

Relationship counselling:

The current state of the union between contemporary art and craft





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Tom Moore, *Hammer Girl
and the Weasel (goes pop)*,
2007, hotworked glass, steel
scissors, jewellers hammer.
Photo: Keith Saunders
Josiah McElheny, *Landscape
Model for Total Reflective
Abstraction (detail)*, 2004,
mirrored glass table, hand-
blown mirrored glass objects.
© Josiah McElheny.
Photo: courtesy Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York

The relationship between contemporary art and craft rides many waves, depending on the current political, social and cultural climates, and discussion on the topic has always been fuelled by much opinion and great debate. If the recent number of exhibitions featuring artists working in the contemporary art/craft crossover are anything to go by, this discussion is not set to wane any time soon. **Robert Cook** offers his own opinion on the current state of play.

Okay kids and campers, news flash from Dr Phil: relationships are never stable! Fine, you knew that. Still, it's worth reminding ourselves of the fact, especially as we take a gander at the current state of the relationship between craft and art. See, craft and art, like all couples, go through phases, from hatred, to envy, to boredom, to enthralled passion – and every state in between. Indeed, so fluid and dynamic are they that there are always aspects of one state in the other. There is hate when love is in the eye, dependence when they are at their most independent. To boldly announce that the current relationship between art and craft is This or That, therefore, couldn't be anything but an emotional lie. Obviously, the relationship is as multifaceted as it has always been, dragging baggage from the old days as well as offering glimpses of what shape the relationship might take in the future. The current state of play, therefore, is a bit George and Mildred Roper, a bit Elaine and Jerry, a bit Harry and Sally, a bit sibling style, and, as we shall see in conclusion, more than a little Dharma and Greg. Plus, there are some new children of the partnership to consider ...

Before we get to our union's blessed offspring, though, let's start at one end of the mood spectrum, the end where there's still some bickering and tetchiness going down between our parties. I'll say it straight: crafties reckon arties are ponderous tossers and arties reckon crafties are twee drips. If you mention one to the other there's

usually a rolling of the eyes and a distinct wince. I know this because I've been in both teams' locker rooms. I am not, however, naming names! This is not just out of good manners, it is also because I reckon such attitudes are little more than a reflex these days. No-one even knows they are doing it is my guess. While there remains, among some, a feeling that one has to keep the antigens of the other at bay, I think the mutual *sotto voce* dissing is generally a sloppy reflex. It's a residual attitude – unfelt, unreal, part of the ongoing George and Mildred pissyness of a relationship bound by past petulant emotions no-one can really remember the source of anymore.

It is meaningless (and therefore irrelevant) because there are no stakes anymore. Sure, we have *differences* between what folk call 'craft' and what folk call 'art', but not the same anguished sense of hierarchy. These days, both 'forms' basically live under The Order of Art. Larry Shiner, in his book *The Invention of Art*, considers it in the following terms:

The assimilation of craft media into fine art began in the late 1950s from two directions: from the side of artists, who began to take up craft identified materials, and from the side of craftspeople who began to take up the styles and nonfunctional aims of fine art. After World War II, many university fine art departments began to offer programs in the studio crafts, which meant that ceramics, weaving, and wood-working students, who might otherwise have gone through an apprenticeship or vocational school, imbibed the same kind of art history and art-world ideas as their fellow students in painting, sculpture, or graphics.¹

I know there are exceptions, but Shiner's take feels right. Crafties continue to make art using craft materials and craft processes. Sometimes

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it is developed into production lines, sometimes works are unique. No matter: art is the frame we bring to the work, more or less. The sense that one (craft or art) is greater or lesser has subsequently disappeared. This is because both have matured and developed distinct audiences and markets to support their work within the same general order. And within it, no-one is stealing anyone else's piece of the pie.² Given this, the reflexes of the bad old days remain but only like some prehistoric species memory in the back part of their brains where the stem dingles down to the spine. In general, they lead happily separate lives, and don't even bother with a telegram at Christmas time.

Mostly, this is ... because there are instances of cosiness where crafties have more in common with arties (and vice versa) than other members of their own clan. Indeed, there are huge divides between crafties themselves, and arties too – there is not A Craft Scene, the same way there is not An Art Scene. The organic uncanny of makers around Gallery Funaki and the spritzzy dazzle of the glass of David Hay, Rod Coleman, Ben Edols and Kathy Elliott for instance, couldn't be more different. A whole cloth-coated sociology of tastes applies to the differences. There is more aesthetic and intellectual kinship between the work of Mari Funaki and Dale Frank (or Susan Norrie even), than Funaki and Moje. It's the same with how Jessica Loughlin's glass works connect with the paintings of late painter and sculptor Howard Taylor; both use their media to speak about the properties and the perception of light in a natural 3D world. The synergies of sympathy between artist and craftie are clear. When both parties are alive, they know

they're working on the same frequency and, most importantly, level of formal intensity. Both come together as distinct individuals and a mature relationship is evident; differences and similarities are left intact. This is the Jerry and Elaine style of relationship: they like each other, really get where each other are coming from, but couldn't make it work if they were to try and unite. They are happy where they are, separate, yet intimately connected nonetheless ... the same, but, like, not ...

On the flipside are those interested in a more assertive exploration of the other's territory. The work of glass-maker Josiah McElheny is important in this category. McElheny is a committed and extremely technically savvy glass-maker whose installations comment on (and embody) the processes of making and histories of museum display. More precisely, McElheny's work engages with the histories of modernism that continue to determine the meanings materials carry within them. McElheny's work brings attention to the issues impinging on what makes it something to look at in the first place. Gregory Volk has summed up McElheny's practice perfectly, stating that he is:

an exquisite practitioner of 'craft secrets', to borrow the high modernist term that Clement Greenberg applied to avant-garde art, as opposed to glass or any other craft. What McElheny accomplishes ... is to make glass as relevant, as charged with intellectual and esthetic inquiry as any other medium.³

In light of that, it is vital to stress, again, the level of medium-specific craft skill that is the foundation of McElheny's practice. He is not 'employing media' as some artists do to make various points, but working through its media-specific challenges and simultaneously engaging in the meta-narratives that, for many, define the distinction between our art and craft couple. In McElheny's smart and incredibly refined work the couple become true twins – identical siblings that cannot be separated.

Though she uses different means, this is also the case in the work of American artist Andrea Zittel. Zittel seems intent on creating her own pioneering Thoreau-style domain outside the inherited passivity of modern consumerism – she creates a republic of one. Accordingly, her use of craft activities has centred on issues of self reliance, and in doing so moves out of the categories we know both art and craft by. She knits using her fingers, she has made small islands to live on, mobile escape capsules, furniture and even her own home at the Joshua Tree. In her work and life, craft, art and design are simply conduits for surviving in the world. These modalities sit comfortably alongside architecture, mechanics, engineering and agriculture – all of which her work also mobilises. None is more important than the other, just more necessary at a given time;



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they exist to get a job done, and, in fact, the naming of them becomes completely irrelevant. The pragmatics of their activities has bled the romance out of the relationship so that no taut difference exists. As such, the partners in the relationship look out together so that the romantic desire is not between them anymore but between the Order of Art and the Order of Life now. And that, we know, is a whole other deal.

There are those artists, however, for whom craft remains interesting and necessary because it is on a different plane of meaning. Take the work of Mike Kelley. Kelley's crafted objects are redolent of the normative processes of psychotherapy.⁴ His mutant dolls, in particular, sit between the id and the ego. The craft shows the repressed coming through. It shows the gaps and the breakages. It cannot be papered over. It is a hothouse of the irruption of desire. As such, craft is *the shape of a symptom*. This generative use of craft to see beyond the superficial and to embody the collision of power and desire that structures our everyday world is also played out in recent work by young Australian artist Stuart Bailey. For a recent exhibition at the Fremantle Arts Centre – *Crafting Self-esteem* – he staged an (imaginative) art therapy session between a group of troubled male teens and late Australian artist Basil Hadley. The small objects, placed around Hadley's lesser known, quite crude sexual work, express a sense of tender, dorky longing. The craft class has been about the direct expression of desires in a context that will not judge, but 'hold the feelings' as they say. The objects are cathartic, holding vessels, but also needing, full of voice. Even so, or maybe especially so, they do not move beyond themselves into the realm of art proper. Their crafty dimension holds them in a psychotherapeutic context that refuses to be fully taken over by the art type of looking. This succeeds even in a context whereby the art domain offers it up as spectacle. Individual personalities and their unfathomable troubles exist, indefinitely, colonising Hadley's art, stripping it of its airs and making it into a more direct assertion of teen obsessions and libido. Craft is, again, the repressed of art, and in Bailey's work it returned to eat it whole.

There is another, similar (albeit differently woven) thread to the relationship that gives equal, though less ferocious, agency to the craft side of the pairing. In it, craft is Dharma to art's Greg; craft is the cool but outright kooky wild young thing ready and wired and carefree enough to take the more buttoned-up of us down a highway of new thrills and pleasures. Here we find the work of Josh Petherick, a skinny young artist with a beard who lives in Melbourne. I first came across his work in an issue of *The Drama*. His work was on the cover. It was a looping series of lines, like a rainbow. The rainbow had these crazy little eyes! They were such beautiful and quirky drawings. Some research revealed that his work is not just about the two dimensional: there is a quasi craft practice too. For instance, he made a series of macrame ceiling hangings. He has also made macrame diamonds (or squares). On these, he places small bubbly eyes too, so each crafted item has a personality. They are the sorts of oddities one might find at a jumble sale or a crafts fair, or the

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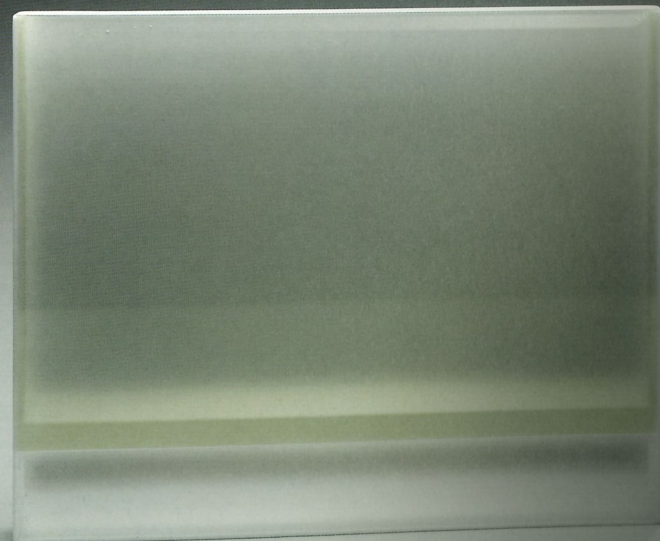
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7 Josh Petherick, from the series *Small Protest Studies*, 2006, plasticine, wood, plastic, wool. Photo: courtesy the artist

> Stuart Bailey, *Crafting Self-esteem* installation detail, (Untitled), 2007, polystyrene, dowel, paper, glue, broom stick and witches hat. Photo: Bewley Shaylor

✓ Jessica Loughlin, *Becloud*, 2006, kiln formed and cut glass. Photo: Grant Hancock



CWA. Yet they are more free than that, expressing the sheer pleasure in doing something so harmless. His works are like little creatures going out into the world. In more recent work he has been focusing on the educational practices of the 1960s, the hippy dream of sustainability with a bit of Buckminster Fuller thrown in for good measure. The retro throwback is not simply about the safety of aesthetic appreciation from an ironic distance, but a fresh and amazingly creative take on the *aesthetics and ethics of joining-in*. The engagement with the three dimensional also seems to move back into the drawing and designing, and there seems very little difference between the two. Petherick's deliciously inquisitive approach to art and craft is redemptive and generous.

There are resonances here with the new crafting boom, which is a recent international development of that whole 'knitting is cool' thing. Remember a few years ago there were certain bars – though not in my city – encouraging us to get together and knit? It was the new something-or-other. Though the impetus may have fallen off a bit in the popular sphere, in another way crafting has taken off.

The new magazine *Craft: Transforming traditional craft* is a great instance of this.⁵ It has features on making little dolls, the uses of buttons, sewing-machine tech, handsome men who craft, origami, and even wine-making. It is very practical, hip in a pragmatic, down-beat non-uppity way – the making is what matters. Arguably, its main achievement, though, is to define a new breed of maker. This maker is a committed hobbyist, a devout amateur who lives outside the Order of Art, residing in hearts and minds, bedrooms and bed-sits, crafting lives outside the use of craft to illustrate art's bigger points. As such, it also lives outside the art-craft affair too. It is a separation; it is now fully Dharma without the tetchy watchful, anxious Greg.

Yet again, therefore, craft is an opening. It offers a form of relaxation that art was missing. It is possible that in many of these relationships, craft is the primitivism to art's modernism. It must be engaged with to take it to another place. In other words, craft is where art goes in order to find out more about itself. So, again, the psychotherapeutic motif is significant. But the thing is, this is also an

expansion (via the amateur's relaxation of finish fetishism) of what craft has turned into under the Order of Art. Crafting, in contrast to craft, is a mobile and endlessly strange set of escapades where mastery is not as important as exploration and inquisitiveness. Crafting is pure pleasure!

Crafting is, clearly, a new *and* an old child of the art and craft coupling. As such a child it has qualities of each parent but is a new entity, and partly rebellious against how each of them is at the moment. As it grows up, it will no doubt come to understand where its parents were coming from, gain some perspective, some critical faculties, by which stage it will be ready to have children of its own. Who it mates with will have some bearing on what type of being is produced, of course. Being no kind of matchmaker or futurist, I have no idea how it will all turn out ... except that there will be ups and downs, misunderstandings, power plays, cannibalistic forays and just a little cheeky frisson under the table. ■■■■

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1. Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A cultural history*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001, p. 274.
2. I know, what a statement! But kinda true I think. It is hard to imagine an artist like John Nixon fighting for market share with Bronwyn Goss. They have entirely different audiences within the same broad gallery system.
3. Gregory Volk, 'An infinity of objects', in *Art in America*, October, 2006, p. 169.
4. I am thinking of his work from the early 1990s, works like the *Craft Morphology Flow Chart and Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology* series.
5. As is the less recent, and (sadly) hardly ever updated, and maybe even defunct! *American Homebody*.



> Josiah McElheny, *An End to Modernity*, 2005, nickel-plated aluminium, electric lighting, hand-blown glass, steel cable, rigging. © Josiah McElheny. Photo: courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York