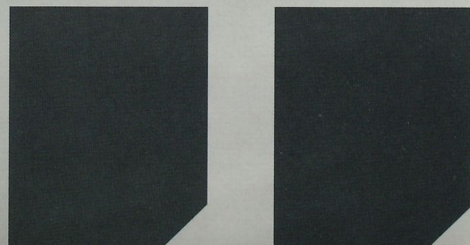
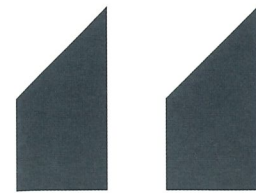


STARTING A NEW SENTENCE ABOUT AUSTRALIAN DESIGN



IF IT IS TRUE THAT AUSTRALIANS DO NOT EXPERIENCE THE WEIGHT OF THE HISTORY AND TRADITIONS THAT EUROPEANS FEEL, IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO THINK THAT WE ARE NOT, NEVERTHELESS, THE PRODUCTS OF OUR OWN.





SOME INTERESTING MOMENTS OCCUR WHERE TRADITIONAL CRAFT VALUES AND THE MECHANICS OF MASS PRODUCTION INTERROGATE EACH OTHER.



According to Susan Cohn, in her group of ironic slogan buttons entitled *Design is ...*, craft is a 'hand job', whereas design 'is not getting your hands dirty'. The reference is to the old dichotomy between hand and mind that dogs the art/craft debate but, as always with Cohn, there's more to get here than what you see. Has the handmade object worn out its aura, redolent with the dignity of human labour and a clutch of positive aesthetic values, and now reduced to nothing more than a wank? And, if so, what of the role of the designer, traditionally removed from the site of labour? In a world where design and style too often translate into Third World sweatshops and cut-price rip-offs, 'not getting your hands dirty' garners a whole new meaning.

that we all want to have a piece of: witty, youthful, dynamic, untrammelled by the burden of long histories and traditions.

However, if it is true that Australians do not experience the weight of the history and traditions that Europeans feel, it would be a mistake to think that we are not, nevertheless, the products of our own. In fact, the last 40 years of craft and design practice in Australia have been shaped by the educational philosophies of teachers who migrated here from Europe and, to a lesser extent, Asia, at the heart of which lie a set of philosophies that privilege craft practice and the aesthetics of handmaking. At the same time, Australian craft and design has had to contend with another, more practical force: the absence of any kind of sizeable or stable local manufacturing base. The hybrid practices of people such as Susan Cohn and Robert Foster unite ideology and pragmatism in equal measure, and look to this fusion to develop innovative production techniques and partnerships as a way of circumventing Australian industry's shortcomings.¹

Some interesting moments occur where traditional craft values and the mechanics of mass production interrogate each other. Janet DeBoos was trained in the Anglo-Japanese traditions of vessel making and, for many years, she has been a potter committed to the aesthetic value of handmaking. More recently, through professional contact with porcelain factories in Milan and China, she has questioned the hypothesis that 'handmade' is automatically better, acknowledging that this powerful idea comes with its own philosophical, historical and emotional baggage, and proposing the possibility that 'the handmade' is just another 'look' in a spectrum of possible stylistic inflections.

The iconoclasm suggested by Cohn could be seen to exemplify the kind of image of Australian design

DeBoos's work, some of it handmade and some mass-produced in a collaborative relationship

< Bede Tungatalum, Alan Kerina, Jock Puautjimi and Natalie Tungatalum from *Tiwi Design*, 2006. Art Direction: Frost Design, Sydney. Photo: Anthony Geernaert

Previous page: Susan Cohn, *Design is ...*, 2006, full panel badge work (detail), badge units and mixed media on aluminium frame. Photo: Shannon McGrath

This dichotomy was dramatised on a wall at the back of the Melbourne Museum, where *Freestyle: new Australian design for living* was first shown. A larger than life-size Robert Foster swung his mallet down upon a sheet of curving metal. The force of the blow was such that his feet lifted from the ground, and the camera shifted, focusing briefly on them as, with each repeated blow, he performed an involuntary dance of making. The image was mesmerising, as a documentation of his skill, certainly, in forging raw metal into a gracefully curved vase, but also because it illustrates the gap that always exists between the turmoil of making and the glamour of a finished product. In *Freestyle*, the dirt and heat of the forge, the controlled chaos of the workshop itself and the sheer physical effort required of Foster seem a world away from the plethora of sleek objects that appear to have simply alighted there, immaculately conceived and brought into being through who knows what magical processes.

she has built up with the Huaguang Zibo Bone China factory in China, presents an absorbing study in translation. The first works produced during the collaboration were made from models based on drawings. Reading them alongside her handmade work is a little like looking at an attempt at imitating someone's handwriting: the lines are all there, in the right place, but there is a certain stiffness, a lack of fluidity, with no sense of the 'personality' of a specific hand. Her more recent work with Zibo has been based on casts made from handmade models. This project has brought both factory and designer into new territory, compelling the factory to innovate to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of her haptic, asymmetrical objects, and leading DeBoos to re-assess the significance of handmaking. She observes that 'makers seem to make different ceramic designs from those produced by "designers"'. There is an understanding of the way materials behave ... which seems to produce more seamlessly functional objects'.² For DeBoos, then, the importance of handmaking is no longer so much bound up with aesthetics as it is with the way in which an object is conceived from first principles.

Australia's comparatively youthful design scene is heir to both the pleasures and the discontents of a globalised world, a world in which traditional aesthetic debates about the value of the handmade are coming under increasing pressure. Tools such as the rapid prototyper have revolutionised the act of making, and so have digital and communication technologies. These have allowed designers to rethink their processes, using the computer as a modelling tool, or to create solely virtual objects.

For example, the work of Simone LeAmon uses computer-generated models, maquettes and video performance, providing an engrossing insight into the way in which the production of an object might constitute a speculative dialogue between the material and virtual worlds. At a more practical level, our digital and communication capacities mean that a designer does not even have to live on the same continent as his or her manufacturer. Many of the exhibitors in *Freestyle* have taken advantage of these possibilities: Robert Foster, Jon Goulder and Stefan Lie have all outsourced at least one product in their ranges to Asia.

And of course, digital and communication technologies also make a world of objects seamlessly available to those of us in developed countries fortunate enough to have access to them. The Net allows us to explore museum collections, or to purchase almost anything from anywhere without leaving our own living rooms. Cheap travel and digital technology have opened up even the remotest locations and their material cultures to our scrutiny and consumption. If this presents an unprecedentedly wide range of possibilities to designers, it also presents them with a set of moral dilemmas.

The fashion label Easton Pearson is able to create elaborately embellished clothing at a comparatively affordable price because they use the expertise of artisans in India and Vietnam who work for a fraction of the cost of producing similar textiles in Australia. At the same time, the lives and work of Pamela Easton and Lydia Pearson have been shaped by the priorities of their Third World workers. For example, as a small embroidery enterprise in Mumbai has grown to accommodate the burgeoning Easton Pearson range, the partners feel a strong sense of responsibility to the 300 workers now dependent on them, acknowledging that they sometimes design ranges specifically to keep the factory in work. In their own small way, Easton Pearson is reversing the priorities of the famously relentless appetite of the fashion industry for novelty and change, by using their increasing influence on the catwalk to make a space for other concerns to affect its aesthetic regimes.

Another model of the globalised designer operating across cultures is Alex Lotersztain. Working between bases in Barcelona and Australia, Lotersztain also acts as the head of the design team for InAfrica Community Foundation, an enterprise that fosters the production of objects that have the potential to appeal to export markets, using local artisans, materials and technologies. The purpose of this program is to assist communities in becoming self-sustaining. Lotersztain prioritises social responsibility, seeing himself as a facilitator and collaborator rather than a style-maker.

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✓ Easton Pearson, Autumn/Winter Collection Fashion Parade, 2006. Photo: Brad Hick Six 6 Photography

> Robert Foster plishing the aluminium edge of a light, 2005. Photo: Shaylor Bewley, Czar Photo Studio



The philosophies about the value of craft, which were imported to Australia and taught in our art schools, developed in the nineteenth century as an antidote to the unprecedented social, economic and political changes that took place in Europe as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Designed to instate the handmade object as a corrective to the 'soulless' product of mass production, these philosophies constitute a nostalgic revisitation of a largely romanticised, pre-modern past.

✓ Alexander Lotersztain,
Africa Project, InAfrica
Community Foundation.
Photo: courtesy
Alexander Lotersztain



It might be argued that the rapid changes brought about by globalisation have given these values fresh impetus. The very things that create such exciting opportunities for young designers also have the potential to be destabilising and confronting: in a world of constantly changing geopolitical, cultural and technological frontiers, a return to the supposedly stable aesthetic values of the past could be seen to be

reassuring. However, the labour-intensive nature of handcrafting makes it economically infeasible to realise in developed countries, so it could be argued that, in the abundance of handcrafted objects imported to the West from developing countries, we are seeing the outsourcing of not only the labour entailed in their making but also of the philosophical baggage that goes with it.³ Perhaps in this new, globalised world, we are again reassuring ourselves with an aesthetic fantasy, exchanging a nostalgic dream of our pre-modern past for an equally nostalgic fantasy about the pre-modern present of developing countries.

My purpose here is not to criticise the work of organisations such as InAfrica Community Foundation, or of designers like Easton Pearson and Lotersztain. After all, it could equally be argued that the changes to lives and communities brought about by their projects lend more retrospective substance to the way in which European craft philosophies linked handmaking and human dignity than was ever achieved in the West.

IN A WORLD WHERE DESIGN AND STYLE TOO OFTEN TRANSLATE INTO THIRD WORLD SWEATSHOPS AND CUT-PRICE RIP-OFFS, 'NOT GETTING YOUR HANDS DIRTY' GARNERS A WHOLE NEW MEANING.



My point is not so much directed at the making end of the enterprise, as at the receiving end. It is important to keep visible the realities and complexities of these kinds of intercultural projects, and this is difficult to do within the context of a large exhibition like *Freestyle*, in which the objects and their designers take centre stage. In this context, the fact that some of the works exhibited under Lotersztain's name were made in collaboration with artisans from Africa is easily lost in the welter of other information in the show. *Freestyle* attempts to bridge the gap between making and object in the six videos of artists that are continuously screened in the exhibition space. It would have been fascinating to have seen one of these follow the work of Lotersztain in the African communities with whom he collaborates, as a way of understanding the social, cultural and economic realities that separate the communities that make the products, from those of us who consume them.

This seems particularly important in an exhibition from Australia, where the interpenetration of two divergent cultures is a living reality. It was good to see this reality reflected in the presence in *Freestyle* of two Indigenous arts cooperatives, Maningrida Arts and Culture and Tiwi Design. As the catalogue to the exhibition is at pains to point out, these institutions play a crucial role in the reinterpretation by Indigenous communities of traditional cultural practices, a dynamic and ever-changing set of transactions that constantly respond to contemporary stimuli. If at times it felt as though the generic title 'designer', with its overwhelmingly Western frame of reference, seemed most under strain in connection with these makers, perhaps in the end they can also be seen as a hopeful counterpoint to the dilemmas posed by Cohn's sloganising buttons. These Indigenous makers inhabit cultures that have survived despite everything that colonisation has thrown at them, and through this have become adept at keeping their traditions relevant to the constantly changing realities with which they have to live. And maybe that is the most important role confronting any maker, whatever we may choose to call them. ■■■■

www.freestyledesign.info

www.cohnartist.com

www.eastonpearson.com

www.finkdesign.com

www.inafrica.org/html/index.htm

www.maningrida.com

www.tiwiart.com

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1. These issues are discussed in greater detail by Paul McGillick and Grace Cochrane in their essays for the catalogue to the exhibition, Brian Parkes (ed.), *Freestyle: new Australian design for living*, Object Centre for Craft and Design, Sydney, and Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2006.
2. *Freestyle*, p. 102. Janet DeBoos in conversation with Brian Parkes.
3. This possibility is interestingly reflected in this excerpt from InAfricaCommunity Foundation's website promotional material: 'The new aesthetic movement away from mass-produced products towards an appreciation of simple and natural design has brought about a world appreciation of traditional African handcraft skills that celebrate culture and origin.' www.inafrica.org/html/index.htm