

Fully Booked

Art News finds out what leading contemporary artists do with the books and magazines nobody else wants.

It's a strange feeling when, opening a book, you find passages underlined and explanatory notes scribbled in the margin. There's an uneasy sense of eavesdropping on someone else's thoughts or even outrage that the pristine pages have been defaced. Perhaps this says something about our notions of cultural value and the loss of innocence associated with such interventions.

Though many artists make books as part of their practice, fewer take the more subversive approach of transforming or recycling them. *Art News* spoke to five contemporary artists whose inspired interventions to books – painting, nailing, tearing, stacking and carving them – push the links between books and art further.

In the reading room at St Cuthbert's College in Auckland is a large multi-media wall work by I. budd, a member of the artist's collective **et al**.



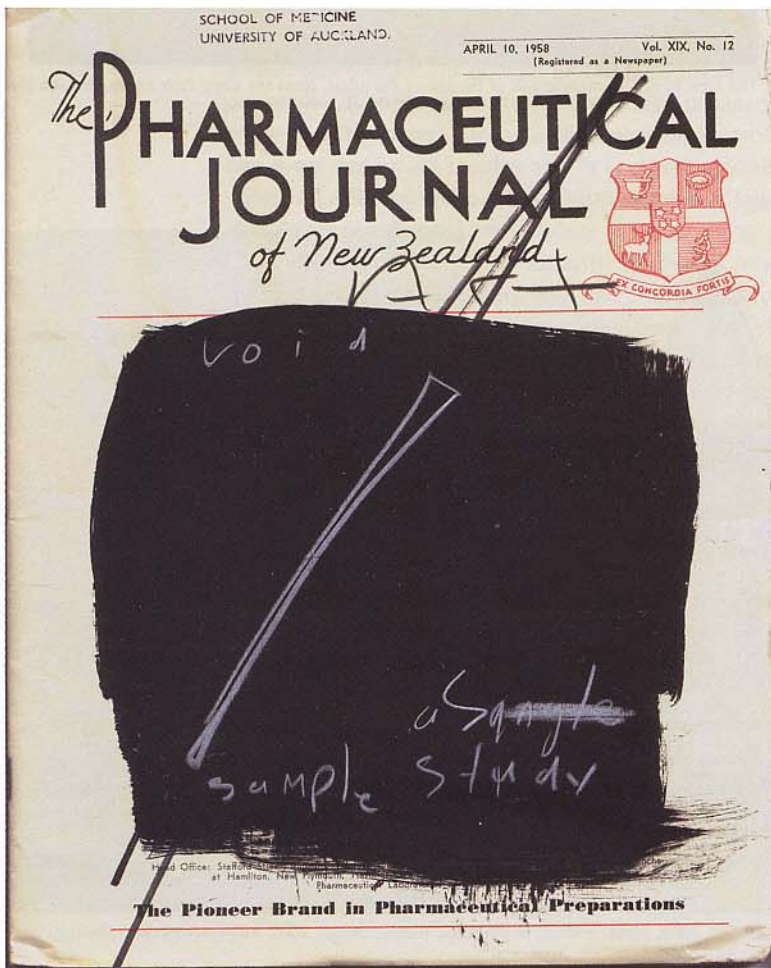
In the matter of knowledge, was commissioned by the seventh form students of the college in 1997 and is one of many works **et al** has made using books and periodicals – insistently painting, altering, attaching objects to or making entire works and installations with them.

Constructed from a grid of similar sized books, *in the matter of knowledge* has a sombre, formal beauty and, like much of **et al**'s work, it carries a multiplicity of associations. The uniformity of the books suggests they may once have been textbooks, giving the work a structured, institutional feel. Though all clues to the books' original context have been erased.

The surface is rich and layered – some areas are faded, chalky and opaque, others animated by a dull lacquer gleam and scrawled snippets of text. Poetic lines: "Light has yellowed like a tulip"; "it is so dark only words are light"; "the waiting becomes flame", further animate the work and suggest certain dualities when read in the context of the work's tight structure – imagination and reason; art and science; order and chaos; subjectivity and objectivity to name a few.

In the matter of knowledge is a fantastic example of **et al**'s ongoing commitment to destabilising the authority of knowledge systems. Familiar found objects associated with communication and knowledge – books, scientific journals, cassette tapes, desks, computer monitors and thermometers – are re-jigged to impart a new validity and meaning and thereby alert us to the highly political nature of language and knowledge systems in general.

As in much of **et al**'s work, a game of cat and mouse is played out between artist and viewer – now you understand, now you don't; now you see us, now



the pharmaceutical journal of New Zealand - void, I. budd

you don't. The fact we are not even sure who the artists are is completely consistent with the collective's concerns. And this refusal to be pinned down, in terms of authorship, authority and meaning is interesting in the way it relates to et al's practice.

As p. mule says (on behalf of the members) when I suggest the title of the work might be a pun, "Every reading is appropriate".

Responding to a question about the collective's use of books, p. mule comments, "The inherent nature of the book itself interests us. The availability of multiple copies has always appealed to us, as well as the versatility of the book, the ability to gather publications from wide-ranging sources, and more recently issues such as typography and format as inherent meaning."

Obsolete or junked technologies also recur in the collective's work – especially the installations. Read in the context of the proliferation of new information technology, books too can be considered in this light. Therefore, can we draw a parallel between the 'past its use-by-date' nature of these objects and the impermanence of knowledge and language systems – the fact that knowledge and language are constantly evolving and can become outmoded and therefore useless or even harmful?

"Your observations are extremely relevant," replies p. mule.

The use of construction fencing, terms like "restricted access" and the hilarious reference to a "mind management workshop" in some of the group's recent installations, further underline these concerns and alert us to the highly political nature of language and knowledge systems.

The book works made with old periodical and journals in particular, point to the way knowledge and language systems change over time and to the potential for social, cultural and political 'truths' to become dogma. The rheumatism journal – how often do you hear that term used nowadays? – with text scrawled across it, is a good example.

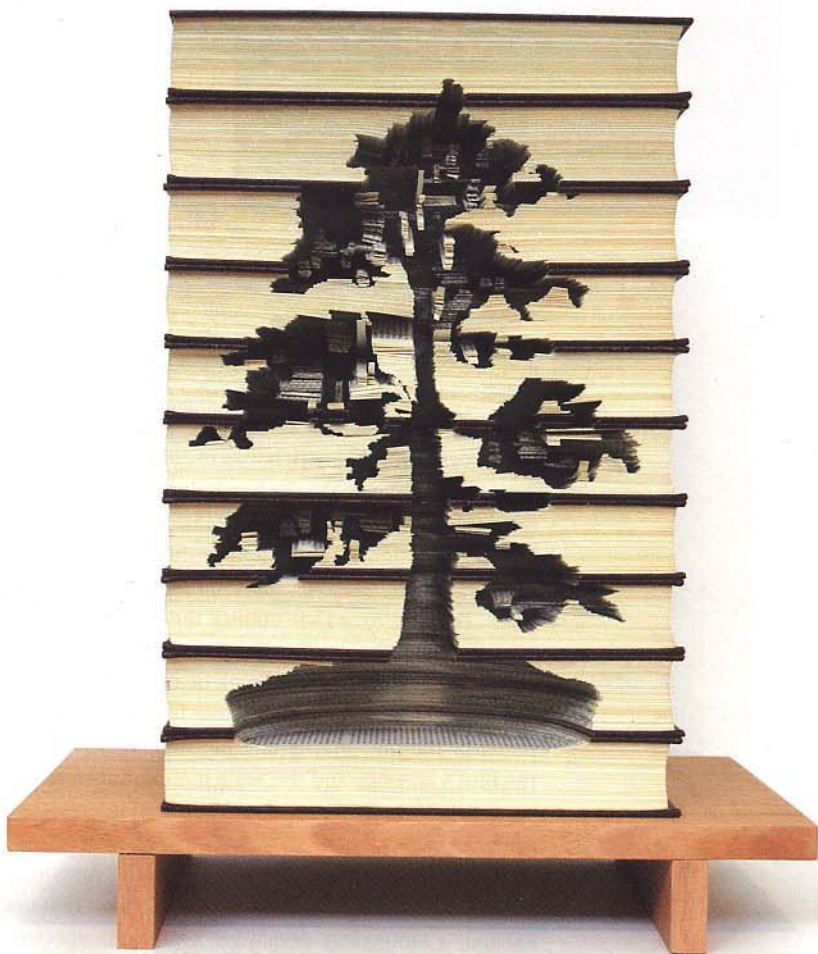
"Generally we tend to work with the cultural implications of prefabricated objects and to explore how these objects change if they are detached from their regular destination. We attempt to alter already existing context and structure and usually the object retains its original identity. These multiple readings of what is represented coexist. Nothing is defaced."

Ex calibre is a dark, portentous work with a thermometer attached to the book's front cover and a cassette tape – both measuring and recording devices – to the back. With its word-play and visual pun – the thermometer could be a sword – it too evokes a dark and subversive humour, which would be easy to miss if you weren't on your toes regarding these artists.

Whereas et al's books operate on a visceral,

expressionistic level, Australian artist **Kylie Stillman's** have a crisp Zen-like beauty and formalism. Her sculptures or three-dimensional drawings of the natural world – trees and birds in particular – invite contemplation and stillness. We first saw her enigmatic sculptures in this country as part of the recent Artspace group show, *Uncanny (the unnaturally strange)*.

Stillman carves the shapes of birds and bonsai trees into the pages of thick textbooks stacked on top of



each other to create mysterious objects, which suggest uncanny combinations of nature and culture, presence and absence. The sense of illusion and artifice is emphasised by her choice of exotic trees – manicured bonsai growing in pots – rather than 'wild' trees.

"The aspect I enjoy when working with the bonsai carvings, is the moment when you feel you are reversing the process in which bonsais are made. The delicate art of trimming away at a bonsai plant is a reductive one, yet with every cut I make I am adding form. The making process always becomes very contemplative," says Stillman.

Tamarak, 2005, book carving, 44 x 28 x 23cm, Kylie Stillman. Image courtesy Utopia Art Sydney



Above: *Poison*, 2005, dictionary and found photos, Peter Madden
 Left: *Interlopacine*, 2002, found images, Peter Madden

Each tree or bird is represented on a life-size scale and the book's text, though not readable, also plays a formal role in the work, suggesting speckled feathers, dappled light on leaves and growth rings on bark.

"I began working with books in 2000 with a series of 'bird books'. The books are hand-altered with a scalpel; the decorative paper stock of the inside page frames the life-size silhouette and contour of the bird. The book's text, no longer readable, takes on a formal role in the work, creating tone that mimics the absent creature's markings and plumage. The common name of the carved bird is displayed below the book in an elegant script on a trophy-style plaque. The plaque tells the viewer the name of the bird that is missing from the piece. It is the bird's absence and the scale mould of its form that encourages an open-ended and personal interpretation of the work."

"The viewer may begin to ponder the function of the altered object – is it a memorial to a plant that once existed, a smuggling device for a precious species, a botanist's tool or an object a child used for keeping secret pets?"

The connection between paper, trees and books is not accidental, says Stillman. "The more literal definitions of the works don't interest me as much; it's important for the viewer to bring their own associations and for the work to hold a multiplicity of readings."

The books she works with are often outdated volumes and digests supplied by art-loving lawyers.

"I treat the books as a sculpting material and a means of supporting a three-dimensional drawing. They are selected for their size – as the carvings are scaled one to one, the books need to accommodate the height and width of the carved form."

Unlike Stillman, Auckland artist **Peter Madden** takes a baroque approach to nature while adopting a playful approach to scale. Sitting in a child's small chair in his crowded studio, I feel like Alice in Wonderland in a magical, miniaturised world. I might also be in the art room of a brilliantly creative kindergarten.

On the floor of this self-described collage artist and post-conceptual photographer's studio is a box of old *National Geographic* magazines. Images snipped from their pages cover the walls of the small room with a teeming profusion of life – humming birds, bats, horses, butterflies, a skeleton smoking a pipe. There is a shelf with a diorama on it, and behind me is a large wall-sized collage made for his show at Michael Lett.

Unlike conventional collage, though, many of these works are three-dimensional – a flock of butterflies and a ruby throated hummingbird project beyond the surface of the wall. Asked how he will reassemble this kaleidoscopic wall work in the gallery, Madden says, "I've made it for so many months, there's no way I would forget it".

As well as dioramas and collages on the wall, which you can't touch, he makes sculptural books, which you can. In one, *Escape into Order*, a cloud of butterflies intersects with the blank, open pages of a book as if hinting at the secret life within.

"It has poetic ambiguities. Is the book a flower? How does it open? It opens like the wings of a butterfly; it sustains a curious interest," says Madden.

There is a book of roses filled with holes where he has cut out images and as you flick through it you see a series of overlaid portals, creating new and hybrid roses. In the work *Poison* a dictionary with snakes wriggling from its pages is held closed by vices.

All these sculptural books function as portals into other worlds and, surrounded by books and magazines categorising birds, butterflies and roses, it's easy to

think of Madden as a trophy hunter or butterfly collector. He himself draws a connection between photography as a modern version of trophy hunting, saying, "Can that (photography) intersect with *saving* nature or is it just too effing late?"

The sense of artlessness and joy in these works sits uneasily with the undercurrent of theft that also comes with photography.

"I had a lot of fun with them (the books) and I'm a little bit naughty; I rely a lot on the gravitas of the given image one looks at."

Surprisingly, Madden's main interest is photography rather than sculpture or painting. "I take photographs but I don't point my camera at the world," he says.

Instead he creates dioramas in the studio, photographs them and turns them into miniature worlds populated with fabulous creatures viewed through a stereoscope.

Like magical realism, where fantastic events seem real, there is a reanimation conceit in his work – when you look at his three-dimensional collages of birds and butterflies flying across the surface of the work, it seems for half a second they are alive again.

"You get caught on the surface of the reproductions and you are reminded how strong the illusion of photography is – but it teeters on its own illusion."

In her recent Anna Bibby exhibition, *Kiss it Better*, Sam Mitchell showed hundreds of drawings made



I'll buy the flowers, 2005, watercolour on recycled paper, from *Kiss it better*, Sam Mitchell

on the title and end pages of old books. She wryly comments the saucy drawings – porno frogs, couples having oral sex, vampy women with flapper hairdos, sold the most. But all these drawings held our gaze with their graphic, illustrative and sometimes wonky detail – you could have been forgiven for thinking you had stumbled into a tattooist's parlour or the pages of a super-sized comic book.

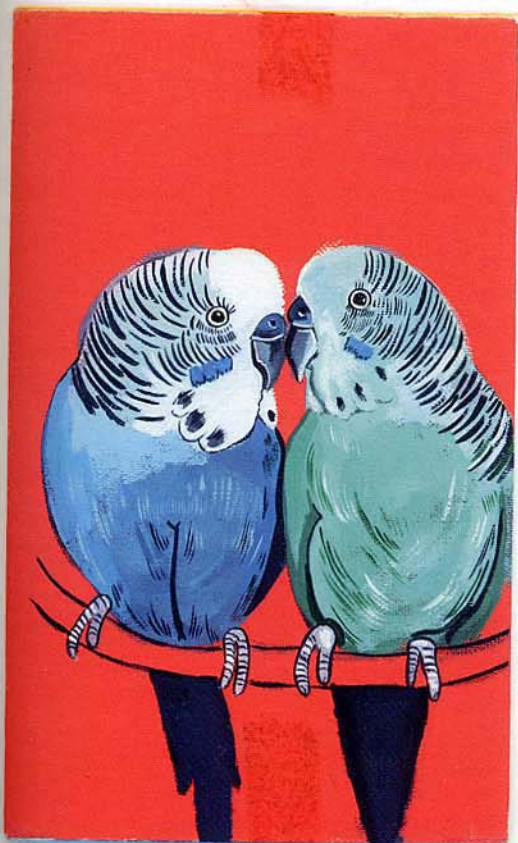
On the opposite wall of the gallery was a row of hard book covers arranged casually on a low shelf. On these were exquisitely painted canaries and budgies, which might have flown straight from a child's book. The naïve quality of these jewel-like works – picture an emerald green and cerulean blue budgerigar painted on a coffee-stained faded red book cover and you're getting close – was the perfect foil for the naughty works on paper.

People have commented that the 1940s-style woman whose face is repeated throughout the drawings, resembles Mitchell herself. The woman is in fact Diana Mitford, the sister of novelist Nancy Mitford who wrote the 1949 novel *Love in a Cold Climate*.

Like the famous Mitford sisters, Mitchell has had an unconventional life – born in Colorado Springs, USA, she grew up in Devonport with hippie parents who had a pyramid in the back yard and ate roast chicken and potatoes for breakfast. Now Mitchell works at a bookshop where she handles an endless stream of books and graphic images, which feed into her work.

The drawings' sense of nostalgia comes not only from Mitchell's imagery, but also from the quality of the surface she works on – faded, foxed and stained pages and fabric-bound hard covers typical of older books.

"Using paper that is already aged gives the surface a personality I can work with – library stamps, coffee spots, thumb prints and food. Sometimes this personality dictates what should go on the surface; it's like a prelude," she says. The book works began with a practical decision. Two years ago Mitchell and good friend Gavin Hurley, a painter and collage artist,



Canary Row, 2005, acrylic on recycled book covers, Sam Mitchell



The Language Series,
[H], 2003/04/05, Lambda
print, Paul Thompson.
Courtesy Idiom Studio,
Wellington

decided old books would be a cheap source of paper. They trawled library sales and markets for books with blank pages at front and back – Hurley cutting out paper to create compositions for portrait paintings; Mitchell drawing her catalogue of bizarre images on the blank pages with gouache and a fine-tipped brush. Though she describes these works as drawings, they are more like spontaneous paintings made directly onto the paper.

“The images are approachable and familiar,” says Mitchell. “It’s very user-friendly and recognisable. It’s not high art. Most people have had a pet at some stage; most people have seen snakes and frogs; most people read fairy tales; most people have had oral sex. It is things that are close and familiar and it’s not scary; and it’s not white on white and it’s not too intellectually challenging, though I could make it so.”

“They remind me of 1920s postcards – the way old men flick through postcards of erotic women lying on chairs and showing their bums. When I made the drawings I was thinking of black and white postcards hidden in the naughty box in the cupboard.”

As a child she suffered from bronchitis and asthma, spending time in bed reading picture books as an escape. A keen reader of everything from natural history and ecology books through to trashy novels and literature, she loves the portability of books. She stores hundreds of works in a red cake tin with a kitten on the lid – schlepping an entire exhibition with her when she travels. And for a woman who travels often, there is no better way to transport her work.

Photographer **Paul Thompson**’s suite of 52 black and white photographs, *The Language Series*, shown recently at Idiom Studio in Wellington, is a series of moody tableaux of pages, books, poems and other manifestations of the printed word. Some are images the photographer has ‘found’, others were set up – like the series of mysterious objects wrapped in paper with the word “poem” written on them.

Like a 19th century portrait photographer, he poses his subjects lovingly in different situations, photographing them outdoors in unlikely spots – windswept beaches far from the library and the living room. In one work he has made a flag from the pages of a book and photographed it with a small island, which he calls “the Republic of Letters”, in the background.

The project began two years ago when Thompson found almost 200 poets had incorporated photography as a subject, sign or symbol in their writing. Like photography, poetry can evoke sharp visual images in a few words or lines. His idea for *The Language Series* was that each image would work as a visual poem and, read together, the images could create their own extended meta narrative.

In *The Language Series*, that mute object – the closed book – is animated and made to seem heroic. We see pages curled, creased and blowing in the wind as if they are literally about to give up their secrets and speak. Sometimes we can read snippets of text, sometimes not, and the scale of each image is intimate – about the size of a paperback book. Interestingly, when so many photographers are fighting for photography’s status as fine art, these works are priced at \$39.95 – about the cost of a paperback novel. Thompson wanted to draw a comparison between books and these photographs as multiples rather than one-offs.

“For an author, the manifestation of their ideas, called the book, has no great intrinsic value as an individual item. Of course books are mass-produced in a factory while photographic prints are made by the photographer, but in many ways photographs are conceptually closer to publishing than they are to painting,” he says.

The Language Series will tour public galleries around New Zealand next year and Wellington publisher, Steele Roberts, will produce an accompanying anthology of poems by noted New Zealand poets who have used photography in their work. /Virginia Were