

Profile William Hall

WE NOT I

A devotee of pure communication, an intellectual, a perfectionist, attired always in a crisp shirt and tie: you'd be forgiven for concluding that William Hall is quite the cool customer. **Steven Bateman** visited William Hall HQ and also spoke to its clients and collaborators in an effort to de-ice the man behind some of today's best cultural graphics.

"I like paper, I like ink, and I like books as objects, but graphic design usually leaves me cold... Communications have most impact, and are at their most engaging and vital, when they're reduced to their core components."

William Hall, founding associate of the eponymous Clerkenwell-based graphic design studio, recently contributed to *Grafik's 150*—a book featuring the collected musings of design luminaries on the subject of inspiration. The above quote, taken from Hall's contribution to *150*, says a lot about the erudite, considered approach at the heart of his studio's work. We'll get around to approach and aesthetics in a bit, but first here's some background.

William Hall graduated from Central Saint Martins in 1997. He worked placements at Landor, Saatchi & Saatchi and Wolff Olins, and he also worked as a graphic designer in the studio of architect John Pawson. Ultimately, he always planned to establish his own studio. While he provides the company with its creative direction and its name, Hall is quick to point out the contributions of others, including a broad network of collaborators and, in particular, associate designer Nicholas Barba, who is currently dividing his time between William Hall and John Pawson's studio. Barba studied at Central Saint Martins with Hall and they have since worked together on most of the studio's projects. They studied graphics during the mid-to-late 90s, an experience that proved formative in the development of the studio's idiosyncratic approach.

"Ray Gun was the apotheosis of graphic design at the time," says Hall. "What David Carson did was exhilarating, but when you're at college you have to have something to push against. In a way, Carson's work meant that we had nothing to push against, because all the rules had been broken. So what I did, and I think a lot of my contemporaries did something similar, was revert to a kind of anonymity, a sense of refinement; a quiet and considered approach."

It is an approach that has seen William Hall cultivate a reputation for accomplished, measured design solutions; solutions imbued with a rigorous and disciplined aesthetic that also pays heed to the tactile and often sensuous qualities of materials and finish. Although predominantly known for its cultural work, it has also worked for a range of commercial clients, designing promotional literature for European office-furniture brand Brunner and a refreshing, craft-infused identity for fashion label Erdel. In 2002 it was handed its first significant commercial commission, to design a book documenting the construction of a new Calvin Klein store in Paris.

"It came at a good time for us. It was the first project where we had a significant budget. It isn't entirely representative of the refinement you find in our work, but we were exhilarated by the opportunity so there are three different paper stocks, varnishes and full-page foil blocks. It has a sense of refinement, but also a kind of sensuality."

It is a beautiful object and it displays a tactile sense of quality present throughout the studio's work. The Robert Ryman catalogue produced for the Xavier Hufkens Gallery in Brussels is a deceptively simple yet incredibly effective piece of design. The clarity of the typography and layout, the natural hue and canvas-like feel of the cover provide a balanced and sensitive framework for Ryman's work. It's sensuous, but in a formal and refined manner that is entirely appropriate to the subject matter.

"I want people to find something attractive about the books we design. The Ryman book and Depth of Field (for the Henry Moore Institute) have a particular personality, a presence and a tactile quality. I want people to be seduced by that; to have a sense of holding something beautiful, engaging and stimulating."



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01, 02
Identity design for
architectural practice
We not I

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03-05

Cover and spreads for Penelope Curtis' *Patio and Pavilion: The Place of Sculpture in Modern Architecture*. Co-published by Karsten Schubert and The Getty, 2007

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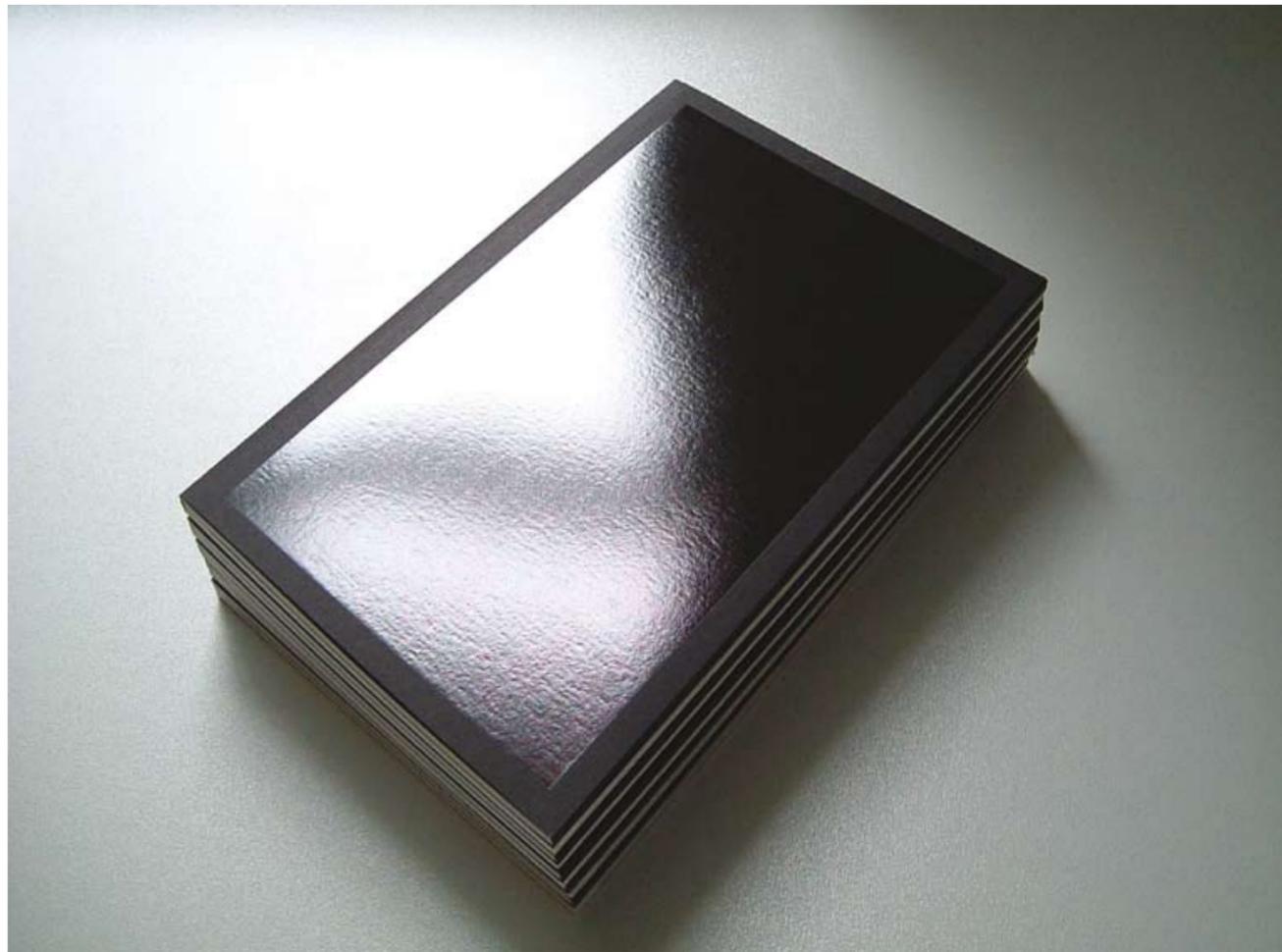


That almost palpable sense of quality has been successfully translated across several identities, notably those for jeweller Sonia Cheadle and enigmatic architectural studio We Not I. The reverse of the Sonia Cheadle letterhead features a pattern based on a series of different diamond cuts, applied in a raised varnish to provide a tactile sense of quality. Applications of the We Not I identity eschew printing altogether, opting instead for a punctured logotype that displaces paper, rather than removing it.

It's an oddly sculptural, architectonic solution, the coolness of which reflects the unusual nature of the client's practice—the directors and their employees have sworn to remain anonymous in a reaction against the vogue for celebrity architects. I swapped emails with an anonymous contact at We Not I and they seem happy with the way the project turned out, delighted in fact that the solution "evades parochial issues of type, Gridnik versus Univers, and instead retreated to a direct and literal physicality where sensuality predominates over form". In layman's terms: Job done.

It was a sophisticated response to a tricky brief and it's exactly the kind of project that has attracted the attention of similarly focused and dedicated individuals, particularly from the art world. An admirer of 'academic' books who is clearly passionate about the arts, Hall is building an exceptional portfolio of work for cultural clients and in recent years his studio has established a strong relationship with the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds. I asked Dr Penelope Curtis, curator of the Henry Moore Institute, what prompted them to commission William Hall.

"I saw the Medieval Modern identity and thought it was very striking, but also very modest. We get approached by a lot of flashy design companies keen to raise our brand awareness, but we're not really interested in that. We aren't interested in sales; we're more interested in the end result."

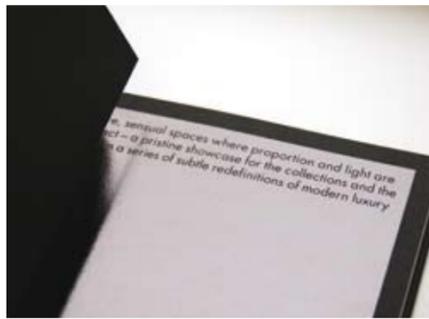


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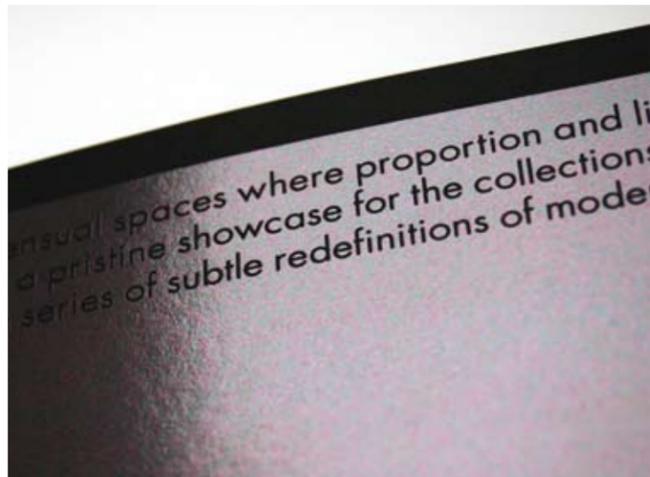
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01-04
Book produced for the launch of Calvin Klein's new flagship store in Paris, 2002

05-08
Brunner catalogue. Photography by Christoph Kicherer, production by Jane Withers

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Profile

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Giorgio Locatelli

Made In Italy Food & Stories



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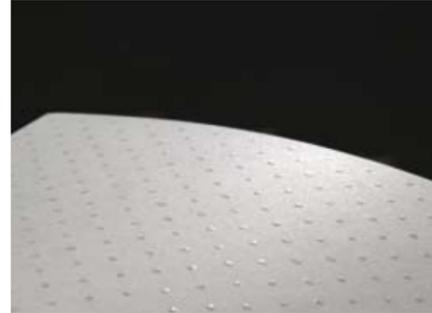
01-04
Cover and spreads for Giorgio Locatelli's *Made in Italy: Food & Stories*, published by Harper Collins, 2006. Photography by Dan Leppard

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Window for Zen Spice Market restaurant, London

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Hall's studio has subsequently produced a consistently engaging series of publications for Curtis, and with no 'house style' to adhere to they've been free to begin each one with a fresh canvas. "As a client I suppose we've been good for them," said Curtis, "because we enable them to produce unusual publications. We expect artists to be adventurous, and we expect the same from designers."

The studio's first project for the Henry Moore Institute was the catalogue for *Depth of Field*, an exhibition focused on a priceless Donatello relief sculpture: it was the first time the V&A had loaned it since acquiring it over 160 years ago. William Hall drew inspiration from the work itself and from several other sources, including a file of notes and images brought to a meeting by one of Curtis's colleagues, which might explain the abundance of tipped-in images. For the front cover, William Hall collaborated with photographer Tim Gutt, choreographing a scene that communicates a sense of occasion, and much more besides.

"The cover documents this moment where, having made the journey from London to Leeds, this priceless object is unpacked and lifted onto a table. The tension was amazing. The technicians, a security guard, experts from the V&A checking the object... Hopefully there's an echo between the scene on the cover—a group of figures focused on one priceless object—and the scene portrayed in the work itself."

Hall's approach demands absolute commitment. He immerses himself and his studio in each new project, and it's a quality that both Penelope Curtis and Tim Gutt admire. "He's a perfectionist," says Gutt, "and so am I. We are both committed and uncompromising, and I like the fact that we can have a much broader conversation about a project; that it isn't simply a problem-solving exercise. I don't want to work with passive people; I'd rather work with someone who fully engages with a project from start to finish."

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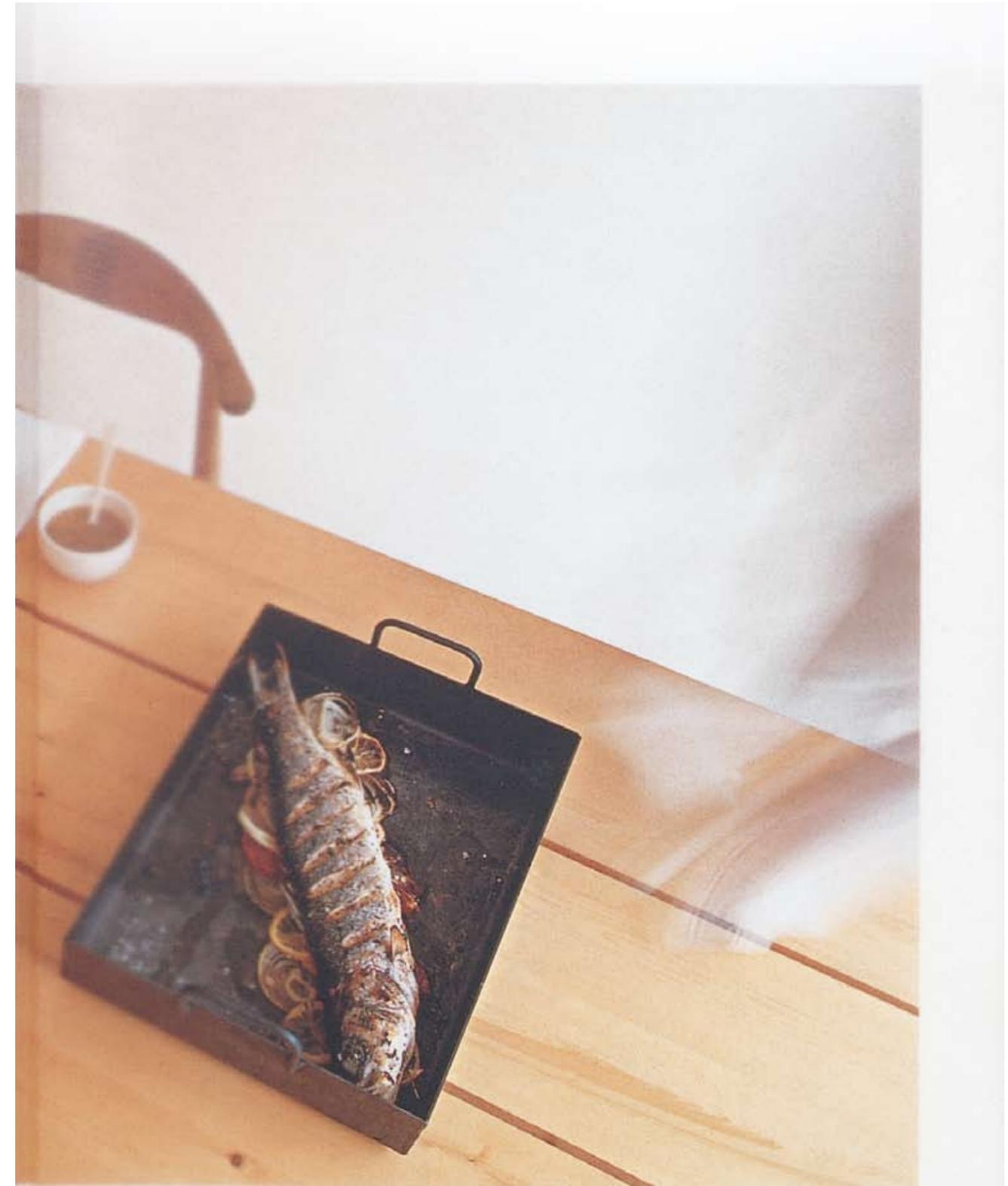


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01–02
Stationary and identity
for jeweller Sonia
Cheadle

03–05
Cover and spreads
design for *Living
& Eating* by John
Pawson and Annie
Bell, published by
Ebury Press, 2001.
Photography by
Christoph Kicherer

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John Pawson and Annie Bell

Living and Eating

The studio followed *Depth of Field* with equally striking and very different catalogues for exhibitions of work by Ettore Spalletti and Imi Knoebel. It is currently working on a catalogue for *Fact of Function*, an exhibition of early work by German artist Thomas Schütte, and *Patio and Pavilion*, a book on the relationship between sculpture and architecture penned by Curtis. Other projects in the pipeline include an identity for Cornwall 100—a non-profit-making online resource aimed at bringing together Cornish artists and collectors—and the catalogue for *A Dream Deferred*, an exhibition of work by British artist Jamie Shovlin at Haunch of Venison.

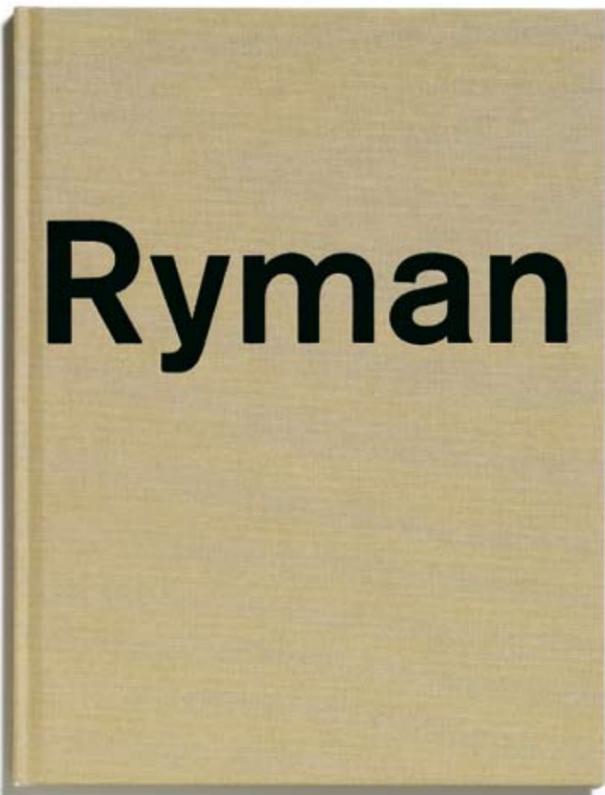
“They liked the Ryman book and then asked us to do something completely different. People often ask for the same thing again, so it was quite refreshing.”

As we talked in more detail about the studio’s work, Hall admitted that he could provide a rationale for every decision it has made during the design process for each project. The Shovlin catalogue is no exception.

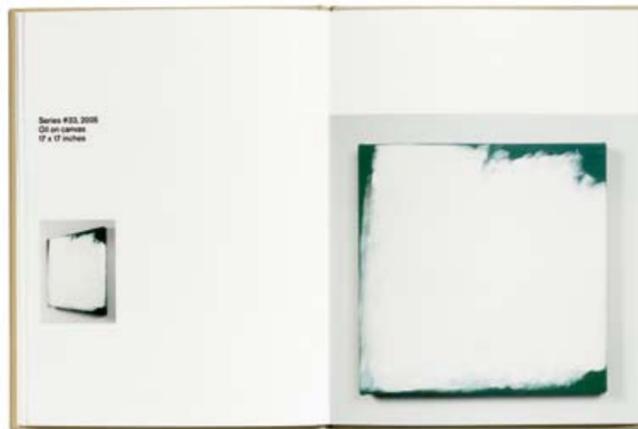
“It’s central to the work we do. I feel it’s necessary to justify each decision we make. I’m interested in getting things as close to perfect as possible. The fonts we selected echo what he talks about in his texts. We used Cheltenham because *The New York Times* uses it. It’s suggestive of the media and of American pop culture, which Shovlin references in the book. We also used Franklin Gothic, which is a Lawrence Wiener reference.”

Perhaps the most commercially successful project the studio has been involved in so far is *Made in Italy: Stories and Recipes* (Fourth Estate, 2006), a book by Italian chef Giorgio Locatelli. It is a beautiful object and, at 512 pages, a considerable one. It isn’t the first ‘cookbook’ it has designed. A few years back it designed *Living and Eating* (Ebury Press, 2001) by John Pawson and celebrated food writer Annie Bell. A masterclass in restraint and elegance, and with some beautiful food photography by Christoph Kicherer, *Living and Eating* remains one of Hall’s favourite projects.

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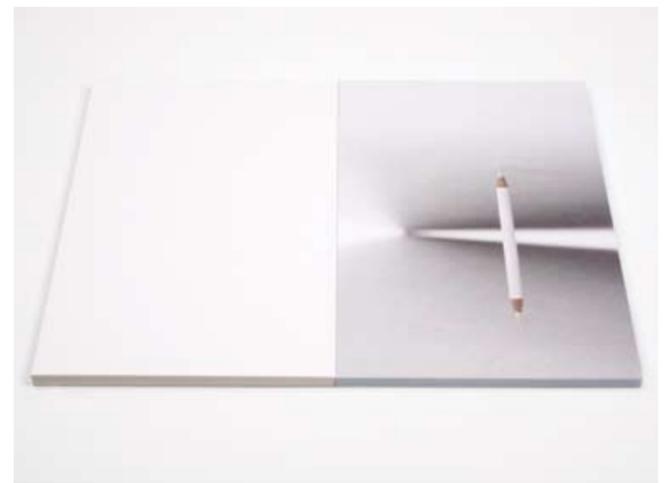


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01–03
Catalogue for Robert Ryman’s exhibition at the Xavier Hufkens Gallery, Brussels, 2005. Photography by Adam Reich

04–06
Cover and spreads for Ettore Spalletti’s exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2005. Photography by Tim Gutt

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“We used one font, Univers, in one size. The chapter headings are in bold and we used tints in the index, but apart from that it’s consistent throughout. If you look at cookbooks, people tend to introduce type hierarchies, italics or different colours. I think *Living and Eating* is clear and navigable. You can distinguish the introduction and the ingredients without any of that drama. All that additional typographic hierarchy is totally unnecessary.”

Made in Italy is a very different beast. Like the Pawson book, it is also something of a triumph, not least because its designers managed to persuade a big publishing house—Fourth Estate—to agree to a text-only cover. By all accounts it wasn’t easy, but they stuck to their guns and with a little support from Locatelli the cover went through, even though it wasn’t Hall’s first choice. He originally suggested the smouldering portrait of Locatelli now residing on the back cover, and you can see why. The composition and tight framing suggest a passionate individual dedicated to his craft, while his pose recalls that of a Renaissance portrait.

The stories and recipes that comprise *Made in Italy* are book-ended by a series of wonderfully evocative portraits taken by Dan Leppard, an exceptional photographer and by all accounts one of Britain’s best bakers. At the front of the book, images of farmers and artisan foodmakers represent authenticity and the source of the ingredients, while the back of the book features a series of rather noble portraits of Locatelli and his staff in their natural habitat, the kitchen. They communicate a sense of honesty, confidence and integrity that is supported by the book’s design.

“Those images gave the book an identity, and lifted it out from the market... It’s a saturated market so it can be difficult to produce a cookbook that is distinctive, but Dan took some beautiful portraits and we introduced devices that add pace and drama to it. So the ingredients panels are set on a grey background. We used a considered grid with a recurring 8mm motif for the margins and indents, so you get a sense of stability.”

When Hall said he could give me a reason for every decision he’s made in his work, I didn’t doubt his sincerity, and while perfection is ultimately unattainable, why should that prevent any of us from trying to achieve it? The Ferrari Formula One team used to have a motto: “Perfection does not exist—only the evolution towards it.”