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Penguin-inspired art set to make worldwide splash

By Michael Stott



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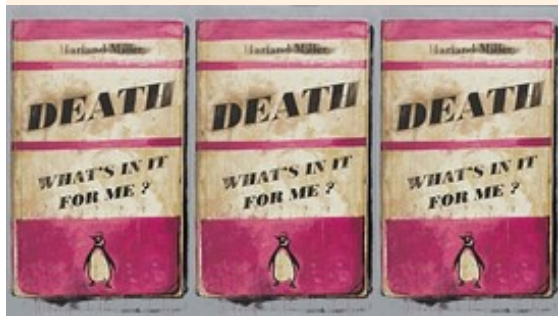
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The latest chapter in writer and artist Harland Miller's quirky, two-decade love affair with the covers of Penguin books will be celebrated in a private viewing this week at the White Cube gallery in London.

Launched in 1935 to produce affordable good-quality paperbacks, Penguin revolutionised book design with its bold tri-band covers. They featured the “dignified but

flippant” aquatic bird emblem suggested by Joan Coles, secretary to the publisher’s founder Allen Lane.

Mr Miller remembers growing up surrounded by boxes of Penguin books bought in job lots by his collector father at Yorkshire markets. Those memories were stirred while the artist was living in Paris in the 1990s by booksellers’ wares along the Seine, prompting his first reinterpretations in oils of classic Penguin editions of Ernest Hemingway novels.

Penguin’s early paperback covers were colour-coded by genre – orange for fiction, blue for biography, green for crime – providing the nascent brand with a distinctive visual signature.

“There are lots of aspects to the Penguin classic that inspire me visually,” Mr Miller said in an interview. “I love it as a colour field. One of my favourite artists is Rothko. If you look at a lot of Rothko, when he got into the maroon phase he was dealing with a lot of oranges and this redness of orange. There is a Rothko which is essentially a Penguin book . . . the same format – the orange-white-orange – just without the graphic furniture.”

During the past 20 years, Mr Miller has developed his own sardonic take on the Penguin covers,

inventing quirky new titles for many of them in a reference to his other career as a successful fiction writer.

At the outset, the artist worried about action being taken against him for copyright infringement. Years ago, Penguin even hinted at a possible lawsuit. But the book publisher never sued, perhaps mindful of how the Campbell Soup brand benefited from Andy Warhol’s now-legendary pop art reinterpretations of its cans. Instead, it embraced the artist.

Mr Miller had planned to move his painting in a new direction to tackle different subject matter. But before he did, Penguin Random House, which is part-owned by the Financial Times publisher Pearson, commissioned the artist to produce a new series of his trademark book cover canvases to hang in each of its offices around the world.

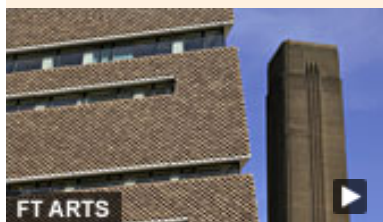
The resulting works will be hung at White Cube before their dispatch. They include one destined for Dublin with the title “No Solids” and one for Johannesburg with a drawing by Mr Miller of a South African black-footed penguin inspired by a visit to a zoo.

John Makinson, chairman of Penguin Random House, said the idea of the commission originated with a generous donation to the publisher from a New York property broker, Richard Berzine. Mr Berzine offered some of the commission he was paid for renegotiating Penguin’s lease on its Hudson Street offices as a gift to fund artwork for the publisher’s offices.

“What I love in Harland’s work is that, although it’s obviously his take on the Penguin design heritage, it is amazingly true to the spirit of the Penguin cover,” said Mr Makinson. “They’re sardonic, playful, ironic . . . but they’re mostly rather beautiful images.”

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