

THE BLUE NOTEBOOK

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We welcome submissions of writing on contemporary artists' books and related issues for *The Blue Notebook*. Please email Sarah.Bodman@uwe.ac.uk for guidelines, or see: www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/bnotebk.htm

Artists' contributions are by invitation from the Art Editor, Tom Sowden.

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Coastal Journey box work, detail, John Dilnot



Country Cottages painting detail, John Dilnot



Out of the trees and into the wood
book detail, John Dilnot

**From potato to digital, always experimental:
John Dilnot and his book works**

Linda Newington
University of Southampton Library

I am writing as a Librarian with a Fine Art degree and have worked with Special Collections throughout my professional career commencing in my first post at the Natural History Museum with botanical paintings, prints and drawings, with Fine Printed Books at Camberwell followed by the Artists' Books Collection at Winchester School of Art. Most recently I have been working with the Knitting Collections held by the University of Southampton Library which include the Knitting Reference Library based at Winchester.

Today I find myself taking an evangelical approach to working with collections in a library context; they remain at the heart of my professional practice even though libraries are constantly being re-branded and urged towards change and transformation. The book, however, is surviving and thriving. It has been taking many shapes and forms since its earliest inception and appears to be a long term survivor alongside current new derivations and all the possible predictive forms it may yet take in the twenty-first century.

The work of John Dilnot connects with my interests in natural history, artists' books and the practice of making that is concerned with the themes of childhood, nostalgia, nature and the everyday. The Artists' Books Collection at Winchester has been developed over four decades and has benefited from early acquisitions with books made in the 1960s and 1970s. The collection has continued to grow since that time with the focus today on contemporary artists; it includes an extensive range of book works by Dilnot.

Dilnot has been a practising artist for many years; he remembers making art work as a young child. He first studied Graphic Design at Canterbury College of Art and Design where he made a one-off book in the 1970s. Later, at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, he received his Fine Art degree and immediately enrolled in the postgraduate Printmaking course there. Who knows, our paths may have crossed at Camberwell where I was working as a Librarian in the 1980s when he was a post-graduate student. Perhaps our visits to the Coracle Press located in Camberwell at that time coincided?

The earliest book held in the Artists' Books Collection by Dilnot is from 1985 and is entitled *Out of the trees and into the wood*. It is one of the first books he made whilst at Camberwell and was purchased from the Nigel

Greenwood Gallery in London. In comparison the latest Dilnot acquisition for the Artists' Books Collection is a bird box with a flock of swallows swooping across a background map of the Solent. It was commissioned especially for the collection and acquired direct from the artist this year. The interval between these two works reveal Dilnot's early interest in the book form and an enduring, even stubborn, commitment over several decades to making book works. This is for Dilnot an essential activity that enables him to create accessible and democratic pieces; he could never give it up. Although these terms are now commonly used to describe books by other artists, Dilnot's book works have for some time been widely available in galleries and shops across the UK and they remain reasonably priced. This is part of their aesthetic, an aesthetic which also involves cheap, low-tech production with no wastage, affordability and distribution through accessible retail outlets.

Out of the trees and into the wood takes the form of a concertina which may be pulled out from the book covers that are made of corrugated cardboard to create a manipulated but recognisable book form. It is screen printed comprising 18 drawn images focusing on the motif of a tree; a reoccurring theme in Dilnot's work. The wood and leaves of this tree create imaginary images for the reader in a visual narrative which links these materials to a selection of everyday objects we may come across again and again, but which are reinvented: milk cartons become book-ends, books become flying objects, leaping or falling, to catching the imagination - or to land on our heads. Clearly, some of these images are not without humour, but Dilnot also subtly juxtaposes material objects to raise questions. Materials such as corrugated cardboard, alongside brown paper and string are now a common feature of the fashionably current simple Zen style of packaging and wrapping. Once shunned as too basic, maybe even a sign of poverty and making-do, here they are utilised by Dilnot to create a book that effectively invites the reader, "Look inside my covers, explore my concertina. I am not too precious - and you can take me home".

Dilnot is an artist who is able to combine the sensibility and skills from both graphic design and fine art to produce interesting and varied forms utilising and merging different techniques in creating a distinct identity for the work. The forms, whether books, boxes, cards, maps, paintings, prints, scrapbooks or even wallpaper, become the messengers for his preoccupations: the everyday, the visualisation of nature when working in an urban environment and the intentional use of nostalgia. A further distinctive and integral part of this identity is to be found in the method of production which is print; from potato to digital, hand to machine, no processes are excluded.



Winter Buds, John Dilnot



Printing wallpaper in the studio



Little Book Series, John Dilnot



Potato Prints, detail, John Dilnot

The artist's imagery presented in the book form has included scenes of rural life on food packaging, the signs of urban nature in the world on the doorstep, along the street, in the backyard or the front garden. Inspiration is both at home and close to home, also to-hand in the artist's personal library located in his studio at Phoenix House in Brighton. The artist has not necessarily needed to travel afar; instead, looking out his kitchen window or walking along a nearby street, all are potential and valid sources of imagery for him.



Bad Apples digital print detail, John Dilnot

The use of books, magazines, ephemera and libraries has also been a constant presence forming a key part of his working practice. Early memories have contributed to a partial reinvention of childhood surfacing in content and form sometimes sourced from the studio library which serves as both an anchor to the past time of childhood, and a source for new work. This approach is not totally knowing or always intentional and may take many guises. Sometimes it is amused or nostalgic and, of course in the 21st century, ironic. However nostalgia is a serious subject for Dilnot and his personal library provides inspiration from the 19th century through to the 1970s offering endless images and views as a means to source the past. This may provide the reader with a re-interpretation whilst also introducing a sense of

play and fun alongside the more serious although subtly hidden concerns about our relationship with the material world.

Dilnot's personal library described by him as 'raw material' includes the classic *Children's Encyclopaedia* by Arthur Mee, a selection of the *Ladybird* nature books, old school text books on geography and science, and many books collected from charity shops since the 1980s for their interesting graphic design. He has also collected original packaging which is kept in a series of scrapbooks forming part of the artist's archive, a rich and unique primary source again of raw material. This interest in resources is mirrored by other contemporary artists seen in the new work emanating from those working directly with archives to create new pieces, or in curating exhibitions of specific collections. It is also seen in the primary sources which comprise the Artists' Archive housed and accessible to the public in the Tate Archive and Library at Tate Britain. It raises questions for collectors, including librarians, about what is acquired and retained, catalogued and made accessible to current and future researchers whether in an academic context or to the wider public. Should there be an elite of public collections, is the everyday to be dismissed as not a part of the nationally collected culture?

Dilnot remembers spending as much time as possible in the Arts Council Bookshop, once located in Long Acre, when he was working in London in the early 1980s as a graphic designer - which he happily left to take up a place at Camberwell on the Fine Art course.

At Camberwell the bookshop was replaced by the Library, where he spent time looking through everything of interest and where he first came across the works of Ed Ruscha and Fluxus. Along the road and close by was Coracle which he found and frequented taking part in a group show "Low-Tech". At this time he also started making constructions including boxes. It is not particularly surprising, then, that Dilnot's degree show in 1984 included diverse works (except paintings).

He identifies the sense of tension he felt at art school as a creative and motivating force. This sense of tension manifests itself in the diversification of his materials, processes and variety of work.

Often viewed as sentimental, nostalgia has been predominantly shaped by a contemporary and prevailing sense of irony but it is not the only interpretation of that sensibility available to us today. Nostalgia is being studied by current researchers in the School of Psychology at the University of Southampton. Their conclusions identify nostalgia as a positive source of inspiration for both young and old and a sign of self esteem. It is viewed as an important contributor to building and developing memory and



Ten English Homes, box of cards, John Dilnot



Ten English Homes, installation at Cornerhouse, detail, John Dilnot



Ten English Homes, installation
at Cornerhouse
John Dilnot

a sense of identity. In relation to English clothing that has a nostalgic influence the now fashionably labelled “Anglomania” serves to illustrate a collective rehabilitation of a particular style looking to the past for inspiration whilst being fashionably reinvented by contemporary nationally recognised designers such as Paul Smith and Vivienne Westwood. They are both inventive users of the past using resources that may be found in our national network of libraries. Paul Smith himself is inspired by the everyday, as revealed in his biography *You can find inspiration in everything (and if you can't look again)* and has acquired work by John Dilnot to both display and sell in his shops.

The theme of nostalgia is apparent in a 1991 work by Dilnot entitled *Ten English Homes* made specifically to accompany an installation at the Cornerhouse, Manchester. It included a window installation comprising four pyramids of mock boxed products onto which were printed images of a house set in a landscape. The primary source for this work was packaging which the artist intentionally altered and subverted to re-use in a different format, provoking a strong sense of nostalgia for homes that probably never existed or existed only in the collective, public imagination. A set of ten cards is packaged in an oblong box; the images on the ten cards are simplified shapes, depicted in bright and vivid colours. They represent the idealised scene of bungalow, cottage and house set in pastoral green hills, amidst perfectly shaped trees beneath blue skies and fluffy clouds. We should remember these images were first part of an idealised picture of country life from an anonymous graphic designer. They were designed to sell quintessential English dairy products to us, the consumers of milk, butter and cheese, from “real dairy herds”. We now have Johnny Rotten, the former prince of punk, appearing on our television screens as a country gentleman representing Englishness in the evergreen countryside. Thus the advertisers of Country Life make knowing use of a romantic but somewhat tarnished idyll and idol.

Dilnot’s obsession with trees is shown in two contrasting views. The tree may symbolise an idyllic, nostalgic and green view of the English countryside or it may offer a quite different view, such as that presented in the *Urban Trees Series*, specifically January dated 1999, with its thirteen photographs of Christmas trees found discarded in Brighton. These Christmas trees acquired for that short festive season have been abandoned and left to be collected and possibly, but not necessarily, recycled. Their demise is sadly evocative of a short life, and here Dilnot presents them, without sentiment, brutally portraying the once-festive trees as stumps, tattered remains, cut-up or trapped, all skeletons of their former selves. These images are



January from the Urban Tree Series, detail, John Dilnot

innocently bound in a simple paperback depicting a jolly, colourful image of a classic Christmas tree with baubles, snow and stars. The theme of nature as utilised by Dilnot may appear welcoming and fun but there is also a dark side as the Christmas tree itself has been coloured black. Nature as a subject is another national obsession, with natural history programmes perennially popular and championed by the public. A fact also displayed in the reverence for the national treasures of Charles Darwin and David Attenborough.

The box as a form has long been a part of Dilnot’s practice, his current success with boxes having developed gradually over a number of years. It is of course debatable as to whether these are bookworks but this is not my concern here; the debate about definitions of artists’ books is taking place elsewhere.



A selection of John Dilnot’s rubber stamps

Dilnot’s boxes are available through the Rebecca Hossack Gallery and although they do not have the affordability of Dilnot’s book works they are part of his approach to making contemporary art that is not concerned with a single material realisation.



Above and below: *Ten English Homes*, box of cards, John Dilnot



These new bigger boxes are identified by the artist as playing a key part in pushing his work to the limit and continuing with experimentation.

Dilnot's home itself comprises in part a working studio which houses a range of ink-jet printers alongside potatoes and rubber stamps. At his open studios, books, boxes, prints, and cards jostle for attention with stacks, shelves, and containers holding paper, twigs, stamps and wood. Yet the artist is never satisfied, he is now thinking about new work and is focusing on ideas for large screen prints and colour pencil drawings.

He continues to experiment and give us new images and objects that voice his preoccupations. He seems to go both backwards and forwards at the same time, comfortable with either, or working the past together with the present, whilst looking forward to the future.

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John Dilnot's work can be viewed online at:
www.johndilnot.com

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