

kitchen sink



for people who think too much

The Things Books Carry

Shooting the Suburbs

In Defense of Sentimentality

Counting Fucks With the MPAA

The Importance of Bob Dole's Erection

George Lakoff's Beard Speaks

Waiting for the Kids to Come Out

Tom Waits Ruined My Life

Art School Confrontational

Googling Michael Larkin

Who Watches the *Night Watch*?

\$5.95/\$8.95 CAN





Give me a “C” Putting the Craft Back in Art

by Lisa Solomon

illustration by Liza Corbet

CRAFT HAS seemingly been Art's dirty little cousin for some time. If you need proof, look at CCAC (California College of Arts and Crafts), which dropped its last “C” to become the more haughty College of Art, because who needs the Craft anyway?

As someone who is personally invested in the divide (as well as the link) between Art and Craft, I have oscillated between being irritated and enthused by all the crafty art I've seen of late. In my recent travels to art fairs and galleries, the trend of thread, crochet—heck, needle arts in general—has certainly been apparent.

Don't get me wrong—I love seeing thread as a drawing device (as in Ghada Ahmer's work),

or a lovely crocheted sculpture (Seth Koen), or repurposed thrift store blankets (Mike Kelley, Sue Whitmore), or even just artful quilts (Gees Bend). But when is threadwork superfluous? Which artists will outlast the trend? How many of us will still be using thread and yarn and exploring the grandmotherly arts in five years?

Originally, this essay was conceived more as a rant about what I found to be the good, the bad and the ugly in the Crafty Art movement, but then I had an epiphany of sorts. I was invited to be in a show at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek, entitled “Embroidered Stories/Knitted Tales,” encompassing 38 artists' approaches to exactly what I had been contemplating. The

breadth and scope of craft-influenced practice in that room was awe-inspiring. Before the show opened, I participated in an informal tour, where several of the local artists came to explain their works to a roomful of docents. The minute Lacey J. Roberts spoke about her work and then divulged that her Master's thesis was all about the ghettoization of Craft, I wanted to have a conversation with her. Here was someone who was really dissecting the ideas that had been rolling around in my head. She was taking an academic and historically interesting perspective, and she had a binder full of juicy articles and tidbits that piqued my curiosity. In one piece, she had knit a queer pink triangle with the words *mom knows now*; in two others she hand-knit letters in primary colors and used them to spell out the phrases *almost always here* and *desperately trying to stay warm in a cold world*.

KS: As an artist who literally tried to re-instate the word Craft into CCA, what do you see as the link between art and craft? Why is it that in this day and age, when there seems to be a resurgence of craft-based artwork in the art world, institutions are still continuing to distance themselves from the word "craft"?

LJR: In fact, several institutions made changes to their names, all regarding the word craft, in the span of two years, including the American Craft Museum in New York City, which changed its name to Museum of Art and Design (MAD), and the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, which took similar action and chose to be named Kentucky Museum of Art and Design. In a very short span of time, institutions all over the country took a very official stance on language that was quite remarkable. Imagine all of the letterhead that had to be replaced!

Plainly stated, "craft" suffers from a language dilemma. Partly, I think it is due to the fact that "craft" can encompass so many ways of working, and has so many different types of practitioners. I think that most people saw this as a negative [thing] and attached stigmatized connotations to the many definitions [of craft]. However, I think this can be swung in a really positive direction. In fact, I see all of the stereotypes and stigmas that led to the dropping of the word as providing a springboard to breaking down categories that we love to shove material culture into, and as a gateway to new discourse. I personally would love to see new discourse on craft modeled on a template of queer theory.

KS: I'm really interested in the idea of "craft" suffering from a language problem. I wonder how to alter that. "Art" seems to encompass a

world of possibilities, both good and bad, high and low. I would hope that "craft" could sustain the same wide scope of objects. But somehow it feels as though all crafts get lumped together (and immediately get associated with popsicle sticks and white glue—not that those are bad materials).

LJR: I think part of the whole language dilemma is our penchant as a society to categorize everything. Of course, material culture is defined by categorization and labels which then take on stereotypes. "Craft" in particular has suffered greatly from this system. I think it's incredible that "craft" can encompass so much—ways of working, identities, demographics; the list goes on and on, but has managed to be seen under rigid, stagnant stereotypes, such as your "popsicle stick" example. (I always read about the "craft" stereotype as a variation of "macaroni gluing," which is in a similar vein.) I am interested in looking at everything just as material and material culture rather than [asking] "is this art/craft/design?"

KS: What do you think about the current trend of contemporary craft? It seems to be a very hot thing right now. I guess I'm wondering about media specificity. A painter friend pointed out that she can't get irritated every time she sees another figurative painting. On the other hand, I do think that artists have a desire to claim something in their practice as their own. So if you as a painter saw someone using the same color palette and technique [that you use,] you might get a bit irked. Is it harder to distinguish this in a craft arena, since many crafts are based on passed-down traditions/styles/patterns?

LJR: Part of the language/identity crisis facing craft also stems from a generational gap. I just returned from a conference called *Shaping the Future of Craft*, and this generational gap was mentioned over and over. One of the main points that kept surfacing over and over was the notion of hybridity, and that younger makers are engaging in hybrid practices more and more. There was a lot of heated discussion because some people felt that traditional practices often associated with craft would be lost, or that learning a craft and the immense work that goes into such skills would be devalued.

KS: I often find myself looking at something and wondering if it really needs that thread/yarn/etc., or is this something that is just tapping into this moment of craft? Do you have a method for distinguishing the good from the bad craft in art?

LJR: Perhaps this is what happens when we see work that alludes to craft or craftiness, but is not demonstrative of learned traditional skill, that our gut feels like those practices aren't being valued. Or worse, when it appears that someone is appropriating from the margins, which is where craft usually seems to exist when we think of the conventional setup of categorized making and material (i.e., that whole art/craft/design setup) and people who have been toiling away for years learning these incredible processes are again cast aside.

I think mostly when I look at work I do a gut check on the maker's intentions. I am always drawn to work that involves heavy process or skill. I also just love material, especially wood, fiber and clay, anything that really involves the hand, or that flips material from its conventional use.

KS: I totally agree. I'm really interested when materials are re-purposed, or you are somewhat taken by surprise at how something was used. And almost anything that is highly sensual, or is intelligently engaged with its materiality gets to me in a visceral way.

I'm quite drawn to your idea of modeling a new discourse on queer theory. Anything specific come to mind regarding that? I can see a correlation between feminist theory and reclaiming words and techniques—as well as the ever-present “the personal is political.”

LJR: I think queer theory could be a useful model for craft discourse in several ways. One is that queer theory has the ability to recognize a multitude of experiences and identities without rendering them as stereotypes. Part of the problem with the word “craft” and its rhetoric is that it encompasses so much that people feel it is impossible to define. That was the most oft-heard explanation for the dropping of the word—undefinability.

I think a queer theory template would add a dynamic discourse of identity through performance that would be a really interesting way of looking at the act of making and how this shapes how we relate to others and various systems we function within. I think being “undefined” in queer theory can actually lead to some sort of identity/definition, but it also allows for growth and imagination, because identity is always being created, affirmed and put back into flux through repetitive performance. And repetitive performance is key in many craft processes. People who work in different frameworks within craft could maintain [their] identity and not [be] in such competition or render [themselves] stagnant. I am still forming a lot

of my ideas around this part, but I think it's a trajectory that could be useful if people were willing to look at acts of making from a different angle.

KS: I love the idea of incorporating the repetitive as part of the solution, because there is such a repetitive/process orientation to so much of this type of work. I can only hope that the artists who are really invested in embracing contemporary craft as their art practice take a role in defining it from the inside. From a personal standpoint, I'm all for maintaining identity while promoting a sense of community and creativity.

I think I am coming to the conclusion that contemporary craft in art needs to be held to the same standards as any other movement or practice of art. The gut/mind check that I apply to a performance piece, or the standards (formal and conceptual) that I hold a good painting or installation to are equally important to pieces that use thread, or fabric, or other craft materials. In the big picture, in order to know when art is really fantastic, you have to also be exposed to pieces that aren't fantastic. As is the case with any creative endeavor, at some point an artist must trust that the audience is invested, and that it is interested enough to recognize when something comes from an “honest” (in quotes because discovering and understanding honesty in art making is a whole 'nother article!) and engaged place of making.

Lisa Solomon is an artist currently living and working in Oakland, California with her husband, two dogs and two cats. Henceforth she will gladly refer to much of her art as part of the conceptual craft movement!

Lacey Jane Roberts is a dual-degree student in the MFA program and the MA in visual criticism program at California College of the Arts.