

Thomas Allen BY YAELLE AMIR

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In Thomas Allen's "New Releases" series of chromogenic prints, the artist brings to life characters extracted from the covers of vintage pulp fiction, mixing it up in straightforward yet moderately kinky scenarios. Scenes of lust, longing, and betrayal take shape with the aid of theatrical lighting and various focal depths, confirming one of Allen's self-proclaimed inspirations—pop-up or View-Master books.

To make his assemblages, Allen gathers several books, juxtaposes two or three figures from different covers, and then slices their outline with an X-acto knife. But rather than neatly excising these figures, he leaves an outside strip or hinge to be later folded and used to arrange them into various positions. Once the composition is complete, he photographs it with a large-format camera. The reconstructed scenes are enhanced with studio spotlights, as well as through sharpening and blurring various components. The figures never lose their point of reference, though, as the book to which they are connected ends up getting incorporated into the piece, turning a spine, worn page, or title into prop-like dividers, tables, and floors.

Extremely playful in nature, these scenes project a light-hearted, almost benign atmosphere. Many present figures in natural settings, as in *Mate* (all work 2006) where one sailor can be seen drinking at a table while another in the back gets tattooed. Yet Allen is most successful when offering hybrid genres and unexpected, conflicting narratives. In *Breathtaking* (2006), an astronaut in a glass helmet stares outwards while a blurry vixen grooves in the background, arms stretched above her head and bosoms perked forward. In *Fancy* (2006), an eye-catching blonde bombshell performs on stage unbeknownst to a nearby family of four playing the piano and singing.

Yet even if Allen's partially obscured fragments don't reflect unresolved personal conflict, their sub-themes do tend to challenge the whole morality play of his cast of heroes and heroines. In *Distraction* (2006), for instance, the image of a shadowy male figure nonchalantly smoking and reading a newspaper while a spotlit dude undresses behind him dissolves the couple in the sexual ambiguity of separated agendas. In several prints, Allen manages to offset the figures' static appearance with dynamic staging and lighting. Sometimes their expressions are so moving, one forgets that they are cut out of paper rather than portrayed from real life. This is most evident in *Fury* (2006), in which two women are in the midst of a physical brawl, one slapping the other so hard that she stumbles backwards, knocking over a chair. Other works depict a quiet yet intense moment of intimacy, as in *Explorer* (2006) where a soldier timidly approaches a woman from behind. Both these vignettes contain a mysterious undertow true to the characters' literary origins.

Allen cuts pulp fiction "covers" along the dotted line of their intrinsically disposable nature. However, the manner in which he employs them at once celebrates their unique flavor, yet also transforms them into bizarre fetish objects. In so doing, they seem to embody some dream come true, stirring up memories of what we perceive to be the very epitome of fantasy life.