's words these are:

*the basic structural elements and gestures that make things things - the stroke that makes a painting, the scribble that makes a pen work, the notation that makes writing, the intertwining of wool that makes a garment, the weave of fibres that make furnishings.*

They are the parts that make up the whole. In representing them within, upon, her intricate hand-carved objects, Kylie encourages us to think beyond the figurative and the literal when we approach all of her work. Sitting in her Werribee studio, Kylie tells me of a trip to the art supply shop on her first day of art

school, a list in hand stipulating all of the recommended materials that she would be expected to acquire for her studies of painting:

*I picked up a tube of red paint and I thought, I can find red. Pigment is made from burnt toast and the way grass goes yellow when the trampoline's been on it for too long or the way newspaper discolours from the sun. Painting doesn't have to involve paint. Blue is the ball of wool that you buy and not the pigment that you add.*

In those early painting classes she would use thread instead of oils or acrylics to map out a story, to make a mark. Now, she paints using negative space: carving out forms from mass-produced or found objects that are to Kylie like pre-stretched canvasses, dictated boundaries waiting to be filled, or emptied as the case may be: “my art supply store is the op shop or the newsagents or the two dollar store or the junk room of my mother’s house.”

Kylie sees her work as a “celebration of the misuse of objects”. She loves it when things are used for something other than their intended purpose: when a staple holds up a hem or when a big book is used to flatten a stack of papers. In Kylie’s childhood, her family would buy both the broadsheet and the tabloid newspapers. They would actually read the tabloid but the broadsheet was bought for an entirely different purpose – because of its size it was the perfect material to use for cutting out the patterns for the family’s clothes. Surely there is a resonance between those newspaper patterns and Kylie’s treatment of the book as medium, the printed paper her pigment.

It strikes a chord then, when Kylie tells me that her introduction to art came from learning how to sew and her mother’s way of sewing – her resourcefulness and her frugality; making the most of every piece of cloth, every sheet of newspaper. Perhaps we could see works such as ‘The Thread’, ‘The Knit’, and ‘The Weave’ as a form of homage to this personal history. At another level, there is a certain kind of spatial thinking that comes with using the two dimensional shapes of a pattern to map out a three dimensional, inhabitable piece of clothing. In Kylie’s work there

is a constant interplay between the planar form of the subject on the surface of the material and the realisation of its depth or volume as the form extends into the body of the object. This tension must constantly be played out in the artist's own thinking as she produces each work. There is a magic in this process. Each time the scalpel carves into a sheet of paper, the form is broken down into its component parts so that it really is just a line on a piece of paper (just as the pattern for a piece of clothing is simply a composite of shapes).

"I think with the carving, it is making a mark, but it's also asking shadow to do it, it's asking the material that is already there to do those things." The artist's mark itself has become the subject of many of Kylie's most recent book carvings. In a work such as 'The Stroke', a painterly gesture is re-enacted via a meticulously crafted process. The image of the dripping daub implies immediacy, a single moment of paint, attached to an artist's brush, meeting canvas. Yet, this particular "stroke" is comprised of hundreds of other gestures – first, the edges of the form drawn onto the surface of the books, then, each sheet of paper carved by hand over the course of many days. When viewed in its final state, the work maintains a vivid sense of the medium that is no longer present. In a similar way, 'The Notation' speaks of a biro pen moving over a sheet of paper and "The Scribble" "talks about textas. The thickness of the line is dictated by the thickness of the texta that I used to make the original mark." The word abstract doesn't really apply to these forms, for they are representations of marks and therefore figurative.

Nevertheless, in all of this Kylie is displaying a formalist bent, with a reflexive attention to the stuff of art, its limits and its components, albeit tempered by a cheeky use of materials and an artisanal approach to making. 'Cypress Pine', the earliest work in this exhibition, is already toying with the fragmentation or breaking down of form that we find in the more recent book carvings. For one, we only see a segment of the tree, its branches continue out of the top and bottom of the field. The organic lines could just as easily be streaks of lightning, an ink spill, or an ant colony. In a way this ambiguity makes it easier for us to think of

the 201 fence palings as a canvas and of the work in terms of its formal composition – the tension between the vertical lines of the branches and the horizontal lines of the wood, the way the forms court the edge of the field.

So too we discover that in ‘The Purpose of Purposeful Repurposing’, ‘the figurative decisions come after the formal decisions. The formal decision being the idea of a stack of books that sit from edge to edge, floor to ceiling, as a column.’ Within this column of books, a light bulb extends from the ceiling and a money plant sits on top of a real wooden chair – rational places for real objects to sit in real space. The device of the room within a room reinforces the illusion of real space whilst unsettling it, encouraging us to think about containing and framing. It’s a kind of reverse trompe l’oeil, as a three dimensional space points to its own artifice. So for Kylie, the back of the room is very important – ‘it’s the movie set.’

Again Kylie seems to want us to think about the parts and the whole, that disjunction between the making of something and the magic of the finished product. The room is 2.4m high, the standard size of off-the-shelf plywood, and the whole ensemble can be flat-packed for transport and re-assembled on site: “It’s always hard for people to imagine that things come apart... even though it’s a corner and a floor and a ceiling, it’s also four pieces of wood and ten bolts.” Kylie loves problem solving, from working out how to make use of pre-fabricated materials, to dealing with those everyday concerns that we sometimes forget when looking at an artwork: transport and installation. But at the same time she loves “how things must always look seamless. I love defying gravity.” The column at the centre of her room within a room does just that. And just as her book carvings take things apart, focusing on skeleton structures or primal marks, they present these forms with such skills of illusion that we can only suspend our disbelief and take the plunge with Kylie back into that empty space at the core of her art.





Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

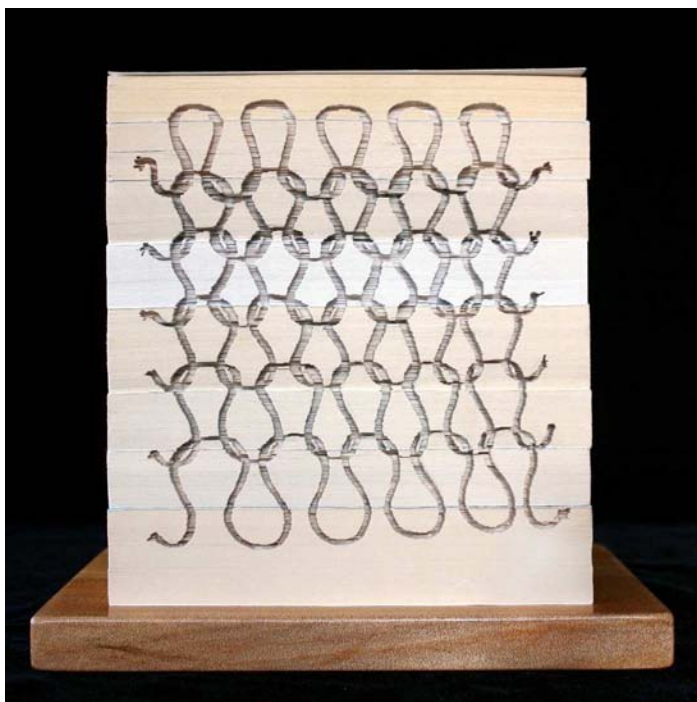


Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

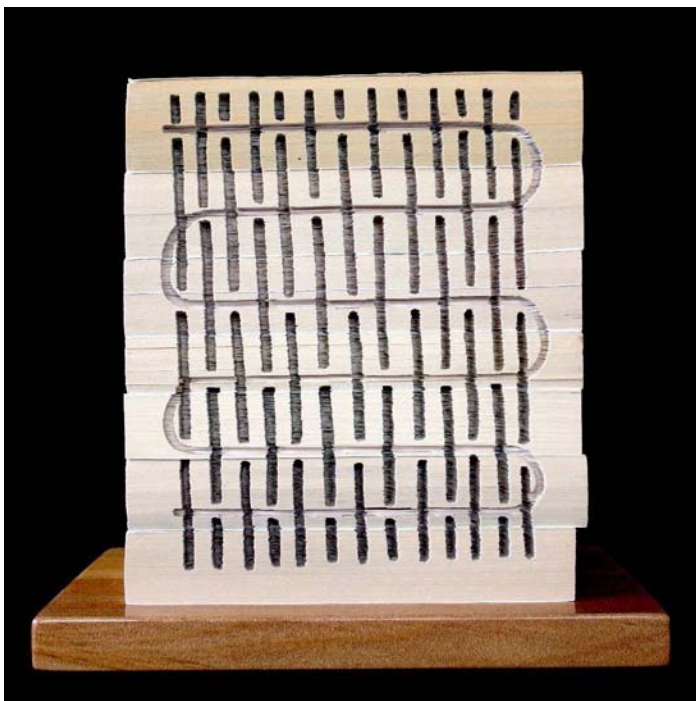


Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



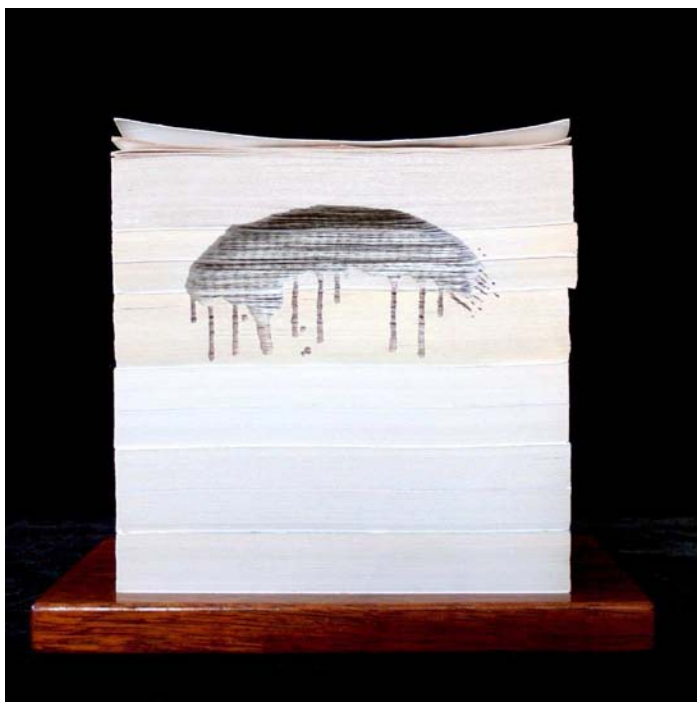


Fig. 10.

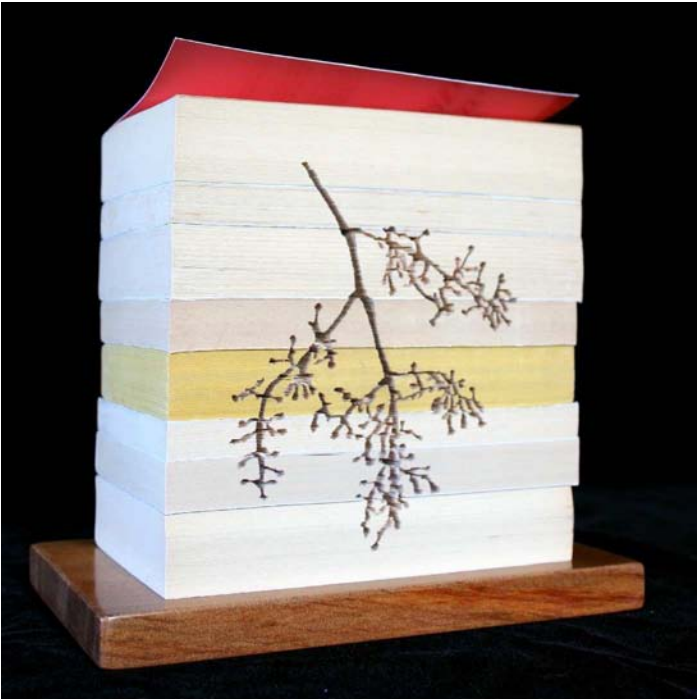


Fig. 11.

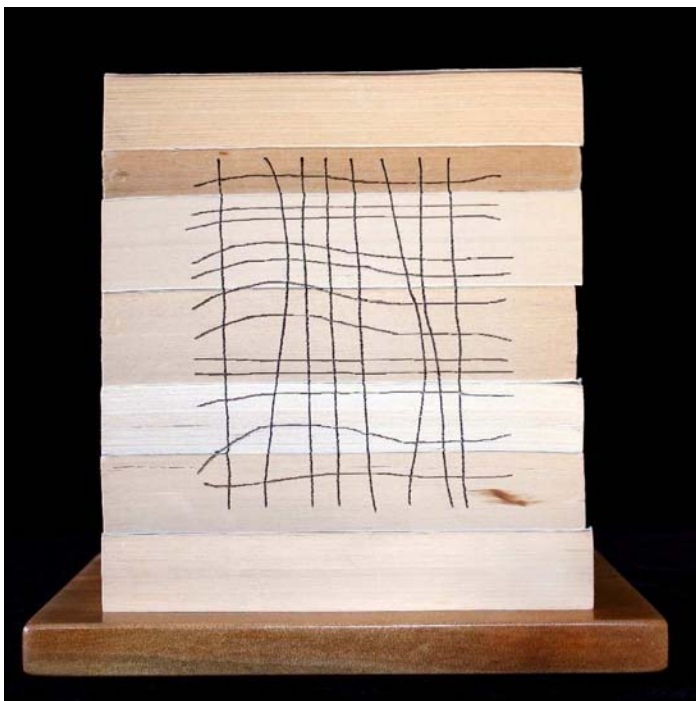


Fig. 12.



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Page 1. Kylie Stillman  
*The Scribble*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 2. Kylie Stillman  
*The Cutting*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 3. Kylie Stillman  
*The Notation*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 4. Kylie Stillman  
*The Knit*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 5. Kylie Stillman  
*The Loop*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 6. Kylie Stillman  
*The Remains*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 7. Kylie Stillman  
*The Swirl*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 8. Kylie Stillman  
*The Weave*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 9. Kylie Stillman  
*The Scrawl*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 10. Kylie Stillman  
*The Stroke*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Fig. 11. Kylie Stillman  
*The Stem*, 2013  
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Fig. 12. Kylie Stillman  
*The Weave*, 2013  
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Page 18. Kylie Stillman  
*The Purpose of Purposeful  
Repurposing*, 2013  
Hand- cut books

Back cover. Kylie Stillman  
*Cypress Pine*, 2012  
Hand-cut fence palings

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