





1

Chris Bond's works are inspired by a specific period in the history of book design: notably the distinctive Penguin paperback of the 1960s. Bond paints new covers in a *trompe l'oeil* manner and affixes these to original books, transforming them into a series of self-authored titles that contemplate theories about the history of painting and the realities of artistic failure.

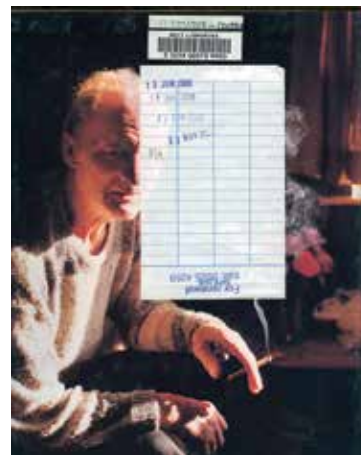
Bond extends on the fictional premise: from the imaginary author and fabricated titles, to the invention of publishing houses whose logos are incorporated into the designs. He also renders physical signs of wear suggestive of the book's use over an extended period of time, such as creases, tears and yellowed paper stock. The seamless merger of Bond's meticulously hand-painted covers with the mass-produced book form effectively creates alternative histories for the objects raising issues of authenticity, authorship and nostalgia.

The trick of the eye executed by Bond has parallels in Patrick Pound's installation *From Darkness to Light*. Described by the artist as 'part library, part puzzle', it comprises fifty-four publications, the titles of each of which bear reference to various states of illumination or lack thereof.

The sequence begins with Victor Gollancz's *From Darkness to Light*—the title, read from left to right, providing the key for the installation to be experienced in the same direction. Twenty-six titles follow with references to darkness, leading to the centrally placed memoir *Edge of Darkness*, *Edge of Light*, which itself is followed by twenty-six books referring to light. This second sequence concludes with the thriller *An Absence of Light*: the narrative established by Pound returns to a state of darkness, creating a cyclical experience for the viewer.

While not as ancient as writing itself, printed books have an extensive history in their own right as well as an immense authority as objects: they have long been associated with the peaks of creativity, imagination and human endeavour. In addition to the ideas, information and narratives they contain, the tactility of books—their weight, texture and smell, as well as the experience of leafing through pages—elicits a strong sense of nostalgia and sensory pleasure.

At a time when the relevance and future of the printed book is often called into question by developments in the digital realm, artists are increasingly engaging with the physical form of publications. *Ex libris—the book in contemporary art* brings together new and existing works by eight such artists—Chris Bond, Penelope Davis, Danny Digby, Nicholas Jones, Aliza Levi, Tom Nicholson, Patrick Pound, and Kylie Stillman—each of whom manipulates the book form, re-purposing, re-interpreting and investing new life into mostly old and second-hand volumes or titles whose popularity may have waned.



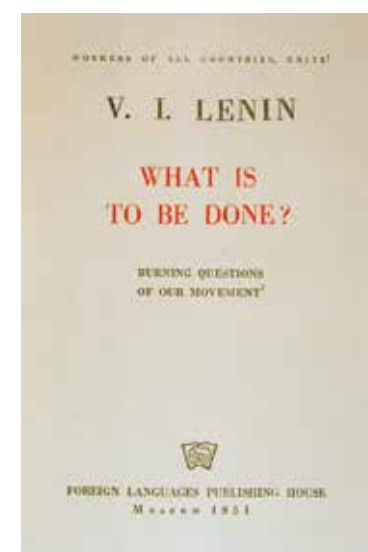
2

Pound creates a contextual logic for a collection of seemingly disparate publications encompassing various literary genres, and in doing so invests new life in these objects whilst also inviting inquiry and new ways of seeing.

A cyclical process is also apparent in Danny Digby's works: photographs of the endpapers of books about well-known photographers reproduced as large-scale prints and the pages of a self-published book. Digby's images, originating from books, are effectively returned to the format from which they derive.

Working with books from several library collections, Digby's photographs record the published sheets and, significantly, the 'due date' slips, barcodes, and the pockets in which library lending cards were housed. These references to library processes transform each of the books from a mass-printed publication to a unique item: each book's history of borrowing is told through the dates stamped on the slip, in addition to the stamps or labels of the libraries.

In documenting these details, Digby makes comment on the transition from manual to automated library lending systems whilst reflecting on the shift from analogue to digital photography. Just as the manual system of lending books has been phased out, so too have analogue cameras and film been rendered almost redundant.

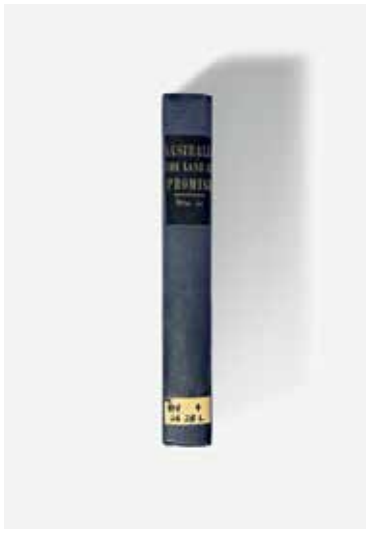


3

Not only has the rise of digital technology changed the way photographers work, and the manner that images and information are accessed, but also the traditional role of libraries. Despite these developments, as repositories of the printed book libraries have long stood as powerful institutions, as evidenced in Tom Nicholson's *After Action for Another Library*.

Nicholson's series has its origins in the political unrest in East Timor in 1999 that followed the islanders' vote for independence: specifically the widespread destruction of books by Indonesian troops and the burning of libraries. In Australia, Nicholson was engaged with a campaign to re-establish these collections and, over the course of two years, more than 3,000 books were donated and shipped to the newly-independent nation.

Nicholson photographed the title pages of these books—a number of which are examples of literature inspired by civil unrest and activism, written by influential political and literary figures throughout history—to create various 'traces' of the action, including large scale prints. In recording the title pages photographically, Nicholson uses a medium with which unrest has been documented throughout modern times: the camera has been a powerful tool in the dissemination of information, providing factual evidence of injustices towards others.



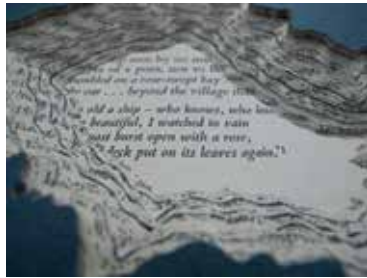
4

Aliza Levi's series, *Books on a White Background*, in which she photographs the spines of published books largely written by anthropologists from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries, explores the politics of book titles and the associations the reader might bring to these at various points in history.

Collected in the countries in which she holds dual citizenship—South Africa and Australia—the book titles make reference to the histories and politics of these two nations, particularly in regard to the attitudes of colonisers towards Indigenous populations. Levi places each of the books uniformly in a central position on a stark white background: appearing as though placed on a bookshelf, each volume throws a dark shadow across the composition.

In photographing the spines, Levi purposefully restricts access to the author's theories: only an abbreviated title can be read. Just as the spines take on an almost abstracted appearance in the photographs, so too the ideas or the content of the books are inaccessible, inviting the viewer to read and interpret these titles from their own perspectives and history.

Fragments of texts and images are revealed in the carvings made by Nicholas Jones into hardback volumes in the series *To the Islands*. Taking inspiration from Judith Schalansky's *Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands: Fifty Islands I Have Not Visited and Never Will*, Jones links twelve inaccessible islands with twelve suitably themed publications: titles that, for the most part, bear a reference to oceans and seafaring activities.



5

Jones carves the perimeter of an island into the cover of the book, and in subsequent pages this form is reduced, exposing traces of print. The meticulously cut pages graduate inwards, simulating the contour lines of a topographical map, while the unexpected reveals created through the process of cutting one page at a time echoes the experience of reading as a story unfolds over consecutive pages.

Beyond their shared passion for cartography and atlases, Schalansky and Jones address the notion of absence: the author writes about islands she has never visited—effectively an absent tour guide—while the artist removes sections of pages, the absent texts rendering the stories inaccessible.

Just as words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters make up the content of a published book, Kylie Stillman's works focus on the elements from which objects are made. She carves precise forms referencing the natural and constructed worlds into the fore edge of stacked paperback books: from the skeletal form of a bird, and the network of veins in a leaf, to the weave of a rug, the mark created by a brushstroke, or the thread that makes fabric or netting.



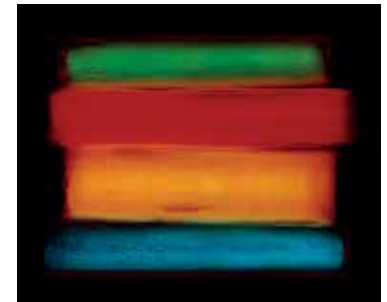
6

Stillman's process is reminiscent of intaglio printmaking in which the forms that are engraved or etched into a plate hold the ink from which a printed image is taken. As she carves into the edges of the books, the dark ink of the printed pages revealed through these cuts provides the tonality that adds form to the overall image. The 'reading' of her works effectively shifts between the three-dimensional negative space of the intricately carved motifs and the two-dimensional surface of prints or drawings.

Penelope Davis creates luminous spectral-like shapes floating in space from casts of stacked books. Davis' large-scale, vibrant prints were created through an involved process merging historical objects and photographic techniques with contemporary technologies and aesthetic concerns.

Historical volumes de-accessioned from libraries were cast in resin: these glass-like 'books' were then used in the photogram process, an early form of photography in which objects are placed directly onto the surface of light-sensitive paper and exposed to light, literally creating shadows of the objects themselves.

Davis' application of coloured gels and filters to build a vivid palette and the subsequent digital manipulation of the photograms to increase their scale introduces more contemporary elements, resulting in glowing, almost painterly, images.



7

Through these works Davis also sets up an interesting interplay: the photogram process, which effectively renders the camera redundant, is the process through which stacks of antiquated volumes—considered to be beyond their own usefulness—are transformed into decidedly contemporary images.

A sense of respect for the history of the book and its authority as a revered and often prized object is evident in the exhibited works, despite a number of the artists physically altering or seemingly defacing the volume. Nostalgia for the book also permeates many of the works: the prevalence of the medium of photography, for example, connects books and photographs as 'keepers' of memories. Each is a medium through which the human condition is recorded: a vessel for emotion and imagination.

In these works, the artists weave a narrative that, in many cases, is as compelling as the literature contained within the books they have transformed. Whatever the future of printed books in the digital era, in the hands of these artists, the traditional format of the codex continues to have a relevance, conceptual power and currency.

