

ART FIRST

A NATURAL WORLD JACK MILROY



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JACK MILROY A NATURAL WORLD

Jack Milroy, now in his later 70s, remains what he has always been, a Conceptual Artist. And if Conceptual Art has become in the meantime something of a debased currency, that is just too bad, and nothing to do with him. Whilst his work has always been led by the idea, the concept, he is of that generation of artists (active since the early 1960s) for whom the perfunctory statement of an idea is insufficient to merit the appellation 'artwork'—a diagram, gesture or model is never enough. Of one thing you can be very sure: when you hear or read of 'an artwork', the last thing it is likely to be is a work of art. The idea of itself may be all very well, but to the Jacks of this world it still requires to be resolved, considered and achieved to become a work of art.

With Jack you never get anything less than that resolution. Yet sometimes the simplicity and directness of the presentation, in the raw material that Jack has always cannibalised for his work—torn-up reproductions of an Ingres portrait, deconstructed postage stamps, worn-out paintbrushes—can be disarming, and deceptive. Yet to it all there will always be that insidious elegance and visual wit, that after a moment come back to take you by pleasurable surprise: a sort of afterburn on the responsive mental retina like that finish on the palate that is, we understand, the mark of wine we can never afford.



Territorial Ambitions, 2014, cut book-page construction, 149 x 118 x 12,5 cm



Detail of **Territorial Ambitions**, 2014, cut book-page construction, 149 x 118 x 12.5 cm

And of course there are the books: ah yes, the illustrated books that, occasional experimental or comparative digressions apart, have been at once the principal working substance and imaginative preoccupation in his work these past 30 years or more. Few artists have similarly made The Book their own, as both material and subject. John Latham, in burning it, addressed it both sculpturally and as a cultural taboo. Tom Phillips, in his *Humument*, continues to quarry his way into a text. There are others. Jack simply opened the Victorian illustrated manual or textbook to discover and release a world of Nature—the birds and beasts, the trees and flowers, the fish, shells and rocks—enclosed within.

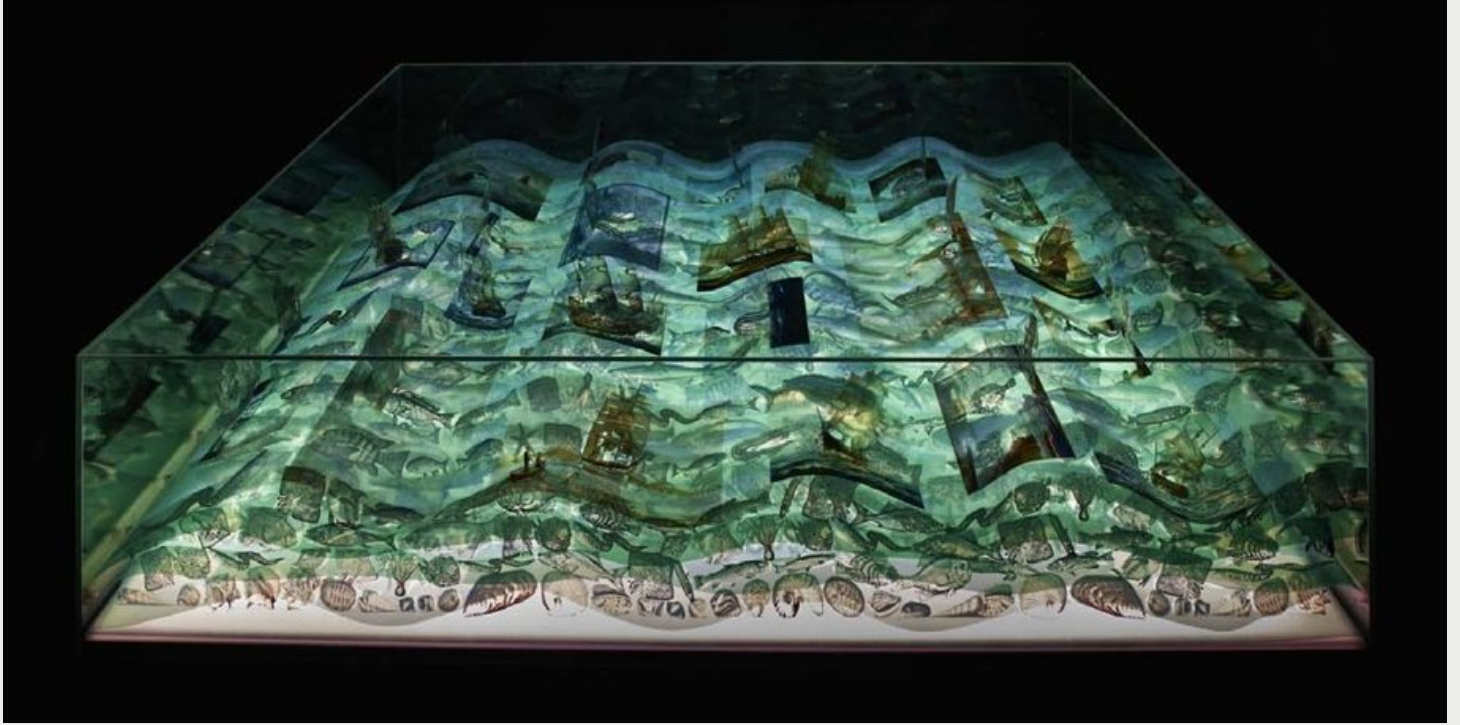
So his world has grown, ever more ambitious in the statement and endeavour, ever more varied and surprising, ever more beautiful. Sometimes the images thus released he has drawn, painted or photographed himself—but all are treated to the same precise, intricate consideration. Now a fallen, or merely falling, angel tumbles down the sky, now a mermaid, or just poor drowned Ophelia drifts through the weeds.

I have called Jack a Conceptual Artist, which in truth he is in that his work is led by the informing idea. Yet here lies an irony: for what results, far from being thus predetermined, always has to it, even so, a quality of surprise and inconsequentiality that is the character of surrealism. So is he, then, a Surrealist too? Who is to say? The visual puns and bizarre conjunctions might suggest as much: but Jack himself has always resisted such close description, and so should we. He is just a true artist, which is the greater compliment.

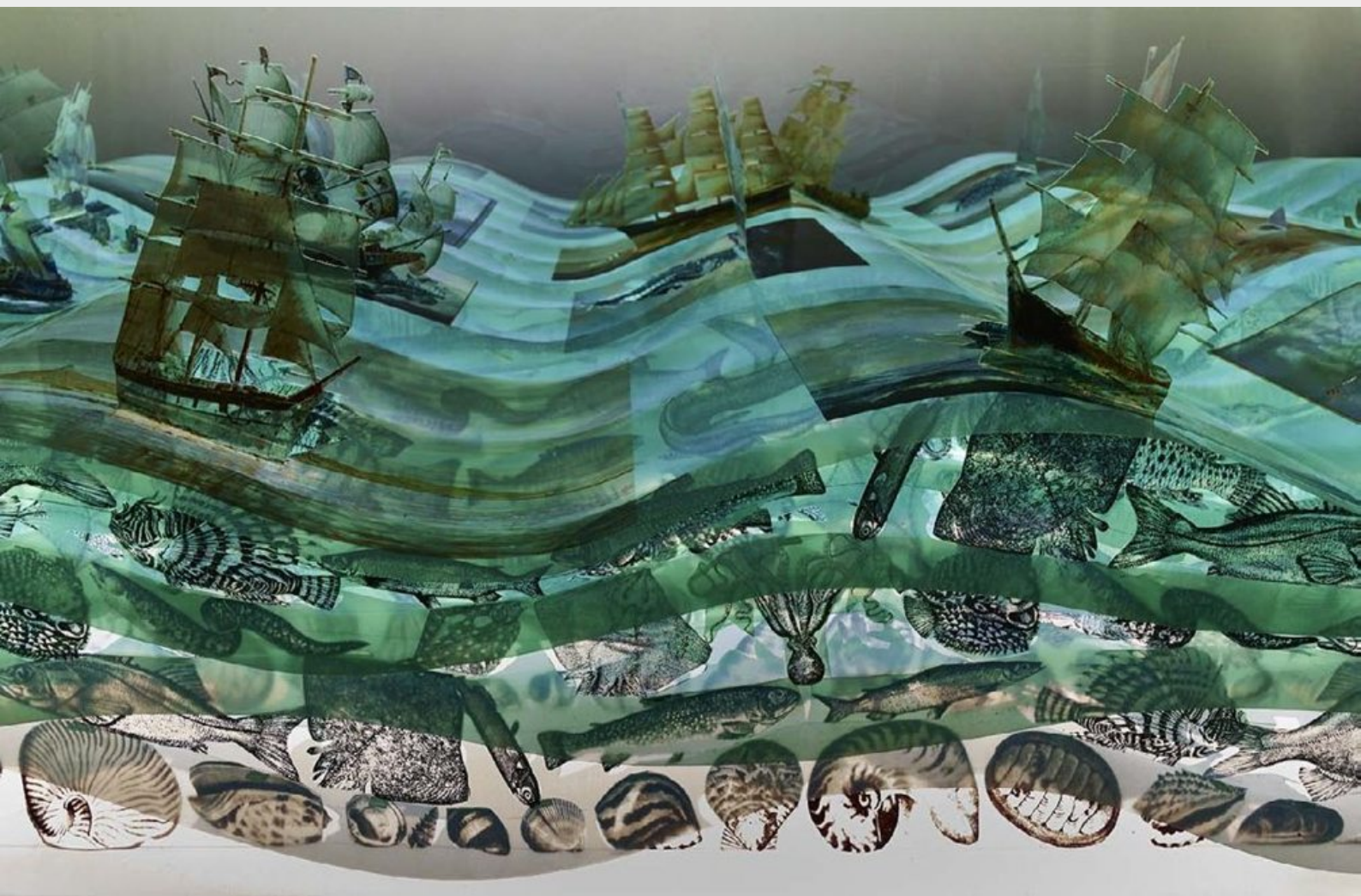
William Packer February 2015



Ophelia V, 2014–5, cut and constructed print on film, 86 x 96 x 29 cm



Seascape, 2015, cut and constructed print on film with lightbox, 39 x 140 x 100 cm



Detail of *Seascape*, 2015, cut and constructed print on film with lightbox, 39 x 140 x 100 cm



Beneath the Surface, 2015, cut and constructed print on paper and film, 57 x 57 x 14.5 cm



Waterline, 2014, cut book-page construction, 148 x 131 x 12.5 cm



Detail of **Waterline**, 2014, cut book-page construction, 148 x 131 x 12.5 cm



Ghost Sharks, 2014, cut book-page construction, 81 x 161 x 14 cm



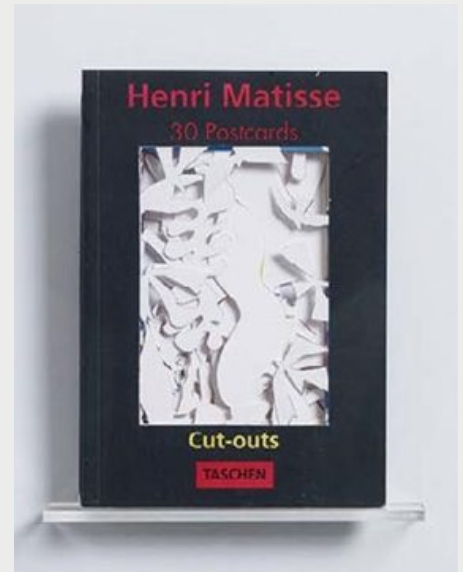
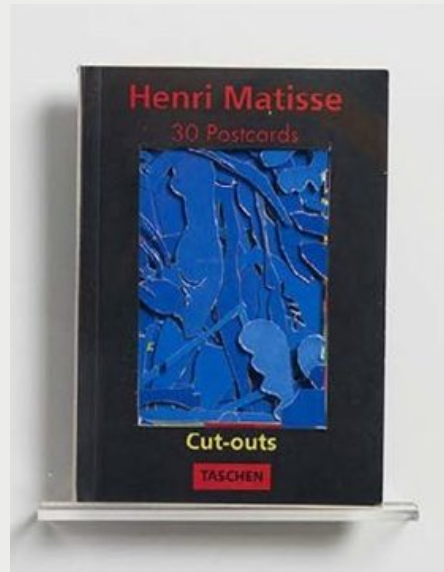
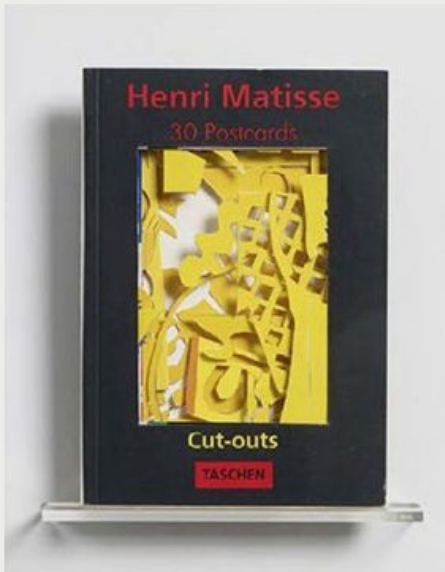
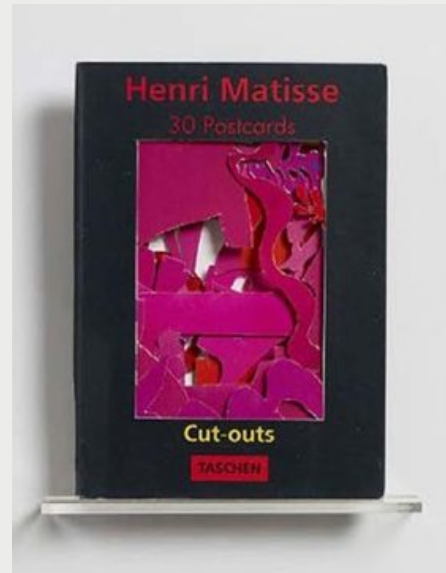
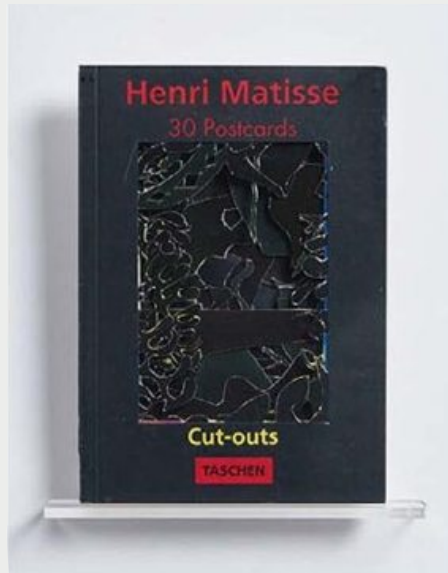
A Natural World, 2015, cut print and book-page construction, 36 x 140 x 100 cm



One Hundred Days of Lunch, 2014, cut and constructed tin cans, 150 x 113 x 11 cm



Cloud / Nest / Water, 2014, cut book-page construction, each 21 x 61 x 27.5 cm



The Colours of Matisse 1–5, 2015, cut and reconstructed books, set of five, each 43 x 35 x 5 cm



Adam and Eve (Japanese version), 2014, cut prints and postcard, 13 x 20.5 x 18 cm

“**Milroy’s sculptural collages** of printed images on paper and film blend fairy tale and conceptual art, meditations on rhythms and shapes with references to Darwin. Like Jeff Wall, Milroy came of age when beauty was suspect and has found his own subversive way of incorporating sumptuous colour and formal rigour into work that is offbeat and unexpected.

He has the gentle wit of a late surrealist, yet the sense of infinite possibilities of mutation, rearrangements of species, gravity, day and night, is fraught with 21st century tension about science and nature: a pertinent contemporary vision. ”

Jackie Wullschlager

Art Critic, *The Financial Times*

“**Jack Milroy doesn’t want to be categorized**, either as a surrealist or some kind of book artist. Nor does he think of himself as a sculptor. As he points out, he works with flat objects —‘I tend to think in terms of sides and backs and fronts’—and doesn’t envision his work in the round. If anything, he is a collagist. He admits that there is ‘an element of surrealism in all the work’, but he has also been known to hint darkly about his structuralist interests. In fact, Milroy’s work resists all isms and plunges to the heart of the unclassifiable. ”

Andrew Lambirth

Art Critic, *The Spectator*

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