



My Studio

WORLDS IN A BOX

The popular artist and printmaker **John Dilnot** may not like to be put into a box, but his suburban Brighton studio is full of them, containing the unusual self-contained worlds that make up his most popular works. Words: **Clare Barry**

ON A QUIET BRIGHTON back street, amid a row of ordinary terraced houses, lies a rather unusual residence. The walls are hung with boxes and prints; little books, kits and cards are dotted about everywhere. A number of screen prints mimic the aesthetic of the Victorian naturalist's specimen trays – although here the rows of moths, butterflies and beetles are so brightly coloured that the insects seem to be brought back to life.

This is the studio of John Dilnot, an artist interested in the way in which we label and classify nature, dissecting and recording facts, while all the time nature itself “just gets on with it”. The theme of classification also

resonates on a personal level. Having first trained as a graphic designer, Dilnot then went on to study fine art and printmaking; by utilising craft techniques and working in different forms and media, both Dilnot and his art resist being easily labelled.

While some have tried to pigeonhole him as either a fine artist, craftsman or printmaker, he is quite happy not to define himself in this way.

“It’s not me,” he says. “I like the idea of trying to create a collection of work that is not made from one material, and people are beginning to appreciate work across different mediums and processes.”

Dilnot is perhaps best known for his box works, a form that has fascinated him since

his college days. There is something about making a “little self-contained world behind glass that can’t be tampered with” that appeals to him. Dilnot finds inspiration in a wide range of sources – from found objects, maps and travel posters to packaging and illustrated children’s dictionaries.

His work explores our relationship with nature, how we experience the world around us, how we represent it and ultimately impact on it. Although he has seen awareness of environmental issues increase in the last couple of years, these are concerns that have been central in Dilnot’s practice from the start. Some works explore our interaction with nature on a very direct level. *White Poplars* shows digital images of trees

with graffiti carved into their bark, while *Urban Trees* gathers together photographs of trees cut down, fenced off and covered in fly-posters. Another eye grabbing screen print simply proclaims "Please Recycle".

A book of line drawings, *Estate*, was produced to accompany an installation at Oldham Art Gallery in 1991. It depicts numerous featureless, box-like houses crammed together around tiny green spaces or with trees trying to squeeze through the gaps. In the wake of the current housing crisis it has as much relevance today as ever.

The artist's graphic training is evident in much of his work. He is drawn to printed

material as witnessed by his shelves of reference books. He says he would rather look at an illustrated image of a bird than draw one directly from nature, and many of his works have a stylised, striking visual quality. Even the wooden frames of his boxes are covered with rubbings taken from his floorboards, creating a more exaggerated wood-grain effect than the real material.

A wry humour underlies much of Dilnot's work. The potatoes featured in his 'Potato Prints' were actually each printed from the variety they represent. Ironically, this was a much more laborious process than the rudimentary technique taught in primary schools. Each potato was printed over and over in layers, with ink added and removed to build up the depth and highlights until he achieved a sophisticated representation of the real thing.

"I went through bags of spuds," Dilnot jokes. "It took forever. I wish I'd made more of them at the time, because it's the sort of thing you never want to do again."

A small pamphlet Dilnot produced listing his book works also raises a smile. On the bright yellow cover is one of his cow head

motifs, printed in overlapping, misaligned layers of red and green, just like one of Andy Warhol's *Camouflage* paintings. There is a playfulness about much of his work and an open approach to experimentation that means he is as interested in producing a box as he is a coloured-pencil drawing or rubber-stamped book.

Dilnot's work blurs distinctions between art and craft, conflating notions of 'high' and 'low' art. His work is to be found in some of the most eminent collections in the world – it appeared in the recent *Mapping The Imagination* exhibition at the V&A and last year he was commissioned to design a Christmas card for the Tate. Yet it remains democratic and accessible: his limited-edition books can be bought for under £10.

Although he is certainly very busy, he mentions that he has been thinking recently about experimenting with a larger-scale piece that incorporates multiple printing techniques. It is clear above all that Dilnot loves making and the creative freedom afforded by working over multiple disciplines.

"Often I have an idea and then work across. You make the print of it, the book of it, the kit of it, the card of it..."

He laughs. "It might even fit in a box."

John Dilnot's studio will be open to the public on 6-7 and 13-14 December (07816 205657). His work can be seen at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London. See www.johndilnot.com and www.r-h-g.co.uk

