

Thomas Allen

3-D

INTRODUCTION

Remember those plastic viewer key chains with a diorama (sometimes a naughty one) secreted away inside, promising a world at once real and make-believe, inspiring you to grab whoever browsed alongside at Souvenir City and say, “Hey, look at *this*”?

Thomas Allen’s work wants to flip the same switch in the viewer’s mind. His photographed tableaux of carved-out characters from the covers of old books—usually pulp fiction novels—are inspired by his obsession for some of the familiar pre-techno delights of a midcentury childhood: snow globes, 3-D glasses, floating pens, the View-Master, and, certainly, the pop-up book.

“I loved pop-up books,” Allen says in the January/February 2007 issue of *Art on Paper*. “I still do. I used to make dioramas in shoe boxes, too. I just loved the way you could feel as if you were in it by putting your face up close. It’s about making and experiencing alternative realities.”

In *3-D*, the sensational world of crime novels, westerns, and romances is the one Allen remakes and brings up close. He uses an X-acto knife to free the characters from their two-dimensional scenes, then arranges them—using wire, tape, and straight pins—into new dramas that amplify, complicate, and subvert the original subject and mood. He completes the effect by photographing his creations with a 4 x 5 camera, using lighting, soft focus, and shallow depth of field—but, as he has pointed out, “no digital, post-camera effects.”

“Allen begins with symbols that most would consider kitsch,” Jean Dykstra writes in *Art on Paper*, and his photographs “celebrate the particular qualities of the pulp-fiction novel—it is cheap and disposable, a little tawdry, and unfailingly entertaining. But there is more to Allen’s images than simple amusement. His photographs have to do with the way books come to life for

their readers. By creating scenes in which the action is distilled to its essence . . . Allen reminds viewers what is so compelling about a good story.”

Thomas Allen was born in Detroit. He earned his BFA from Wayne State University in 1991 and his MFA from the University of Minnesota in 1996.

His photographs have been exhibited at the Foley Gallery in New York, Thomas Barry Fine Arts in Minneapolis, and the Grand Rapids Museum of Fine Arts, and they are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Milwaukee Museum of Art, and the Target Corporation. Allen’s work has appeared in *Zoetrope*, *Harper’s*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review* and on the cover of three James Ellroy novels. His book *Uncovered: Photographs by Thomas Allen* is forthcoming from Aperture this fall.

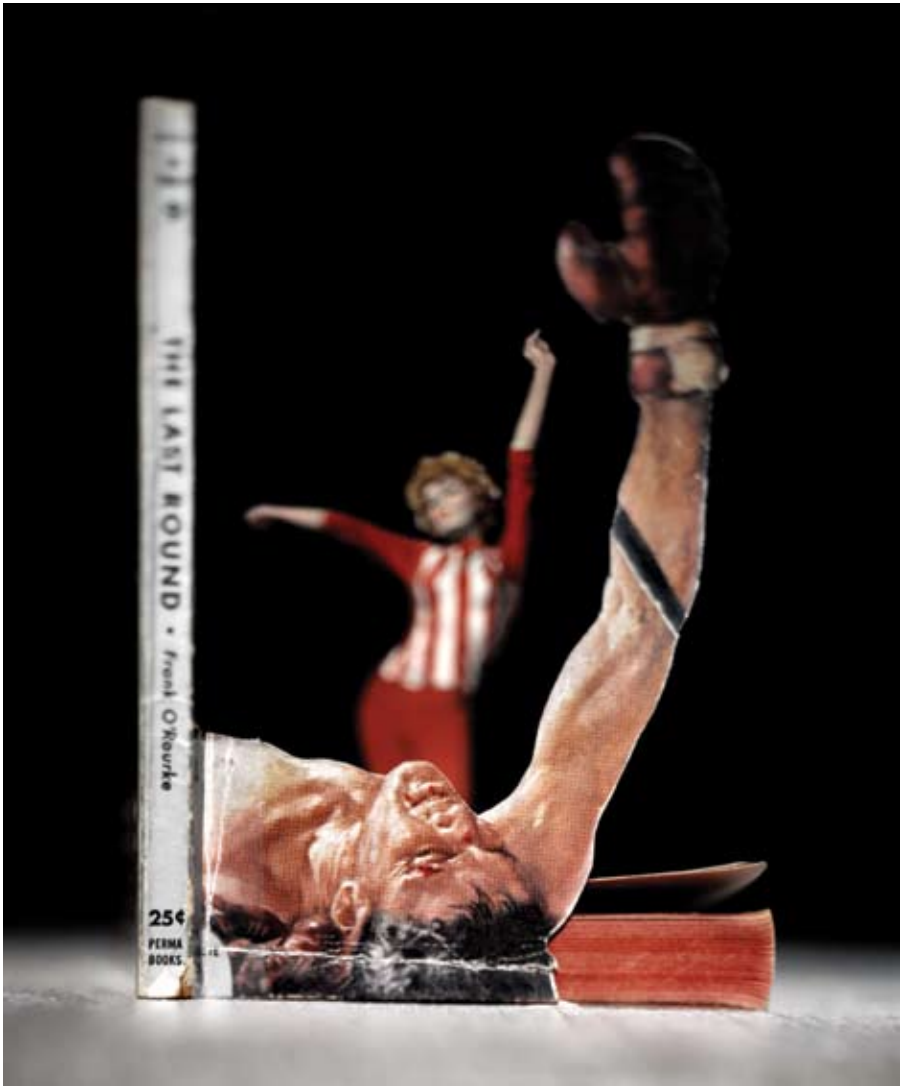
The images here are chromogenic prints, 20” x 24”.

M.W.

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Stranger (2006)



Knockout (2006)



Red (2002)



Distraction (2006)



Mate (2006)



Fancy (2006)



Uplift (2004)



Topple (2006)