

# KYLIE STILLMAN

*Trident maple* 2005  
book carving  
46 x 28 x 23 cm

Kylie Stillman's work *Trident maple* is an innovative form of relief sculpture carved into a stack of 10 books. Stillman is interested in cultural traditions that make a spectacle of and seek to order nature. Her bonsai-shaped relief sculptures made from wood and paper, such as this one, signal the absence of nature.

In *Trident maple* the tree has been replaced with its own shadow, suspended in the void created by the logging and woodchipping industries. The work's dual references to paper and the Japanese art of bonsai are not coincidental. Over the last decade, almost 90 per cent of Australia's woodchips have been exported to Japan to be manufactured into paper for the production of books and printed material.

*Trident maple* is a prototype for a three-metre-tall work, *Red maple*, which is made from a stack of 200 sheets of plywood and featured in the 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. Other timber-based materials deployed in Stillman's oeuvre include reams of A4 printing paper and aluminium Venetian blinds.

Since the creation of *Trident maple* the tide has begun to turn in the woodchipping and paper industries. The environmental damage caused by woodchipping internationally, and particularly in Australia, has come under increased public and political scrutiny. In Australia, woodchipping mills have reduced output, while consumers in Japan have re-evaluated the source of their timbers and sought more sustainable alternatives. Simultaneously, electronic readers have forced book publishers to rethink the necessity of paper-based publishing, forcing many booksellers out of business.

The metaphorical illusion of the tree fading into obscurity, consumed by the demands of the printing industry, may

soon become obsolete if the woodchipping and publishing industries continue to become more environmentally sustainable. On a broader level, however, the consumption of nature by the spiralling appetites of culture continues apace. It is important to note that it is not a tree that Stillman depicts here, but the empty space of a tree that has disappeared, literally carved out of the cultural landscape. In fact, it was never a real tree as found in the natural world but rather a bonsai plant, a miniature, an ornamental folly, evidence of humanity's desire to manipulate and control the natural environment. As Stillman explains:

My artworks are sculptures born of the discarded and prefabricated, materials that already have their own texture, form, size and, in many cases, a long [and] useful life before they reach me. With adoring respect towards handmade objects I embark on the manual process of turning these materials into artworks. With every mark the object becomes a contradiction, a poignant nod towards an object's ability to possess inner qualities beyond its material construct.<sup>1</sup>

Stillman lives and works in Melbourne, where she was born in 1975. She has a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Fine Arts from RMIT and her book works are held in the state library collections of Victoria and Queensland, and in the Fisher Library at the University of Sydney. In 2011 she completed a major commission, a plywood tree-based work – *Yamadori* – for the new Hermès store in Sydney. Commanding a high-profile street window site, it comprises 240 sheets of stacked plywood into which Stillman has carved the impression of a tree. Like the artist's book carvings, this too deploys a process of reduction in which space symbolises the return of man-made timber products to the wild.

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