

POP-UP FICTION

Thomas Allen makes photographs from sliced-up pulp paperbacks

by Jean Dykstra

Anyone who recalls the thrilling childhood experience of reading pop-up books, their characters springing to life in three dimensions with the turn of each page, will grasp the appeal of Thomas Allen's photographs. "I loved pop-up books," says Allen. "I still do. I used to make dioramas in shoe boxes, too. I just loved the way you could feel as if you were in it by putting your face up close. It's about making and experiencing alternative realities."

Today, Allen creates his alternative realities by taking an X-acto knife to vintage pulp-fiction novels. He slices his characters from the sensational covers, repositions them, and photographs the scene with a 4 x 5 view camera, carefully manipulating the lighting, focus, and angle to give the scene new and sometimes unexpected meanings. In *Teeter* (2004), for example, the cutout figure of a man holds his arms



up in fear while standing atop an unsteady stack of paperbacks and leaning over the edge. In *Thirst* (2004), a woman on the cover of one book reaches out with an empty glass toward a man emerging from the cover of another. The man, who holds a bottle of whiskey, has been cut out and bent back so that he is perpendicular to the book, rising from the pages as though the force pulling the couple together is stronger than the bonds of a mere paperback-book cover, or even their fictional existence. "Lust," the only word visible in one of the book's titles, presumably explains it. The spine of the other book reads, somewhat perplexingly, "The Nymph and the Lamp," its ominous subtitle, "Only One of Her Lovers Was Her Husband."

Allen, who now lives on a four-and-a-half-acre farm in southwestern Michigan with his wife and two-year-old daughter

Bottom Left:
Knockout, chromogenic print (20 x 24 in.), 2006. All images Thomas Allen, courtesy Foley Gallery, New York

Above:
Recall, chromogenic print (20 x 24 in.), 2006

and a yard full of chickens, grew up in a suburb of Detroit. His grandfather was a private detective—fitting, given the private eyes that populate the world of pulp fiction and make their way into Allen's photographs. At one time, Allen considered studying law, but wound up going to art school instead, all the while supporting himself by working at Toys "R" Us. He stayed with the company for eighteen years, in part for the paycheck and the benefits, and in part because it was fun and suited his playful sensibility.

That playfulness is evident in both his photographs and their one-word titles—like *Cover* (2002), in which a gun-toting