

# GRACE COCHRANE: SMART WORKS: DESIGN AND THE HANDMADE

SMART WORKS PLACES THE MANY DECISIONS AND SOLUTIONS OF THESE 40 RESOURCEFUL DESIGNERS AND MAKERS IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT.



*Smart works: design and the handmade* is a new craft and design exhibition that has just opened at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Jenny Deves spoke with the curator, Grace Cochrane, about the development of the exhibition.

'Although the original idea for *Smart works* was proposed back in 2003, I have really been working on the exhibition constantly over the last 12 months,' said Grace Cochrane.

It has been a joy to research and select the craftspeople for this show. Some of the practitioners were well known to me, but I have also had the opportunity to get to know many more craftspeople across Australia and New Zealand. It has been fascinating to learn of the wide array of opportunities they have been presented with, and the choices that they have made and why.

*Smart works* presents the work of 40 contemporary craft practitioners. It explores their use of design, the role it takes in their practice and the issues they face in working with industry, locally and internationally, in today's global marketplace. The exhibition focuses on the interface between 'design and the handmade', that is, on the unique expertise and specialist knowledge that crafts practitioners bring to designing for production, with their 'hands-on' knowledge of materials and how they respond to treatment. Cochrane says:

I've been interested for some time in the relationships between the crafts and art, design and industry. The crafts have always been able to lean one way or another, and many craftspeople are both artists and designers, making one-off works while also putting ideas into production.

< Brian Tunks, *Bison homewares*, glazed stoneware, 2006. Designed by Brian Tunks, made at Bison Australia, Pialligo, ACT. Photo: Alan Benson

^ David Trubridge, *New sling rocking recliner*, 2006, American white ash, hoop-pine plywood, stainless-steel screws, CNC router cut, steam bent. Assembled by David Trubridge Ltd and Cicada Works, Industrial Park, Whakatu, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand. Photo: David Trubridge

The exhibition includes metalwork from Andrew Last (NZ) and Robert Foster (ACT); ceramics from Prue Venables (Vic), Les Blakebrough (Tas) and the Ernabella Workshop (SA); glass from Nick Mount (SA) and Ben Edols and Cathy Elliott (NSW); textiles from Liz Williamson (NSW), Vivienne Jablonski (NZ) and Jill Kinnear (Qld); furniture from Rex Heathcote (Tas), Alex Lotersztajn (Qld) and Jon Goulder (NSW/WA); fashion from Akira Isogawa (NSW) and Georgia Chapman (Vic), to name but a few. *Smart works* also contains work resulting from recent initiatives such as FORM's Designing Futures (WA), Swinburne University's Timber Research Project (Vic) and the Australia Council's Maker to Manufacture to Market (MMM) program (Australia-wide).

The exhibition came about as the result of a successful bid for a grant from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council in 2003, to create a major event addressing the VAB's International Craft Strategy. *Smart works* was proposed originally as an international selection, but, Cochrane explains:

I decided to focus on Australians and New Zealanders, as they share similar histories and circumstances in their relatively small local markets, distant location from other markets and the diminishing manufacturing capabilities of their region. *Smart works* places the many decisions and solutions of these 40 resourceful designers and makers in a global context, which I hope will have resonance for those working between contemporary design and the values of the handmade in other countries.

The premise for the exhibition – exploring design and the handmade – also met the priorities of the Powerhouse Museum, Cochrane says, which are:

to explore the changing interfaces between the crafts, decorative and applied arts, design and industry, in the context of the challenges of materials and changing technologies, and the opportunities and constraints of this particular geographic region on markets and audiences.

At the same time, she remarks:

today there is a strong public interest in 'design', and I have been aware of an interest here in a return to the look of, if not the reality of, the handmade in contemporary fashion and homewares.

So *Smart works* responds to a range of contemporary factors that bring interest in the work of craft practitioners to the forefront.

The exhibition has also received a strong response from New Zealand. Creative New Zealand: Arts Council of New Zealand, Toi Aotearoa has supported the New Zealander participants in this project, and the Auckland War Memorial Museum, Tamaki Paenga Hira, has contributed to the publication and plans to show a substantial part of the exhibition in 2008.

The opening of *Smart works* was accompanied by a three-day symposium, with Peter Day (UK) as keynote speaker on 'Economic Futures: Global manufacture and the handmade'. The symposium further explored the global context for contemporary practice, and provided opportunities for practitioners to share their many and varied experiences, from manufacturing in Pakistan to marketing in Japan to designing in China. Some of these stories are explored further in the book that accompanies the exhibition. ■■■■

[www.powerhousemuseum.com](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com)

Jenny Deves is a freelance craft writer with a background in arts management. She is currently undertaking research for Craft Australia.

1. A full listing of exhibiting artists can be found at [www.powerhousemuseum.com/smartworks/](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/smartworks/)

SMARTWORKS: DESIGN AND THE HANDMADE CONTINUES AT THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM, SYDNEY UNTIL 19 AUGUST 2007.