

KYLIE STILLMAN

Red Maple

Occasionally when confronting an illusion it becomes important to start with what's apparent or obvious or perhaps an uncomfortable truth. In this case that truth is that the 200 sheets of full scale plywood that form the basis for Kylie Stillman's work *Red Maple* was never Red Maple. This is a reality check for pine plantations everywhere because it is easy to imagine from the plywoods' perspective that the Red Maple is an aspirational tree. It's a grand dame of timber imported from the Far North, its leaf so effortlessly resolved by nature, so symmetrically lovely that impudent Canadian travellers everywhere feel the urge to wear it stamped on their all weather gear and laud its elegant silhouette on flags and badges that fly in the face of other less grandiloquent landscapes in which the eucalypt or pine becomes a minor cause celebre.

The further issue with the truth is that it is often unwieldy, it resists our whims. Full scale plywood, sounds promising, but it's pedestrian. This is the standard size that reconstituted woodchips are compounded into in order to construct domestic interiors, housing estates and package homes. (Dimensions per sheet 2.4 metres x 1.22 metres x 15 millimetres for those who need to know.) And wood-chipping is political. Perhaps ask Gunns, but not Ikea. Or ask the artist. Stillman frequently redeploys the manufactured pre-existing forms that we overlook everyday into transformed aesthetics. With precise intervention she literally cuts into the surface of the familiar enacting a gesture in which the outcome is equally sublimely visceral and an act of resistance to form.

Books, reams of A4 photocopying paper, venetian blinds, stacks of plywood – in Stillman's hands this potential detritus becomes susceptible to imprint and excavation. In *Red Maple* there are resonances of mourning, of loss, and the quiet yet compelling urgency of absence is palpable. And this absence is made tangible through the acknowledgement that everything is always in transition. In Latin the phrase *momento mori* translates loosely into 'remember you will die' and in this circumstance whether you are a graceful signifier of nature's majesty, such as the Red Maple, or a more modest plantation harvest, issues of sustainability, temporality and consumption collide. Recycling is as much an inexorable necessity as much as it can be an existential question. Can we ever return to our roots? Is that desirable? Are our unresolved memories of an idealised landscape ever more than the most paltry of fictions? Entangling these questions and defying functionality, in *Red Maple* Stillman takes an oblique three metre high stack of plywood and reasserts the invisible lyricism that resides within the material prompting the viewer to reconsider the origins of the matter we use to assemble our constructed world. The allure of our most romantic ruminations on the environment is monumentalised in material we take for granted. Consequently the truth that Stillman evokes with this action is of the interconnectedness of manufacturing to illusion and the uneasy fictions that reside uncertainly between fact and aspiration.

Alexie Glass

Red Maple, 2007
plywood
300 x 240 x 120 cm
Courtesy Utopia Art Sydney

