

Vancouver Sculpture: Craft Concepts

Recent art practices have focused largely on the dematerialization of art in its making and its experience (electronic media and technologies, etc.) with an emphasis on narrative, on language, on discourse and on theory, where images have clear precedence over objects. Yet a resurgence of material practices which are based on direct physical experiences which contest the hegemony of language and of images in experience and that revalue the importance and the role of process has also been gaining ground, possibly as a counterpoint to the distancing and alienating power of mediated experiences. Craft practices (what could also be called "First Media" or "First Technologies") and most importantly craft concepts are at the core of these recent art productions, most notably within sculpture and related practices like installation and performance art. This movement combining sculpture form and craft concepts finds part of its origin in relatively recent British sculpture where it has played a particularly significant role, but I will mostly be looking at its implication here in recent Vancouver sculpture practice.

This essay begins with a title that combines two words that may be perceived by some as the ultimate oxymoron: craft concepts. Craft practices are generally understood as material based and traditional with an emphasis on the hand and body in their making and experience, and a connection with the past, with history in a manner generally perceived as nostalgic. Rarely if ever do we think of craft practices as mental, intellectual activities, as a conceptual approach to making, and to experiencing and understanding reality. Yet craft objects are articulated around two very important concepts, the first being function and the second decoration, with its corollaries, symbolism and abstraction. We often forget that function is a concept and that anything functional is thus inherently conceptual and that most decoration is a form of abstraction, which finds its historical origin in decoration and thus, in craft practices. Yet, the work of the artists under discussion here who use craft concepts in their work is neither functional, despite the fact that it makes obvious references to function (chairs, buildings, shelters, bags, boxes, sweaters, bricks, piles and vessels of all kinds, etc.) and it is unambiguously non-decorative, as it never blatantly seduces or beautifies, and non-abstract as it always tends to represent something familiar, real, tangible, and often in a trompe-l'oeil fashion. This trompe-l'oeil aspect of much of the work, the idea that a material imitates in a convincing manner another one is also more often found in craft practices where trompe-l'oeil effects have played a continuous historical role for millennia (ceramic objects imitating bronze, wood, leather, cloth, etc.) by challenging our expectations and contesting the implied meaning we stereotypically invest in materials in our ambiguous relationship to reality and mimesis, to representation. Too often in trompe-l'oeil, the operation remains a simple visual game based on word play and technical prowess and it rarely transcends the "wow" factor. In these artists work, the illusion is never totally convincing and the suspension of disbelief acts as an entrance into the work but its operative power is short lived, luckily, and on purpose. As well in these sculptures, often materials or objects are present in and of themselves and they then act as simulacra, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, a familiar experience for which an original doesn't exist.

I want to argue here that the core concept in craft practices is the concept of containment (as an extension of function) and that containment is situated at the core of recent Vancouver sculpture practice.

Craft always imply the making of objects and objects are of two main types: tools, which are active (the conceptual aspect of tools is function) and containers, which are receptive (the conceptual aspect of containers is containment). Containers establish a transition between two distinct aspects, in a non-

hierarchical fashion, between the interior and the exterior and this transition does not imply an opposition or a rupture but a continuity and this transition seamlessly follows, also in continuity, between the object and its environment, contrary to images which operate in discontinuity and opposition, within our experience of the physical world. Containment bridges an object with its environment and containers contain their own context. Thus, a container is a space where binary opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled and containers bring together the extreme of polarities in reconciliation. They cancel the dialectical impulses of language and discourse and as such, they resist narratives, fictions and theories so central to contemporary institutional experiences of understanding. Containers and objects collapse and dissolve binaries as they combine in symbiosis the top and the bottom, the front and the back, the interior and the exterior, presentation and representation, image and object, material and concept, nature and culture, art and life, intellectual experience and bodily experience, body and mind, words and things (to reference Michel Foucault's formula, and to whose ideas I am indebted here) and all and any other binary oppositions we can conceptualize. This also implies a resistance to hierarchies and other forms of normative value judgment so prevalent in theories of culture and other institutional and academic practices.

I will now concentrate on a specific example since it is particularly appropriate for its precedence, importance and relevancy.

Vancouver sculptor Liz Magor is one of Canada's most accomplished and celebrated visual artists. Her rigorous, sensitive and intelligent practice over more than thirty years has contributed greatly to our understanding of the potential for sculptural practices to inform our lives and make us aware in a renewed fashion of the particular world we now live in. Her work is grounded in direct bodily experience in both its making and its viewing and this phenomenological approach constitutes its core aspect.

We can readily agree that Liz Magor's work uses craft materials (wood, textile, paper, plaster, metal, etc.) and craft forms (chairs, furniture, clothing, etc.), craft techniques (mold-making, wood-working), craft processes (casting, joining, assembling) and craft methods (multiples, repetition, etc.). Beyond a connection to nostalgia and utopia, both quite perceptible in the work, it remains removed from crafts by its obvious lack of practical function and its removal from any decorative/abstract intent, then how does it embody craft concepts?

Like all the artists discussed implicitly here, her work is primarily based in a material practice where the transformation and manipulation of the physical world is central. Yet it remains at its core a conceptual practice and the material, physical results nothing more nor less than the embodiment of thoughts. The process of making the work as well as the material used inform our experience as viewer and as such they retain an importance that cannot be readily ignored or dismissed yet they are far from being the most important aspects. The methods and techniques used are rather traditional and include mold-making, casting and carpentry, among others yet she also uses various industrial materials like plastic, rubber, resin and other such compounds. Over the years, her work has taken various sculptural forms: furniture such as chairs, shelters like log cabins, both as scale models and full size constructions (recently a fisherman's boat shed), containers such as knapsacks, purses and rolled carpets, stacks of towels or clothing, bundles and hollowed "wood" logs or pile of faux rocks hiding various actual and real contents. When one writes or reads such a list, it creates the impression of rather unimpressive banality and familiarity yet the actual work has a convincing presence and efficiency impossible to ignore and difficult to dismiss. One of the many themes of the work centers around our relationship to content and concealment in a physical sense, either through absence or emptiness (something that was there is now gone or missing or hiding) or presence, yet remaining hidden, making us aware of that presence by a bulge or some material oozing out, like light, hair, fluid or other such often abject

substance. She creates objects that inscribe the presence of displaced others. A strong feeling of anxiety, of loss or lack, of protecting and hoarding is often deeply felt. A particularly brilliant formal and conceptual innovation in her work consist in the merging of two distinct spaces into one, where one is the shell, the container and the other the content. As an example, a pile of bath towels may read perceptively as a solid, as a mass, but it has been made into a shell trough resin casting while still remaining visually believable as a solid and is totally convincing as such, in a trompe-l'oeil manner. But when the work is viewed and we move around the object, strangely positioned awkwardly on the gallery floor, one realizes that the pile is actually a hollow form whose interior space is now completely filled with desirable and gratifying things focused on anxiety and satisfaction, like beer cans, cigarettes or candy. Thus the towel pile and the beer cans now occupy the same physical space, something impossible in the real world. By combining the simulation of an object (towels) and a material (cloth) with other real, actual objects (say, cigarettes), the work contests and challenges our expectations around realism and reality.

Liz Magor's work, specifically her photographic practice, which have influenced and impacted her sculpture practice, has also been informed by another popular culture phenomenon involving communities, notably the reenactment of historical events like important battles, which she has documented photographically with focused commitment for many years. These war games imply from their participants the creation of elaborate reconstructions of artifacts, costumes, arms and tools, which serve a critical role in the believable recreation of the event. These generally hand made objects imply the continuity and/or revival of various craft practices and techniques current and relevant at the time of the reconstructed and reenacted historical event. These reenactment scenarios also imply a particular relationship with time and history and they serve for those involved to reestablish a direct connection with the past at an emotional level, but they also act as a form of impermanent archive in recreating an event from the past. Craft practices and craft objects are also not only experienced in space but most importantly in time and their relationship to time is quite specific. Containers, and I would argue that most of not all craft objects with the exception of certain tools are at the conceptual level containers, and they imply a conceptual constancy that doesn't change with time. Their generative and operative aspects remain constant no matter when, where and by whom, regardless even why they were made (a bowl is always a bowl). This conceptual constancy, in a world in constant flux, that values newness and change over constancy and stability, positions craft practices in "reaction" to most contemporary practices. In a world where the impermanent, the ephemeral, the virtual, the transitory, the instantly obsolete is the norm, containers challenge, subvert and contest by proposing a totally different experience, an experience that remains intemporal and universal. Much art of the previous century and continuing into this one has been generated around a wish for a reconciliation of the art/life dichotomy. This has often produced successful results but usually only for the duration of the event itself, the action, the gesture, the exhibition. Progressively, the institutionalization of these kind of practices, usually through usually photographic documentation, has recreated the art/life dichotomy anew and even more powerfully. Craft objects on the other hand have no need of the contextual power of institutions (beyond the politics of the market in establishing value and legitimacy), since they intrinsically carry their own context. Craft practices are also archival practices, inasmuch as they preserve and perpetuate at times obsolete and possibly irrelevant techniques and processes in the making of objects that have also lost their original relevancy in the contemporary world. Of all craft practices, ceramics is the most keenly attuned to this potential. The material is incredibly resistant to time and it fossilizes action, form and matter, preserving information in a time frame verging on eternity. The material is itself worthless, extremely abundant but also non-recyclable and yet fragile but even a mere fragment will operate effectively as an archive of a specific moment in time and culture. No other material has such potential and can make such a claim and these physical and conceptual particularities position ceramics (and other craft practices) in opposition to the current culture of

consumption and consumerism. Craft practices are also a form of archive of knowledge not only in the transmission and preservation of technologies but most importantly of fundamental human experiences. In a world where the relevancy of art, of art practices and art experiences has become tenuous and attacked by other more powerful and accessible forms of experience in image making (mediating technologies connected to entertainment), the institutional experience of art too often becomes another form of reenactment, the reenactment of art, instead of the original event, similar to the reenactment of an historical battle, but as a pale simulacra far removed, in time and in reality, from the actual bloody and deadly, yet real event.

This investigation of craft concepts through an engagement with containment is also found in numerous and rather diverse sculpture practices, particularly embodied and single-out here in the work of Liz Magor. I am thinking specifically (among so many others) of the work of Tony Cragg, of Richard Deacon and Andy Goldsworthy, of Anish Kapoor and Rachel Whiteread in England, all of whom have made numerous container forms and objects, and in Canada of Tom Dean's large scale installation "Excerpts from a Description of the Universe", which presents on welded metal tables, themselves containers, a large assortment of objects made of clay, glass, metal, paper, fabric, etc., and shaped like bootles, vases, clothing, hats and other tools and container forms, often in a state of becoming, of incompleteness. More recently in Vancouver, the work of Damian Moppett (hobbyist wheel thrown pots presented on faux modernist sculptures), of Geoffrey Farmer (movie props, mail boxes, furniture burnt in a fireplace), of Myfanwy McLeod (hothouses, cords of wood) and more specifically of Brian Jungen where we can find masks made with leather athletic shoes (a container becoming another container), whale skeletons made with plastic chairs (again, a container becoming another container), cafeteria trays becoming escape shelters on wheels (you get my point), or leather couches becoming a teepee (yet again). He has also exquisitely crafted ordinary wood pallets in exotic wood in a direct reference to craft and the assignment of value and meaning through material and process (what I call "artism", the ideological belief that certain materials and/or art forms are inherently superior to others) in contemporary art. This recent proliferation of containers, often highly crafted, in contemporary sculpture is not irrelevant and certainly not meaningless and/or arbitrary and my guess is that, at this point intuitively, these various makers are perceiving the extraordinary power of containers to communicate complex ideas in specific ways and specifically non-hierarchical. It may not constitute a movement per se yet and it has not been given a theory yet (this may be the beginning of one) but its current importance goes beyond the individual intuition of separate, disconnected practices. These distinct developments speak of a collective need for the reinvestigation of a deeper connection with real experiences from which art has largely removed itself in the last decades, in its rejection of craft practices and craft concepts, of skill and even talent, in the failure of imagination that resulted from a fixation with dematerialization and mediation. These investigations of the concept of function, of the symbolism of signs in decoration and abstraction and most importantly of the core concept of containment which, again, implies a de-hierarchisation of polarities and binary oppositions so central to language and theories and to normative, discursive and institutional practices propose to us a reevaluation of the role and importance of craft practices where these concepts have always been maintained and explored.

If the use of these concepts around containment was at the core of craft practices historically where they have always been necessary for making and for meaning, within sculpture their use is relatively recent yet now basically endemic and it has possibly become the single most interesting and important development in contemporary sculpture practice. This debt to craft at the conceptual level (to say nothing of other debts at the material, technical, stylistic or esthetic levels) is probably unacknowledged because the artists who are indebted to it are actually unaware that they are. This conceptual debt may actually be unacknowledgeable since it would imply a profound rethinking of the prevalent hierarchies

of value and destroy the statu quo around normative institutional (curatorial) mind set which is largely responsible for the current crisis and stasis in contemporary art. This text aims at rectification and proposes a model and framework for progress.

The connection between these recent sculpture practices with craft practices (and historically there used to be no difference between the two) goes beyond an obvious if important relation with specific materials, particular techniques and processes or an emphasis on transformation by hand, or a connection to history and histories. Most importantly, these contemporary art practices constitute a renewed and different investigation of craft concepts and of the conceptual aspects of crafts, something that has if not been simply dismissed as even a remote possibility, then totally ignored by recent art history, art theory, as well as institutional strategies of institutional display.

Another historical aspect of craft which needs to be positioned as one of its core concept is the notion of anonymity, a characteristic of much contemporary sculpture. Craft objects were, historically at least, more often the expression of a community than an individual. This emphasis on individual expression which was the obsession of the last century through Modernism and which is still dying a slow death here and there, has reduced much visual art to a stylistic practice often based on mannerisms (and this could also be said of design as well as architecture or popular music). The work of the artists I have made reference to here has moved away from this idea of the importance or even necessity of an individual style toward an approach to form that is more neutral and universal. Yet their work remains truly and profoundly original while transcending narrow notions of individual expression. This return to anonymity, stylistically at least, in contemporary art practices and particularly in sculpture, and which as played such an important and seminal role in craft history, should be seriously considered by most if not all those involved in contemporary crafts, where stylistic signature is still unfortunately and erroneously perceived as a necessary attribute.

Beyond these developments in contemporary sculpture, the most recent and important phenomenon in contemporary Canadian art is a phenomenon that could be called "conceptual crafts", which is specific to Canadian culture although its influence is ever more far reaching, which finds its principal manifestation in ceramics and in a very different manner, in textile practice. This development has largely been ignored by art institutions and the art establishment (even within craft institution and the craft establishment!). A dialogue with other art forms, between craft and sculpture for example, could be most beneficial to both since they both find themselves in a state of crisis right now.

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