

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACKER SCHOPF GALLERY

# A THOUSAND WORDS

IF A PICTURE IS WORTH THAT,  
WHAT HAPPENS IF A SCULPTURE IS MADE OF JUST AS MANY?

TEXT HUANG NICKMATUL

**FACING PAGE**  
*SCIENCE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*, 2009,  
 ALTERED BOOK  
**RIGHT**  
 BRIAN DETTMER IN HIS STUDIO  
**BOTTOM**  
*HARMONY HOUSE*, 2008, ALTERED WALLPAPER  
 SAMPLE BOOK

**BRIAN DETTMER'S AMAZING** art works come from exploring the interiors of books like how an archaeologist or a spelunker would explore a new territory that they hope would hold treasures: layer by layer, page by page, he carefully selects and removes pieces and chunks of material to uncover what he calls a book's "hidden, fragmented memory". Fresh perspectives and relationships between ideas and concepts in different parts of the books are revealed, and interact in a precise yet astonishingly dynamic manner.

The 35-year-old American, who has a bachelor's degree in art and design/art history from Columbia College, Chicago, began first exploring the idea of sculpting books a few short years ago but they sparked his – and his audience's – imagination with such fire that today these book sculptures are the ones Dettmer is best known for. At the *HC* headquarters, we love them for being both beautiful and thought-provoking, but just as importantly, for being a courageous exploration of vision, ideals and the boundaries of art. They're also very eco-friendly as these materials would otherwise have been tossed in a trash bin somewhere.



Besides books, Dettmer also works with cassette tapes and maps – melting, cutting and reconstructing to create sculptures that are often surprising, sometimes charmingly delicate and on a few occasions, eerie. His map sculptures are also arresting pieces: fragile, slender threads that tenderly offer up some wild ideas in both abstract and concrete forms.

To date, Dettmer appears to have done hundreds of his complicated art pieces, obviously none of which can be mass-produced, and no less than five different galleries carry his works for sale, so we were pleasantly surprised that this busy bee actually responded to our overtures and agreed to an interview!

**WHEN AND HOW DID YOU FIRST GET THIS IDEA OF SCULPTING BOOKS?**

About 10 years ago, all of my work was focused on language and the cliché of art as a 'universal language'. I was working on some collage painting, ripping up newspapers and applying them to the surface of the canvas. I liked the idea of the surface actually holding information that was no longer accessible in the same way and I wanted to work with books to produce paintings that contained specific ideas without a narrative. This led to ripping up books for my work. I felt guilty about this and began to think about the role of the books, and to explore its physical possibilities. I would seal books and turn them into solid objects with the idea of approaching them as a raw material. This began my focus on books and it has evolved from there.



PICTURE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KINZ+TILLOU FINE ART



**HOW DO YOU MAKE EACH BOOK SCULPTURE DIFFERENT? THAT IS, HOW DO YOU DECIDE ON THE FORM AND SHAPE THAT THE BOOK SHOULD TAKE?**

The form and the shape often depend on the content the book contains. The shape I push usually suggests some ideas I have about the book's role or position. Also, the type of book, its original shape, the type of paper and the book's history all give me ideas on ways I can approach it.

**ARE THERE ANY SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS YOU HAVE TO TAKE?**

I am always conscious about the relationship between illusion and honesty, and the relationship between ownership, authorship and intervention.

**YOU USE OTHER MATERIALS, NOT JUST BOOKS...**

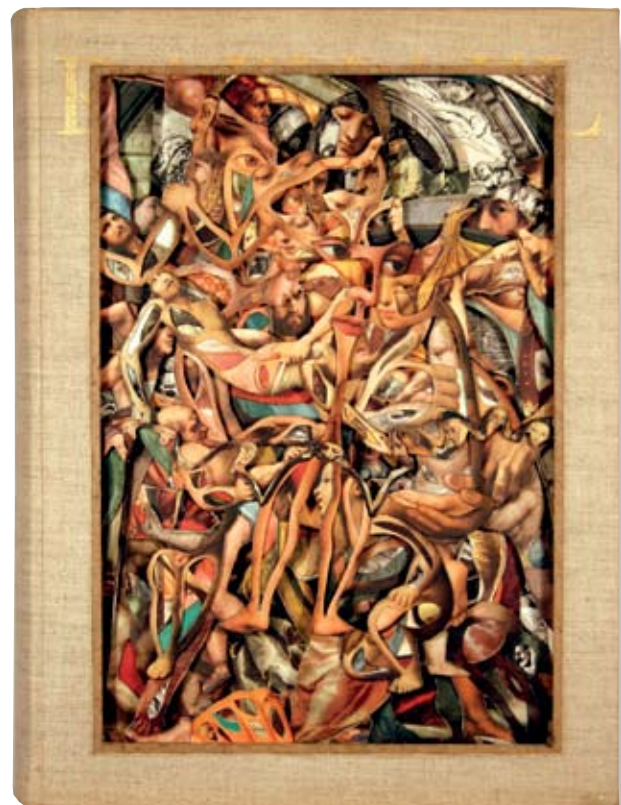
Working with books has influenced the way I view and approach other types of physical information and media that are currently threatened by newer forms or methods. I have always been interested in the beauty of maps and the fact that cassette tapes are a material we no longer use: they are so loaded with pre-existing ideas because of the content and the role of the material. As the physicality of our information, entertainment and art is slipping, we are left with these materials that we no longer use. They have great meaning within and they have meant a lot to us. There are limitless ways to keep them as a part of our memory and out of the landfills.

**WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR BOOKS?**

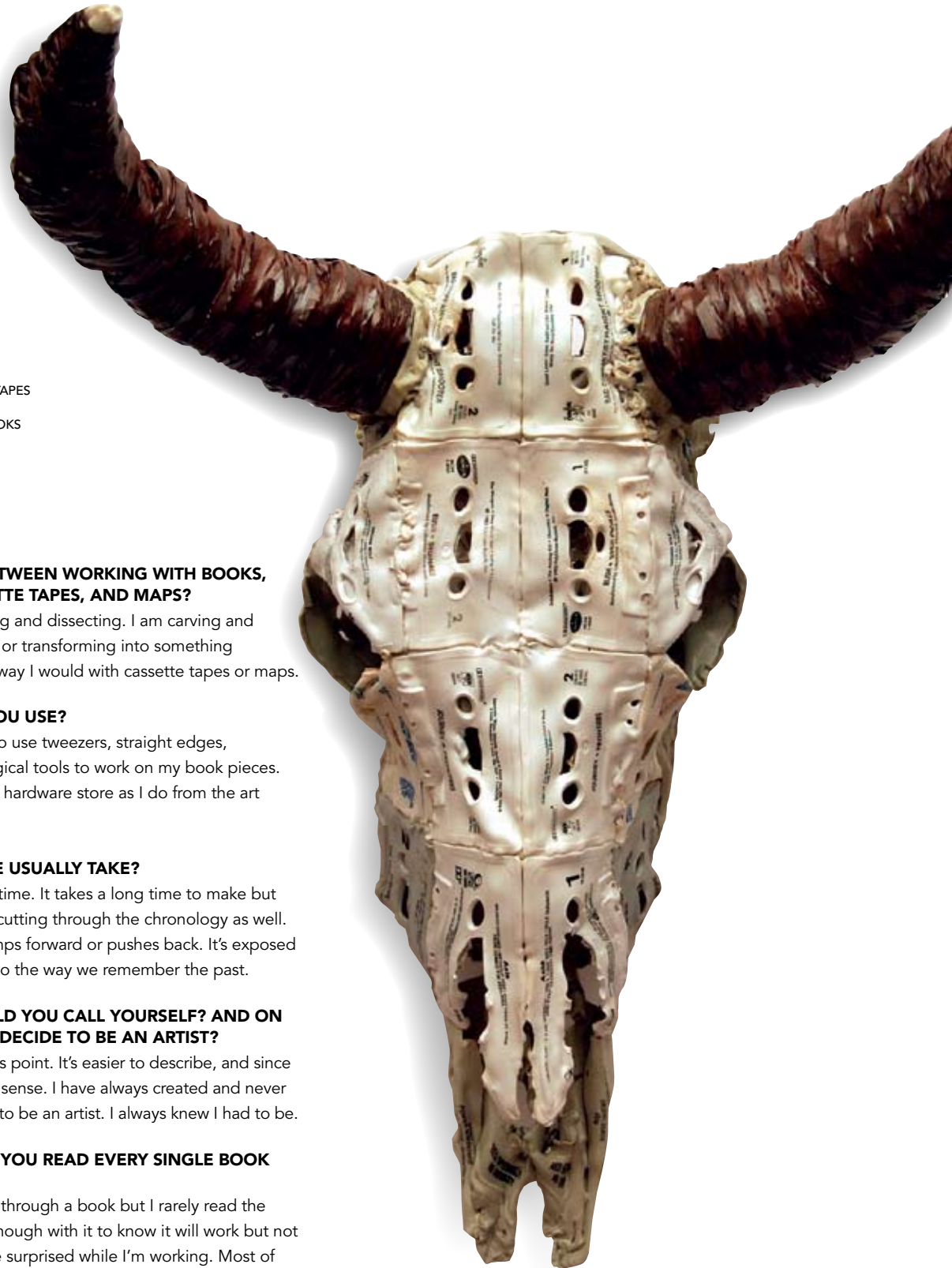
I get my books from all over. Sometimes I will have an idea and I'll seek the perfect book to work for my idea; sometimes I will come across a book that inspires me to work with it. I go to a lot of estate sales, garage sales, vintage and used bookstores, flea markets and thrift shops, and sometimes I shop online if I know what I am looking for.

**WHAT IS YOUR DESIGN PROCESS?**

I am very honest about my process because I think that it is part of what the work is about. I seal a book up after forming it so that it is solid before I begin carving. I have no control or no idea over what comes up on the next page while I am working. I can't control what happens next; I can only control the way I respond to it. Everything in a finished piece is where it was before. I don't move or add anything. I only carve and remove what I don't want. This is important to me because it lets the book dictate what happens as much as I do. It becomes an honest collaboration.



BOTH IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KINZ + TILLOU FINE ART



**RIGHT**

*BULL SKULL*, 2007, ALTERED CASSETTE TAPES

**FACING PAGE LEFT**

*THE NEW CENTURY*, 2008, ALTERED BOOKS

**FACING PAGE RIGHT**

*RAPHAEL*, 2008, ALTERED BOOK

**WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WORKING WITH BOOKS, AND WORKING WITH CASSETTE TAPES, AND MAPS?**

With books, I am normally sealing and dissecting. I am carving and removing rather than re-forming or transforming into something completely new or different the way I would with cassette tapes or maps.

**WHAT KIND OF TOOLS DO YOU USE?**

I use a lot of X-Acto blades. I also use tweezers, straight edges, sandpaper, other knives and surgical tools to work on my book pieces. I buy just as many tools from the hardware store as I do from the art supply store.

**HOW LONG DOES ONE PIECE USUALLY TAKE?**

My work isn't really about linear time. It takes a long time to make but as I cut through the space, I am cutting through the chronology as well. Time becomes fractured and jumps forward or pushes back. It's exposed in a non-linear structure, similar to the way we remember the past.

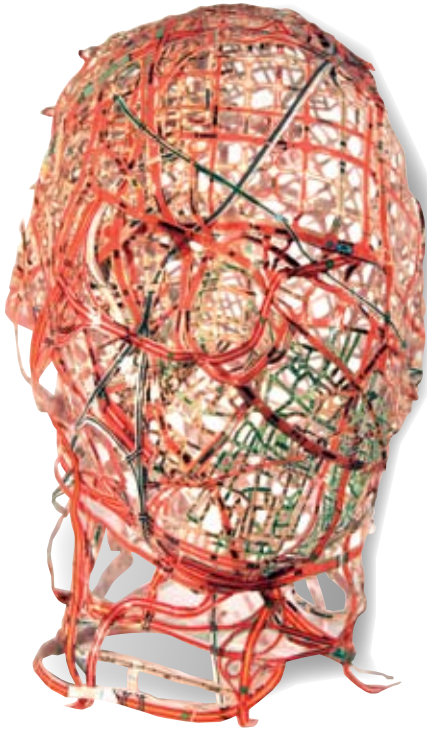
**WHAT KIND OF ARTIST WOULD YOU CALL YOURSELF? AND ON THAT NOTE, WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO BE AN ARTIST?**

I consider myself a sculptor at this point. It's easier to describe, and since I am making sculptures, it makes sense. I have always created and never knew a moment when I decided to be an artist. I always knew I had to be.

**JUST OUT OF CURIOSITY, DO YOU READ EVERY SINGLE BOOK THAT YOU SCULPT?**

I read it with a knife. I always sift through a book but I rarely read the entire book. I become familiar enough with it to know it will work but not too familiar because I want to be surprised while I'm working. Most of the books I work with are reference books so they are not meant to be read from front to back. If I do work with fiction, I always read it before I work with it, or I listen to it on audiobook while I work.

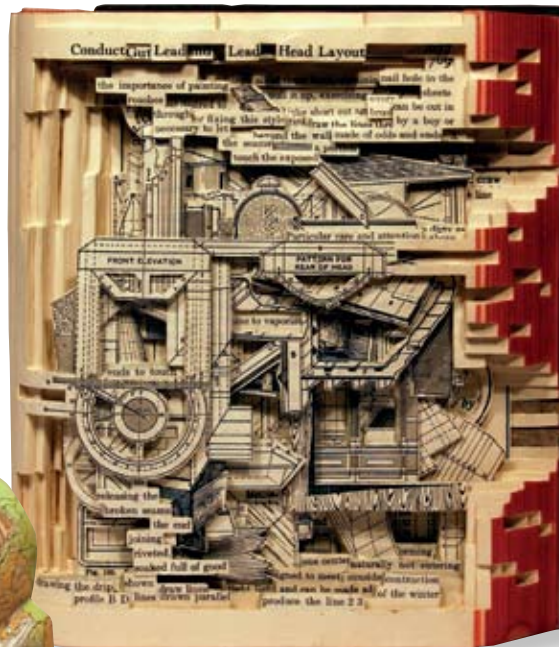
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITO GALLERY



ALL THREE IMAGES ON LEFT COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITO GALLERY



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PACKER SCHOPF GALLERY



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**  
*TRAVEL PLANS - BARCELONA*, 2008, ALTERED MAP; *NEW BOOKS OF KNOWLEDGE*, 2009, ALTERED SET OF ENCYCLOPAEDIAS; *PATTERN LAYOUTS*, 2007, ALTERED BOOK; *BRAVE NEW WORLD*, 2008, ALTERED BOOK; *NEW UNIVERSAL*, 2007, ALTERED BOOK



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TOOMEY TOURELL FINE ART

**ALL ARTISTS FACE CRITICISMS ABOUT THEIR WORK BUT YOU'VE FACED SOME PARTICULARLY HARSH ONES BECAUSE YOUR BASE MATERIALS ARE BOOKS: PEOPLE HAVE ACCUSED YOU OF BEING DESTRUCTIVE AND DISRESPECTFUL. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THESE CRITICISMS?**

The only criticism about working with books or 'destroying' them I have received has been online. I understand people's love of books and I love them too, so I always feel an obligation to put enough work into the piece to justify ending its previous life and to justify calling it my own.

I don't really think the complaint has any validity because I'm always working with material that has been mass produced and there are several copies out there. The books I work with are almost always out of date and only kept for their material value. Some people can't separate an idea from a material and they have no problem copying and pasting ideas all over the Internet, but they get upset when it comes to something material.

This is part of what my work is about. I want to create a visceral tension. Hopefully this will lead to more questions.

**IS THERE ANY BOOK THAT YOU FIND YOURSELF RETURNING TO OVER AND OVER?**

I am constantly returning to Webster's dictionaries because they are

so rich with information and the book itself is so physically rich. The randomness of alphabetised information aligns well with my process and approach.

**WHAT KIND OF RESPONSE HAS BEEN THE MOST MEANINGFUL TO YOU?**

There have been many great responses and it's amazing to see what people take from my work depending on their own experience with books. People tell me they could never look at a book the same way again and the fact that I'm creating something that shifts someone's perception and that they won't forget means a lot to me.


**HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF PROGRESSING IN YOUR ART?**

Right now, I'm continuing to focus on the book. I think I'll continue to explore the book and all the different ways it can be approached. I think it's limitless as a material. I have just finished a series of videos documenting and animating each layer being removed. I see these as actual works rather than as documentations of the work.


I'm also constantly investigating other modes of communication or information and thinking about how their functions shift and how the content relates to the carrier. There are limitless ways it could go but it's hard to nail down the position of a media when it is constantly shifting. **hc**

**Jewel Ashley Gallery** caters for the one who seeks pleasure in the fusion of contemporary living and modern sensuality. It opens the door and invites you to experience a euphoric state of artistic splendour. Ashley travels across the different regions around Asia and Europe to bring back products designed using her fine taste. With her French-Vietnamese origins, her product designs are inspired by both eastern and western culture. The gallery offers an ethnic essence of Ashley's signature - a range of carefully edited home accessories, has been appreciated by discerning customers from all over the world. With its in-house interior designers, Jewel Ashley Gallery provides interior consultancy to transform your house into a beautiful dream home! For those looking for individuality and unique furniture pieces, Jewel Ashley Gallery is able to custom-design furniture, wall features, landscape, lamps and many more to suit your taste at affordable prices. Don't take their word for it, make your way down and find out for yourself! Each month Jewel Ashley showcases art pieces by international artists. Ushering customers in for a further visual treat. Enjoy finely brewed Vietnamese coffee as you browse through the gallery. Pamper yourself, family or friends, and bring an Asian treasure home!

. interior design . custom designed furniture .




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Gallery

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Open: Mon to Sat: 10am - 7pm  
Sunday by appointment only



Ashley's Design