

Box

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What is “Box”?

“Box” contains visual and verbal images for you - the viewer - to arrange and contemplate.

The images are fragments of television, poetry and printed colour. I chose these fragments for their colours: the primary colours red, blue, and green, those three colours' secondary combinations magenta, cyan and yellow and the combination of all colours, white. These are the elements of coloured light, the raw material of colour TV.

At a deeper level, light can be seen as the raw material of almost - or even absolutely - everything. It is possible to speculate that all actual and imagined things - all the things we think of as real and fictional, living and inert, ideas and emotions, matter and sound and light - are patterns of energy waves. Seen this way, no two images in the box - and in the world around it - are completely unrelated.

As I sat in front of different TV screens, my aim was to shoot images dominated by one of those seven colours. I was alert only for colour, like a bower bird collecting blue things for his bower. I wanted to impose an alternative program. I hoped to find a silent beauty behind the urgent clamour.

Theatregoers are said to suspend, voluntarily, their “disbelief” as they enter the imagined world of cinema or theatre. My approach to television in making “Box” was the opposite. By concentrating on the arbitrary subject of colour, I suspended belief - in the programs' intended content - and allowed a theatre of appearance to emerge.

Then, using the same colour references, I chose fragments of poetry from books accumulated over forty years of living, travelling and reading but never sorted in this refreshing way.

Behind the fragments of TV are the vanished programs, behind the chipped-out words are their source poems (which are reprinted in full in this booklet) and behind the programs and poems are fictional and real events, concepts and passions.

To reinforce the guiding principle used in selecting both images and texts, the box also contains a solid printed sheet of each of the seven colours.

To continue this work, I invite you to take sheets from the box - as few or as many at a time as you like - and arrange them on your wall, in any pattern - each with its associations and in the midst of what is going on in your room.

For example, you could hang all seven images that share one colour, or combinations of the primary colours (red, blue, green) or the secondaries (cyan, magenta, yellow), with or without white, or all texts or all images or colour blocks.

The booklet has a page to record your ownership of this work and pages for notes to add to the experience of future viewers.

“Box” began for me with a photographic exploration of television. Making it has led me into imagined alternative narratives and back into my own past and shared culture. Having so much enjoyed making “Box”, I hope it will continue to be a catalyst for insight and happiness.

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“Daddy” by Sylvia Plath is reproduced with permission of Faber and Faber.

Kenneth Rexroth’s translation of “Winter Dawn” by Tu Fu is reproduced with permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

“Kidding Myself in Kuta, Bali: a Pantoum” by Alan Smith is reproduced with permission of the author.

A RED, RED ROSE

O my luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June.
O, my luve is like a melodie
That's sweetly played in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I,
And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun!
And I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only luve,
And fare thee weel a while!
And I will come again, my luve,
Tho it were ten thousand mile!

Robert Burns

(1759 - 1796)

THE MAN WITH THE BLUE GUITAR

I

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

Wallace Stevens

(1879 - 1955)

WINTER DAWN

The men and beasts of the zodiac
Have marched over us once more.
Green wine bottles and red lobster shells,
Both emptied, litter the table.
“Should auld acquaintance be forgot?” Each
Sits listening to his own thoughts,
And the sound of cars starting outside.
The birds in the eaves are restless,
Because of the noise and light, Soon now
In the winter dawn I will face
My fortieth year. Borne headlong
Towards the long shadows of sunset
By the headstrong, stubborn moments,
Life whirls past like a drunken wildfire.

Tu Fu

(713 -770)

(translated by Kenneth Rexroth, from “One Hundred Poems from the Chinese” © 1971 By Kenneth Rexroth.)

HEKTOR'S BURIAL

But when all were gathered to one place and assembled together,
first with gleaming wine they put out the pyre that was burning,
all where the fury of the fire still was in force, and thereafter
the brothers and companions of Hektor gathered the white bones
up, mourning, as the tears swelled and ran down their cheeks. Then
they laid what they had gathered up in a golden casket
and wrapped this about with soft robes of purple, and presently
put it away in the hollow of the grave, and over it
piled huge stones laid close together. Lightly and quickly
they piled up the grave-barrow, and on all sides were set watchmen
for fear the strong-greaved Achaians might too soon set upon them.
They piled up the grave-barrow and went away, and thereafter
assembled in a fair gathering and held a glorious
feast within the house of Priam, king under God's hand.
Such was their burial of Hektor, breaker of horses.

The closing lines of the Iliad of Homer (believed to have been composed in the 8th or 7th century BC), translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, 1951.

DADDY

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time -
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars,
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich, '
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of
Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird
luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you.
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You -

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.

And then I knew what to do.
I made of model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So, daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two -
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through

SYMPHONY IN YELLOW

An omnibus across the bridge
Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
And here and there, a passer-by
Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay
Are moored against the shadowy wharf,
And, like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs along the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
And flutter from the Temple elms,
And at my feet the pale green Thames
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

Oscar Wilde

(1854 - 1900)

KIDDING MYSELF IN KUTA, BALI : A PANTOUM

They've hired too many actors for the scene
The piles of bodies really are a laugh
The wounds are so extreme that they're obscene
With limbs ripped off and bodies cut in half

The piles of bodies really are a laugh
The blood however excellently done
With limbs ripped off and bodies cut in half
While all around the crimson rivers run

The blood however excellently done
Confused? Concussed? A little drunk perhaps
While all around the crimson rivers run
I am the one in shock who laughs and claps

Confused? Concussed? A little drunk perhaps
At last it dawns, there is no camera crew
I am the one in shock who laughs and claps
Hawaiian shirt with blood now streaming through

At last it dawns, there is no camera crew
A laugh chokes in my throat, I'm sobbing now
Hawaiian shirt with blood now streaming through
A man in white sticks something on my brow

A laugh chokes in my throat, I'm sobbing now
The frantic search for living victims starts
A man in white sticks something on my brow
He smiles and whispers sorry and departs

The frantic search for living victims starts
A second man comes close, and shakes his head
He smiles and whispers sorry and departs
I can't accept I'm very nearly dead

A second man comes close, and shakes his head
I do not want to face my life's conclusion
I can't accept I'm very nearly dead
It's just a film: my final self-delusion

I do not want to face my life's conclusion
They've hired too many actors for the scene
It's just a film: my final self-delusion
The wounds are so extreme that they're obscene

Alan Smith

(included in "The Best Australian Poems 2004" edited by Les Murray, Black Inc., Melbourne.)