

Cover versions

Thomas Allen cuts up book jackets and then photographs his three-dimensional alternative realities. Henry Casey meets the artist who makes pulp precious

As I get out of Thomas Allen's car and walk toward his house, I hear many a strange sound that the average city dweller isn't used to hearing. We're about 40 miles west of Kalamazoo, Michigan, in the town of Coloma; there's a hen coop, and from Allen's four-and-a-half-acre patch you can't see a neighbor in either direction. "You hear the frogs?" asks Allen. "Those are peepers." Maybe Allen has been living here so long that he's attuned his ears to the point where he can tell the sound of one type of frog from another, but I have a suspicion that picking odd elements out from the crowd and giving them prominence is an ability that is not limited to Allen's sense of hearing.

Bookend, 2004, is a perfect example of Allen's mock pop-up book prints. It features two cowboys – one lying dead, and one standing in the distance, his guns still smoking and slightly out of focus, just like everything below his waist. As with all of Allen's work, *Bookend* was made by cutting apart old pulp novel covers, combining them, posing them, taping them, and pinning them, before photographing these formerly two-dimensional objects and



While studying for his master's in fine arts at the University of Minnesota, Allen, whose grandfather was a private detective, supported himself by working at a toy store – and certainly there is a playfulness present in much of his work.

Opening pages: *Red*, 2002, chromogenic print (20 by 24in). Opposite page: *Recover*, 2003, chromogenic print (20 by 24in). This page, from top: *Uplift*, 2004, chromogenic print (20 by 24in); *Bookend*, 2004, chromogenic print (20 by 24in)

breaking down the fourth wall. With *Bookend*, the elements were taken from two different book covers that featured the same two cowboys. Allen then cut everything around the cowboys' image off the page, and took his picture. With his precise use of focus, Allen has created a new scene, making these illustrations more immediate through their new dimensionality. "That's the beauty of the view camera; you can really just crank it so you only focus on one part," Allen explains.

When asked about his method for getting these images isolated in such a pristine and exact condition, Allen doesn't refer me to a piece of digital image-editing software; rather, he says, "Just this," and pulls out a shining scalpel. To avoid the complexities of Photoshop, Allen keeps his tools simple, using just this X-Acto knife, some "T"-pins, invisible Scotch tape, and glue sticks. It is with these basic means that Allen is able to arrange his illustrations exactly the way you will see them in the final print. This is one of the many advantages of doing most of his work with traditional sheet film rather than a digital camera. "It's too easy," Allen says, when asked to compare digital manipulation to his handcrafted process. "For me, the whole art-making part of it is that I try to see as close as possible to the final image before I shoot with the camera."

Another work that demonstrates Allen's clever use of focus is *Uplift*, an image of two children on a swing about to fall back toward the ground, and, in fact, into a book. By adding in shadow and making the page below them out of focus, Allen gives the picture a sense of peril not present in the original. As he shows me the work and how the cutout is taped in and can flap up, it is intriguing to see how this once innocent image has – under Allen's knife – placed the two children in an uncertain and possibly dangerous reality outside of their book.

In Allen's office, the first thing that strikes the eye is a vast collection of pulp novels – not surprising in itself, but the titles are even further over the top than one could imagine. One shelf reads, *Michael Shane's Long Chance, You Live Once: She Was a Playgirl Without Rules*, and *Deadline at Durango*. When asked



whether he is drawn to the stories as well as the covers, Allen replies, perhaps surprisingly, “Just the covers. I’ve never actually read the novels. Never really interested me.” What interests Allen, it soon becomes obvious, is the creation of microcosms to observe and manipulate to perfection.

Allen’s “manipulated microcosms” have been shown in many galleries and venues, but the artist says that the Foley Gallery in New York and Thomas Barry Fine Arts in Minneapolis have been particularly supportive, as have the Aperture Foundation and the graphic artist and book-cover designer Chip Kidd, who used Allen’s mock pop-up book photography for all of the imagery in a recent volume of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Zoetrope* magazine. But whereas with zoetropes the flat image is given the illusion of movement, Allen’s passion

and they were having an equipment sale. A new art building was about to open, so they were selling off everything from the old building, which has since been leveled. I found the board in a room full of junk and asked them how much it was, and they told me to just take it.” His smile proves that to this day he knows he got a good deal. The detail in the plywood, the distress that the wood and paint have suffered – you can see these details if you look for them. By giving them a base taken from the scrap heap, Allen provides his intentionally cut-up characters with an equally damaged world to inhabit.

When asked about how he came to produce work in this way in the first place, Allen explains that “it was kind of an accident,” and he also, somewhat mysteriously, mentions something about

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runs much deeper, as he himself explains. A visual depth, “a fabricated reality,” as he puts it, is what excites his mind, “whether it be pop-up books, dioramas, 3-D images, floaty pens, etc...”

“The act of moving in close, looking in, and feeling as if I’m actually in the space makes me smile every time. I remember getting a train set for Christmas when I was four or five. The best thing about it was when I’d lie on the floor with my eye right next to the track, so that when the train came by it looked enormous!” When he jokes about the thought that he might not ever grow up, I wonder whether Allen’s works could have been created without that innocence and sense of wonder.

So where exactly does the photographing of these scenes that Allen meticulously assembles take place? Again, Allen’s answer is quite simple; with pride in his method, he says, “On a discarded, distressed, and painted sheet of plywood, resting atop two sawhorses.” This explanation is just another example of how Allen sees things in ways that most others simply do not. “I was at the University of Minnesota,

Jesus and the devil. “I was working with images that I was superimposing over each other,” he says. “One day, as I was taking an image of Jesus out of a book,” – he opens the work, *Temptation*, on his computer screen – “because of the light in the room, an interesting thing happened when I took my photo...”

What happened was that Allen had folded Jesus out of one side of a very white page that he had suspended open. Then, on the flipside of the same page, Allen cut and folded the devil from the same picture. Thanks to the light coming through the page, *Temptation* appears to show Jesus in dazzling white light while the devil is subsumed by shadow with only the silhouette of Jesus casting a white relief in the darkness.

So while it is difficult to avoid the feeling that *Temptation* is a work with a message, Allen insists that “the religious iconography is incidental.” In other words, the plot (like the novels he never reads) is secondary to the visual effect. By putting his work above any sense of character, Allen has given his world of pulp breadth and depth. ♦

Allen’s photographs examine the same themes as the dime-store books from which he cuts out his images: lust, betrayal, revenge, and danger. Placing his characters in a scene of peril, as in *Teeter* (opposite), 2004, chromogenic print (24 by 20 in), is a familiar theme in Allen’s work

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