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A TWO-SIDED MEDITATION ON LANGUAGE AND IMAGE.

“KIM SCHOEN: STANDING IN”

By Ginny Cook

To abridge a text is to shorten its length without losing the basic contents and overall sense of the original. Abridgment is often done to books to make them accessible to a wider audience, allowing for faster, easier reading. At first glance the books in *The Stand-Ins* by Kim Schoen remind me of my mother’s longtime quarterly subscription to the *Reader’s Digest Condensed Books* series. Each book, which featured four to six truncated versions of popular or classic books bound together, had a strikingly colorful spine on which its titles were listed in pragmatic, gold-foiled succession—*Voices on the Wind*, *The Wild Children*, *Diary of a Medical Nobody*, *A Dinner of Herbs*. One volume I remember from the early ‘90s had more of a conspiratorial air: *An Ark on the Flood*, *The Seventh Secret*, *Come Spring*, *Break In*. Along with our *Encyclopedia Americana* set and a globe from Pier 1 Imports, these condensed books sat dusty and unused, decorating the spaces between the John Grisham, Stephen King and Patricia Cornwell paperbacks.

The Stand-Ins features photographs of books that Schoen rented from a Hollywood prop house, paperbound wooden façades depicting books. In the film industry “stand-ins” refer to the people who stand in for actors before filming begins. They are the Talent’s substitutes, employed only in service of the final image. These photographs are part of Schoen’s larger continuing project *The Empty Library*, in which Schoen photographs various types of artificial books used not only as props for the out-of-focus backgrounds of films but also as staged pieces in design showrooms. In all instances the books, like the stand-ins, are a means to an end, part of an installation designed for a film’s mood or to sell a high-end couch. In Schoen’s project the books become the foreground, shot matter-of-factly and up close from a variety of angles, revealing every fabricated detail. With each photograph of these props, Schoen amasses a library of substitutions, a larger study of the fake.

But the books in *The Stand-Ins* are different from the other empty cardboard ones, which are bold, starkly designed, pristine boxes void of information, contents absent. Rather these wooden books are dense, condensed, the paper pages compressed back into wooden origins, fossilizing and filling in themselves. Emptied out of all language including titles, they are inert and mute, incapable of speaking. The wordless props are also worn, presumably by the hands of stylists and handlers, the paper peeling away to reveal the sham a little more. As we see in *Dummy 9052*, *Three-Quarter View*, the disintegrating prop is a simple façade held up by a wedge of wood like a bookend—the prop propping (and stopping) itself. Reduced only to their solid spines, the books face us like a building on a stage or film set, substituting language with theatrical appearance. The pleasure in looking at the images of these props is not only the delight in discovering them as counterfeit, but also the ease with which we can accept their crafted surfaces at face value—as silent, aging fakes.

Schoen’s images of these petrified dummies mimic the close-up deadpan approach of product photography. Like a ventriloquist, Schoen animates and elevates her silent subjects through the subtle act of photography, replacing objects with still-life images, substituting her voice for theirs. While writing this, I turn to one of my favorite books, the thesaurus, for another word for stand-in. Synonyms are words grouped because of their interchangeability, with meanings nearly the same. Words approximating others. Alternates used as equivalents. In the thesaurus I find imitation, sample, substitution, understudy, mannequin, clown and dummy, all words that touch on some of the ways a person or thing can stand in for another, all linked by their overlapping meanings. Questioning a larger primacy of image over text, we bear witness to her photographs as they stand in for the staging, and flattening, of experience that forms our daily background.