



The Informal Garden



Kylie Stillman

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Throughout history and across cultural divides, gardens have served as spaces to wonder at the diversity of nature and the brilliance of human design. They have also been sites of sly social structuring; the hierarchical order imposed on the landscape paralleling that pursued in society. And gardens represent human conquest over seemingly incontrovertible nature. The French and English formal landscapists of the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, rigorously imposed order on the natural world: space was represented in a series of discrete, structured, and grand (yet manipulable) zones which touted man's domination over chaotic life. In retaliation to this strict code came 'informalists', with designs which advocated a return to nature (through imitation) but who in reality engendered an equally strict denial of natural freeform. Garden design traditions stemming from China and Japan, particularly bonsai, are also recognisable as a reigning-in and replication of the immensity of nature to fit human scale.

Kylie Stillman's exhibition *The Informal Garden* is suggestive of this struggle: the precise, surgical removal of accurately-scaled bird and potted bonsai shapes from solid books seems to capture nature in stasis. But does it? That which is excised – the solid, three-dimensional form – is no longer encapsulated within the bounds of the book; indeed prior to its removal it did not even exist. However this absence of form not only reveals the negative space around an imagined 'positive' but creates in its place a new positive. The fragments of printed text visible along the edge of the void, no longer meaningful textually, become legible as speckles on feathers, dappled light on leaves, growth rings on trunks. The level planes of the books' marbled cover sheets seem 'less real' than the contoured hollows beyond. Even the way the bird-books are hung, their covers spread like wings, implies some inherent vitality. Optically and conceptually there is a definite movement in Stillman's work, like the flick between candlestick and two faces in profile, or rabbit and duck. Simultaneously, there is a stillness and silence in the works' muted hues and in the imagery of birds posing taxidermically and old trees stunted and contained inside the books' boundaries.

Stillman is a consummate maker. Her finely-crafted interruptions into ready-made items resound with skill and dexterity. And somewhere between the intention and the actuality there is space for something else to grow: although the work's titles refer to particular species, the carved spaces are open to be filled with the viewer's own recollections of nameless birds or archetypal bonsai. The invitation to see something that is not there (and perhaps, if it were, it might be something entirely unexpected) allows for myriad responses and interpretations.

Georgia Harvey







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images Cover: *Lovely Wren* 2005, book carving.

III: *Trident Maple* 2005, book carving.

IV: *Dusky Honeyeater* 2005, book carving.

V: *White Pine* 2005, book carving.

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