



# KYLIE STILLMAN

STORY OWEN CRAVEN

Defying placement in a neat category of sculpture, collage or painting, Kylie Stillman's practice has moved from found materials to A3 paper on a desktop, thanks to the recent arrival of her baby boy – and this in turn has reintroduced embroidery to her expressive repertoire.



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**YOUR ART DEFIES definition – they do not fit the conventional definition of sculpture, collage or painting but they are a bit of everything. Can you describe for me your art as you see it?**

Conveniently, I would say sculpture. I would say my art is the only way I know how to make work. Art materials and blank canvases generally frighten me. My art practice uses materials that are free of hierarchy and free of the preciousness of other materials.

**You originally studied painting – what led to the evolution that is your current mode of practice?**

I was unhappily studying design. I love design – and what I loved most about my design degree was the art history component. In fact, I came to fine art with a strong art history knowledge. I applied to RMIT with absolutely no degree and tried to dazzle them with my ideas in the interview, which failed dismally and I was put on a waiting list. About midterm, I called and queried if there was a position available and it was a freaky chance where Michelle Usher had taken a year-long break so two days later I was suddenly enrolled in painting at RMIT.

At enrolment I was handed a list of painting materials so I went to the art supplies shop and I was so overwhelmed. I remember picking up a tube of red paint and thinking “I can make red in other ways; what I have to say is not in this tube”. I went back to campus and asked “I don’t really have to paint, do I?” and Robert Kingston – the coordinator at the time – replied “oh god no”.

**What role did art history play in allowing you to make that decision?**

I think it was being introduced to conceptual art – that an idea can be expressed as an idea and walk away from it with ownership of it. It was about breaking down the stuffy, consumer driven ideas of art.

**You describe your work as a ‘celebration of the misuse of objects’. Can you expand on this for me?**

One thing is about finding it in everyday life. Or in certain instances in life I just have to grab an object and create a solution that’s temporary, just in order to have a functional usage. Whether it’s a

shoe you use to prop up a window or a pile of books you quickly stand on to dust the corner of a room ... it’s using things in quirky, resourceful ways.

When it comes to bringing that into my artwork, it’s about playing with alchemy – taking something very common and then giving it this nobility. A common example of a biro pen can be used to create a landscape; a strong stack of books can be used to make a sculpture; or a set of venetian blinds can become a wall piece. It’s about things from the everyday that by adding – or in my case subtracting – that raise its level of value or aesthetic to give it a noble presence.

**What I find beautiful about your work is that while this has been a convention practised over time – most famously Duchamp’s ‘Urinal’ – you’re actually re-engaging with the object to make it create the artwork or the image, you’re creating an image within the objects, which is what I find enchanting about your work.**

I like that you pick that up. While I do appreciate that conceptual attribution, it is important for me to do something and not let the object be the work on its own. There is poetry in that but in my case it’s important I do something else. It is important to me that it’s accessible and that the viewer isn’t left scratching their heads and asking ‘am I missing something?’.

**Your work is extremely process driven and laborious. Can you tell me about how you go about composing and constructing your book stacks for instance?**

Everything is planned out. I don’t like using glue or permanent fixtures, I like everything to be able to come apart. Like stretching a canvas, a stack of books needs to be prepared – so things are stacked together and I work with my husband, who’s a genius engineer and constantly reminds me about gravity! It’s really good to prep everything in that kind of way. So, for example with the books, they all have an internal rod to hold it all together and everything is invisible and doesn’t do damage to the books – nothing will fade or discolour the pages. Once I have everything put together then I work page by page – in the same way you read the book, I’m opening each page and cutting out sections and working that way. So you stack all



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the books, plan from the front and then take off one book at a time and work through it, page by page.

**You seem to thrive on the meditative qualities of repetition and labour.** Things that are labour-intensive are something I appreciate in art. The idea that there are simple moments of gestures in time that are trying to get the viewer to slow things down and think about that. I enjoy, too, watching someone look *really* closely at your work and you can see the person trying to nut out how it was done or look at each mark or cut and, then, bring themselves back to look at the form or imagery and what is the connection between those two things. To grab that moment in time and make them think about it for as long as possible is something I love about art and isn't a luxury you don't often get in life.

**A lot of artists talk of 'controlled chance' in their compositions – what colours and textures will work together aesthetically. For you, this challenge must occur with the artwork's physicality. How do you know what will hold together and will not?** There is a lot of chance, which I think works in my favour. It must be intuition because I don't over-complicate or over-think it. The more I let my hand work, the better the works get. It often happens with the labour-intensive works that the mind does drift. You can only stay focused in a certain way for so long and where your mind drifts can be amazing. Often with the carved works you can intend to make things with a certain depth or tonal indent but things can just drift and things turn out in a different way that adds to it.

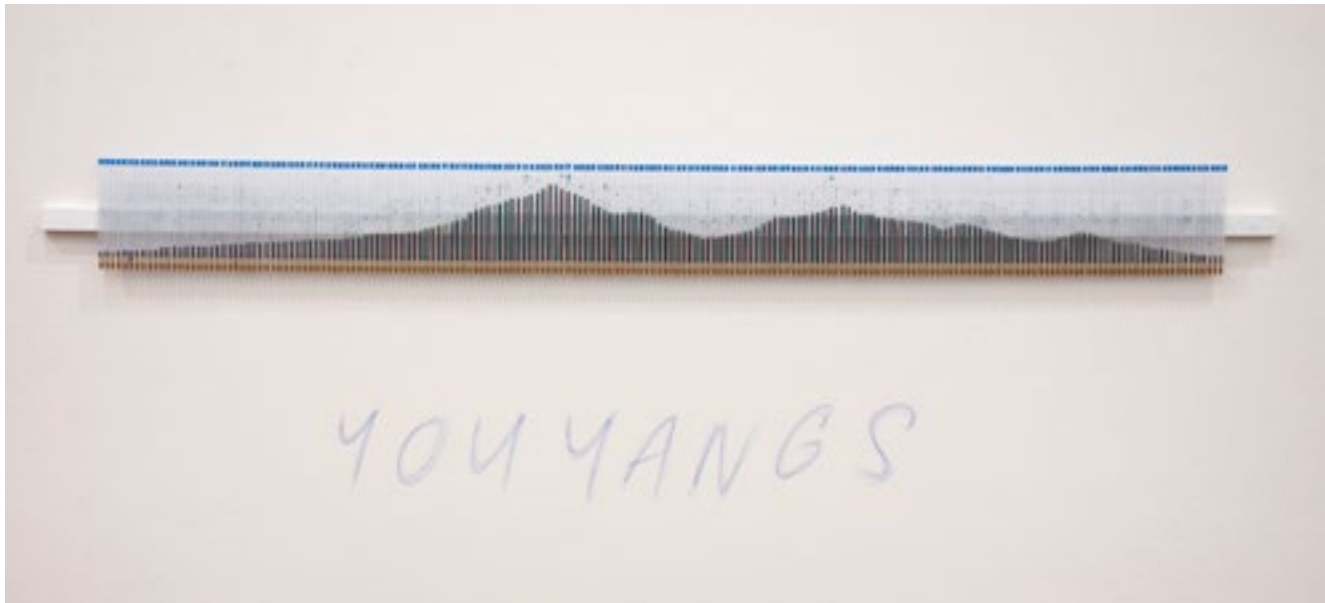
The other thing with chance that I like is choosing materials, especially when they exist in the world already or they're second-hand. You don't actually have much choice, so simply by picking up a box of

unwanted books from an op-shop is interesting – it's a nice snapshot in time of things someone doesn't want anymore, whether they're Sweet Valley High books or encyclopaedic volumes. It's a unique chance to play with things you wouldn't normally read or see.

**Tell me about the subject matter in your work. What role do the words in a book play in the imagery of the works?** I try not to be too literal with those sorts of things; I try to keep the material as neutral as possible, as in, it's simply a stack of paper. And that's where the lovely sense of chance comes in – you might not have thought about it but you turn the stack around and see it's a collection of books that spells out a concrete poem! I think the more open that is the more chance the viewer has to read into it their own interpretations.

**It allows the imagery to speak to many different directions or perspectives, leaving openness for the viewer to meander between the content and the imagery, perhaps?** Exactly. And I think books in particular are perfect tools to make political artworks and make didactic messages with, which is fine, but it's not something I'm interested in doing in that way. It can have that meaning if that's what the viewer wants to read into it, but by leaving it more inconclusive it allows things to fall more into the area of the sublime.

**You have turned your hand to embroidery more recently – do you feel this is an extension of the book stacks and carvings? Or will these works feed into one another?** This has been a really great process. I'm preparing 50 of them for a show with Utopia Art Sydney, which I'm almost at the tail end of. It's been so good to see where they've gone because it's not been a way I've worked for a very long time. By that I mean to try to work



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quickly and to work in a way that's not overly laborious – although they still take me weeks at a time because I can't help myself! They were borne out of needing to be more mobile and be able to do work on a desk (since the birth of my son). So I've been working on A3 paper and working in the only way I know how – with found materials that leave a great mark – and this time it's thread and sewing.

A lot of the imagery I've been playing with has come from the reference materials I've been playing with earlier (namely, scientific and medical encyclopaedias). I've been looking at scientific drawings: human muscles, how trees are grafted, how pantographs are made. What's coming up, and this wasn't an original intention, is that I'm referencing three dimensions or sculptures or how things are made and connected and put together, or knotted or joined. All of these are different ways of making two materials come together to make a larger object. And in the same way, by using a thread and sewing them, that's what the sewing is doing as well.

It's a bit like when I put a stack of books together and I don't want them to be glued, I want them to be able to come apart – it's that quality of how things are made that I'm trying to explore in these drawings. It feels a lot is going on in them and it's going to take having them all in a room for me to stand back and look at them and see what I think will be obvious connections but, at the same time, a lot very different, busy different directions. It will be like expunging a lot of visual ideas I've been collecting over the years. ■

EXHIBITION  
Exhibition title  
3 - 24 October 2015  
Utopia Art Sydney

Kylie Stillman is represented by Utopia Art Sydney  
[www.utopiaartsydney.com.au](http://www.utopiaartsydney.com.au)  
[www.kyliestillman.com](http://www.kyliestillman.com)



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- 01 Cypress Pine, 2012, wood carving, 225 x 210 x 15cm
- 02 Stitch stitch, 2014, cotton thread on paper, 42 x 29.7cm
- 03 The Venation, 2013, hand-cut paperback books and timber base, 20 x 23 x 14cm
- 04 The Purpose of Purposeful Repurposing, 2013, hand-cut hardcover books, timber chair and room structure, 240 x 120 x 120cm
- 05 (cue)eucalypt(tpyl), 2013, hand-cut paperback books, 39 x 54 x 11cm
- 06 You Yangs, 2013, wall mounted installation, blue ballpoint pens, 40 x 150cm
- 07 The Marker, 2013, hand-cut paperback books and timber base, 21 x 23 x 14cm

Courtesy the artist and Utopia Art Sydney