Omnia Somnia

Not much is known about the 16th-century Kentish poet Joshua Sylvester.
He doesn't appear to have written many poems, although his epitaphic
Omnia Somnia (Everything is a Dream), a playful and profound musing on
the nature of our brief existence, guarantees his immortality.

Colin Booth has borrowed this line for the title of his first show at the UpDown
Gallery. The exhibition is a survey of work from the past five years and focuses
on three main themes: his longstanding interest in early Modernism and the
built environment, the interface between the historic and the new and the
transformative potential of everyday objects and materials.

He describes this transformation as *'making strange'*, a reference to Russian
formalist critic Victor Shklovsky's essay, *Art as Technique,* 1925.

'The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived
and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects *unfamiliar...*'

Clear threads of personal narrative and a distinctive *'material poetic'*
are successfully combined in this impressive body of work.

This all started with the grid, the lure of Agnes Martin and Brice Marden whose work Booth went to see whilst still a student. Booth was drawing grids with pencil and ruler in the early 1970s at art school in Leeds and Daniel Buren, with his emphatic stripes, was a favourite. The structure touched, repetitive action building into a mass across the surface. Booth's more recent grid paintings work their way around the edge of the canvas and are given volume and dimensionality by the actuality of the paint placed onto the surface. 'Turning paint into something that is not paint' Booth. There is an earlier set of building blocks, where dimensional depth and attitude makes a play into the space between the person looking and the surface. An intrusion as soft as the reflective plasticity of the white paint which covers the blocks.

Bricks or offcuts, collected from a local furniture manufacturer, are used over and over as an expression of continuity, a way to build scale with regular pace. Booth uses ordinary warehouse pallets for stacking, metre, and presence. A logical man-made natural plinth. The work also looks as if it might continue, expand or retract in many ways. Booth works in a scale that carries practical and personal relevance and association. Using a medley of material which provides mainly a sense of the interior, the work is caught between references both real and raw. Booth encourages a specific anecdotal reference to be thrown in every now and then. The blocks, which come with generic coloured ends, promise a meandering vehicle for expansion, however, a perpetual motif. Denying though any rigid association with systems or a desire for minimal order, Booth brings other elements through in the work, each with a role to play in terms of domestic life, architectural space, and childhood experience.

Sections of words are brought by Booth from poems, or statements, by others into a physical state. Found by the artist, they are refloated, as it were, with different possibilities. Engraved onto marble, *Fragments of Sappho 2013* for instance, or a decorous 1960s Dartington glass memento, *Fluted Comport 2014*, the words are made to exist as complete moments of understanding in time. 'Artists stop decorating the easy life of the bourgeoisie' etched on to a real bourgeois object, carries a circularity of

its perpetual own. The object, the phrase, the call to arms and the inevitable descent into the exact.

The marble is square and the phrase, laid down as it were, all at once, becomes a sign for transitional meaning. The sound, mood, and meaning shifts as words become solid, isolated, and bound together. When Booth made his first grid paintings he carried on painting around the edge of the stretcher to make two dimensions three and the painting an object. A set of wooden books, *Go, litel bok 2014*, solid, with wood grain for the text and white for the cover makes fake books for real thoughts, akin to Chaucer's 'Go little booke, go little tragedie'. And words cut into marble, fixed forever as part of the surface and subject, are doing much the same thing.

Booth's fascination with white, having made paintings of poured white paint and organised an exhibition *Colour White* at the De La Warr Pavilion, is recently manifested in the enjoyment, re-discovery, of net curtaining, a mass-produced manufactured element, for all its delicacy. Cut into a circle, falling like a giant shroud, *Utility 2014*, or set into in a shallow frame to make single colour backed, or blocked volumetric paintings that play unashamedly on the history of painting and light, *Summer Long 2014*. Colour is there by insistence, at times, a result of manufacturing purpose while white is layered on white, draped, dripped and sometimes framed.

But before the associative references, it is important to touch base, to appreciate where Booth is coming from. *Jesus Wept*, a neon sign mounted on twenty-two-foot scaffolding near St Leonard's Warrior Square, was Booth's first major public piece. On quite a different scale perhaps, it may seem different but it is still, as he insists, an extension of associative power; the ability for material and method to expand, and yet bring all down to earth in terms of expectation deflated and result.

With wood, in many states, the atmosphere can change but the association is never too fixed or puritanical. A recent shift in possible material shows a number of luxuriant

gnarled tree trunks brought to heel, as it were, by straight cut across. Loose form and movement are transformed, brought home and back to order.

Booth sees his work as a form of rescue from a state of flux. Old and new things, perhaps falling from an industrial and archaeological state to something quite else, are rescued. The offcut, never really much anyway, from the factory floor is used. Other fragments from the factory, a found wood template of space between, the negative result of quite another intention, hangs on the wall, and then *GGGone 2014,* a cage with rungs from a child's cot now placed between the frets has a piece of board gnawed by a pet hanging down like the rudder of a boat. *In Tray 2013*, another work, has trays sitting one on top of another, with perfect logic, a piece of wood just fitting between. The convention of transformation is really very much, almost all, of art history. Something is something because we say it is, because as Booth says 'You see what it is and then what it becomes'.

The sense of a number of states informing at once comes with all of the work. Although some of the pieces, the cage, the chair, the table with the cloak of lace curtain are more specifically autonomous, each carries the constant reminder of movement, permutation, and possibility, an implication that action is possible. The blocks of wood that could exist in multiples of many, could expand process, assembly, and horizon, to march in any permutation through the building. By following the logic of what already exists, Booth circumvents any notion of fantasy or disorientation. In fact material brings its own metre, the grid in the mesh, the regular space between frets on a pallet, inch upon inch marked out for real on a ruler, and places the artist in a distinct and, at times, purely participatory role.

Instead of a participating in a theatre, though, this artist acts as architect and captures the material between collapse and restoration. Making something new from surrounding reality. Rather than the heightened ceiling of earlier architecture, Booth has a natural inclination for the ground-hugging, unfurling invention along the seafront of Mendelsohn's De La Warr Pavilion. He appreciates the horizontal, flat, wide light open space, the apparently expansive project, with each unit repeated in relation to the ground.

Working in a bright, airy, studio by the sea, Booths plays somehow between the scale of everyday and the beat of modernity. He shows a box with a series of offcuts transformed by a great level of attention to detail. Each block painted with a continuation of the grid on paper and canvas, a three-dimensional expansion.

Elements of truth will always persist. Booth believes there is no point in creating for affect. He prefers not to glue pieces together, if he can help it, in order to keep all components in a state of flux. The implication is that the basic elements will perhaps be reconvened in another series, another painting, another time. He insists on the possibility, the implication of change, where, yes the same blocks can, for instance, fit neatly into a cupboard, *Heart 2013*, to present a sheer front of built detail. In *Gift 2010*, the face is a rectangle, a lozenge of framed grid and the paint claiming the surface as it goes across.

The blocks, wherever installed, can do so much, they do not, however, in any way imply that this is it, the end. They can run along the floor but never raise themselves further with sculptural virtuosity. Either wood grain or rough wood, coloured from the workshop or found, provides an easy reference, a start, and a humanity, which allows a buildup in scale without loss of belief. The transformation of material can only really work for the artist it seems, when somehow humble, answerable, understandable and accessible. A certain history of 20th-century sculpture demands that we look down upon it. We gain an overview. The scale provides a start, and the touch of a truthful artist is about what you don't see, an indication of the humble means by which physical truth can suggest and undermine fantasy at the same time.

Sacha Craddock

OMNIA SOMNIA

Go, silly worm, drudge, trudge, and travel,
    Despising pain,
    So thou may'st gain
Some honour, or some golden gravel:
But Death the while (to fill his number)
    With sudden call
    Takes thee from all,
To prove thy days but dream and slumber.

Joshua Sylvester, 1563 – 1618

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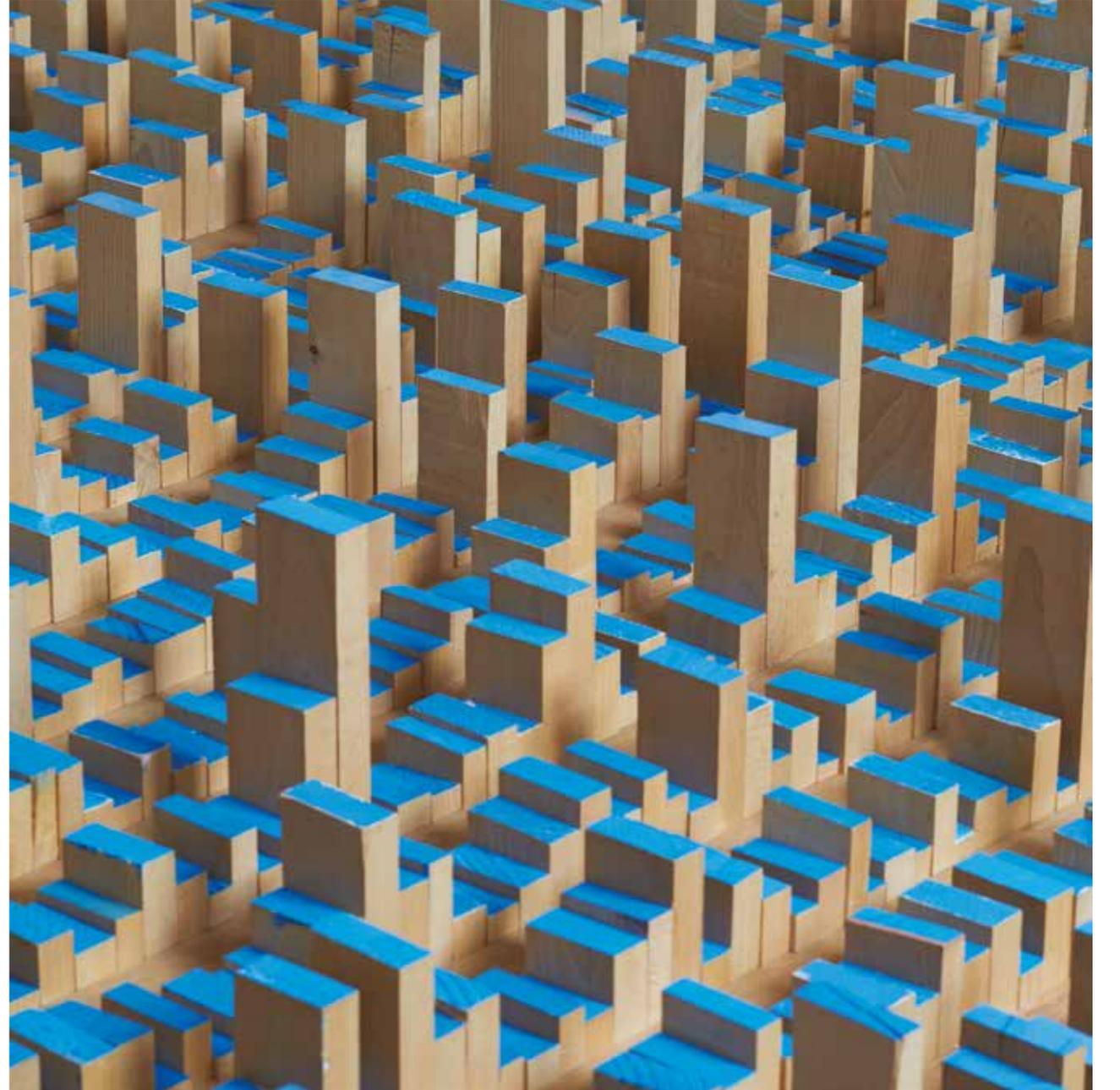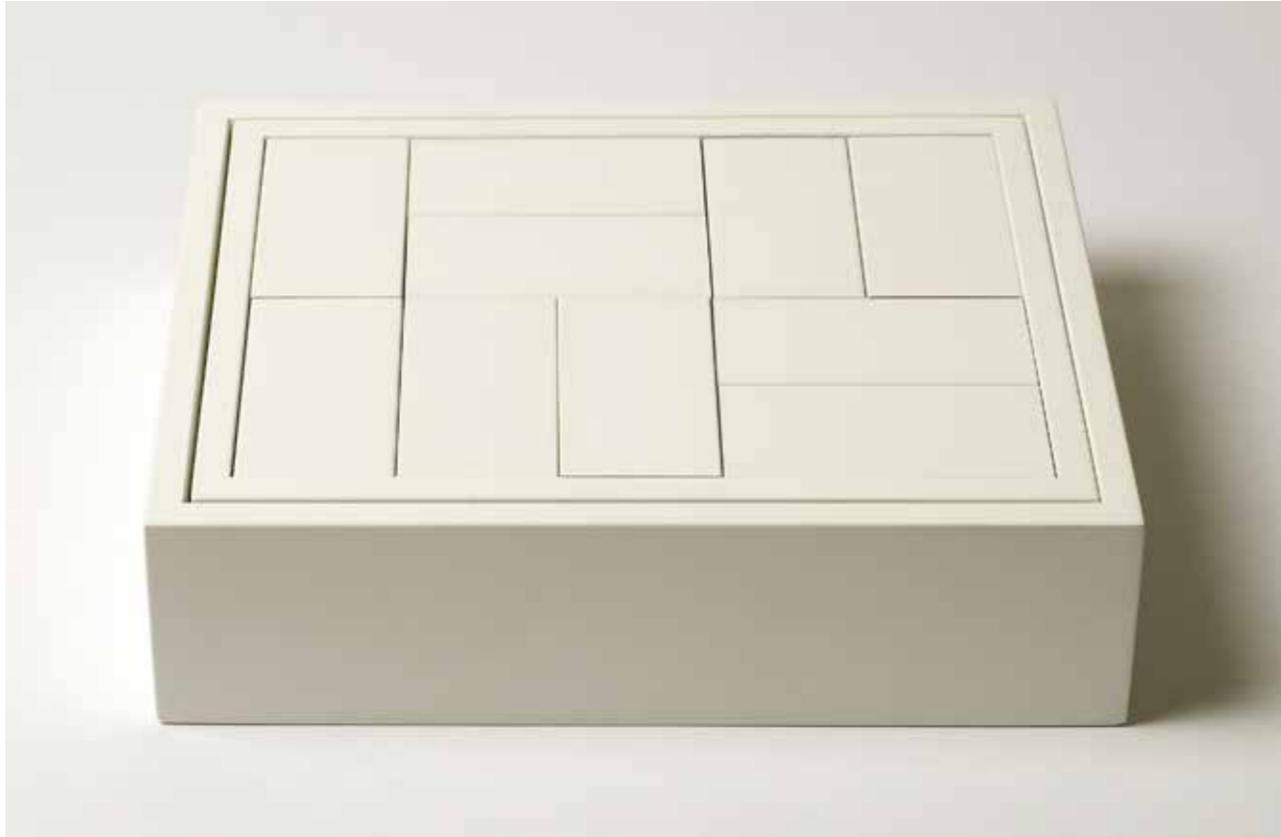
1 Time Spins 2014
   Digital print

2 Wallflower 2014
   Wallflower, steel, silver plate

3 Bling 2014
   Steel, silver plate

4 Utility 2014
   Voile, mdf

5 massed musical
   instruments 2014
   Tulipwood, cellulose paint,
   mdf

6 GGGone 2014
   Metal, wood

7 Fluted Comport 2014
   Vintage Dartington glass
   crystal

8 Box 2014
   Digital print

9 Balance Chair 2013
   Vintage chair, wood,
   plastic

10 Pyramid 2013
   Beechwood

11 Endless 2008
   Beechwood

12 Heart 2013
   Metal, tulipwood, cellulose
   paint

13 Fragments of Sappho
   series 2013
   Vintage Belgian black
   marble

14 In Tray 2013
   Metal, plastic, wood

15 the nothing new 2014
   Neon

16 Jesus Wept 2012
   Neon

17 Fewings' Ladder 2012
   Wood, lining paper

18 Mission 2012
   Metal, mdf

19 haus konstructive 2010
   Birch ply

20 Gift 2010
   Tulipwood, cellulose paint,
   mdf

21 Institute of Play 2010
   Tulipwood, cellulose paint

22 Seat 2009
   Foam rubber, birch ply

23 Tricolour 2009
   Foam rubber, lime brick

24 Archetypes 2009-10
   Foam rubber, tulipwood,
   cellulose paint, mdf

25 Gifts and
   Preoccupations
   series 2009
   Wood, cellulose paint

26 Metropolis 2008
   Beechwood

27 Blueprint (detail) 2008
   Ash wood

28 Herbert Read Gallery
   2008

   Chicane
   Gloss paint on canvas

   Blueprint (detail)
   Tulipwood, beechwood,
   cellulose paint, mdf

Colin Booth lives and works in St Leonards on Sea and has a well-established practice as a sculptor exhibiting nationally and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions have included: *Metropolis*, Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury 2009; *Measure and Intuition*, 1 Canada Square, London 2010; Institute of Play, a major commission for the V&A Museum of Childhood, London 2010; *Institute of Play and Other Collections*, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne 2011. His work was included in *International Sculpture* at Sanyi Wood Sculpture Museum in Taiwan 2012 and he produced *Jesus Wept*, a neon text commission for the SPACE, St Leonards on Sea 2012-13. This year, a neon text piece, *the nothing new 2014* was commissioned by StrangeCargo for Cheriton Lights, Folkestone. He was represented by UpDown Gallery at *ART 14* in London. His work was included in *Cities of Ash* at g39 in Cardiff and he had a solo show *Time Spins*, at one one six gallery, Tenterden, Kent.
www.colinbooth.com

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