

Speaking Through Hands

Mass culture and mass manufacturing has certainly replaced much of the world of traditional arts and crafts. But the handmade artwork speaks not only to tradition, but also deeply to the histories and personal worlds in which the artists live. In Adelaide, South Australia, Craftsouth's Wish List 2009 exhibition shows that the handmade object is not only alive and well but is flourishing.

By Christine Nicholls

In the space of just a few years, Craftsouth's *Wish List* exhibition has become a greatly anticipated occasion on the annual South Australian artistic calendar. Each year a selection committee chooses a relatively small number of Craftsouth's members' artworks for display in this big-ticket event.

Craftsouth has almost 500 members and this year a record field of entrants

competed for the opportunity to show their work at the Adelaide Central School of Art in Norwood. The 2009 Wish List Selection Committee was therefore faced with a particularly difficult decision-making task.

Membership to Craftsouth is open to craftspeople (who currently comprise the majority of its members) as well as to artists working in other genres. While the diversity of media and range of different

genres of artwork created by the Craftsouth membership is a reflection of increasing diversification of its membership base, this also poses significant challenges to curators and designers of this annual exhibition. For example, how feasible is it to create a single, coherent, well-integrated exhibition from such spectacularly diverse artworks?

On the whole, the most successful works in this year's exhibition were



Matt Burgess, *Awakening Light*, 2008, lead crystal glass, rubber, 20 x 11 x 18 cm. All images: Courtesy of Craftsouth.

three-dimensional. Several of these stand out. One was Matt Burgess's intriguing figurative lead crystal glasswork of a lone, hunched, (apparently) male figure. Attached to the sitting figure's mouth, perhaps bafflingly, was a coiled length of rubber hosing. This raised questions about the nature of the man's relationship with the rubber piping.

Is this naked man in the grip of a serious physical addiction, to drugs, for example? Or is the work expressive of a metaphorical attachment of some kind? Perhaps the man is painfully attached to an extreme ideology, or is he maybe grappling with an addictive, fatally flawed, failed romance? The man's absolute solitariness and self-contained-ness is emphasized by his stance. Burgess has named his enigmatic work *Awakening Light*, perhaps pointing to the possibility that the figure, seated Buddha-like, is on the cusp of enlightenment (chemically induced?) The work's open-endedness and mystery are among its real strengths. The fact that it is technically flawless also contributes greatly to the success of *Awakening Light*.

Another highlight of *Wish List 2009* was Hans Kreiner's compelling, hard-hitting, and equally technically accomplished work, *For Skin and Bones*. Kreiner's haunting work, comprising conjoined skeletal cutout shapes fashioned from kid skin dyed red, evokes blood, sex, and death, also giving rise to other kinds of free association. As is the case with many fine artworks, *For Skin and Bones* gives the impression of a journey that will continue, for the artist, long after the exhibition finishes. While *For Skin and Bones* calls to mind the mediaeval tradition of the "Dance of Death," or *Danse Macabre*, and even perhaps the pre-Hispanic Mexican "Día de los Muertos" ("Day of the Dead") of the Aztecs, the work also seems imbued with a narrative of a very personal nature. *For Skin and Bones* offers a glimpse into the horror, despair, and death lurking beneath the surface of the quotidian, affording the work a lingering power. The fact that, in terms of skill and scrupulous craftsmanship, Kreiner is without peer in his field, also contributes to the potency of his arresting work.

With respect to those same qualities of craftsmanship and the high skill level involved, Erin Keys's wittily titled *Kitchen Tales # 1* and *Kitchen Tales # 2* are also significant works, pointing to a bright future for this dynamic and gifted young artist. Keys's sleek, funky, but lethal-looking carved carbon graphite stainless-steel knives are masterpieces of strong, simple design. As such, they are authentic *objets*



Hans Kreiner, *For Skin and Bones*, 2009, kid skin, 65 x 43 cm. Photograph by Michael Haines.

d'art, a good deal more than 'mere' kitchen knives, transcending their functionality.

Naming these objects *Kitchen Tales # 1* and *# 2* was an exceedingly clever move on the artist's part. In terms of framing responses this nomenclature causes a subtle shift in how one perceives these implements. There is something beautifully sensuous as well as brutally erotic about these knives. Such subtextual energies are in part conveyed, or at least reinforced, by this titling.



Above: Erin Keys, *Kitchen Tales #2*, 2008, carved carbon graphite, stainless steel, 20 x 6 x 3 cm. Above (top): Erin Keys, *Kitchen Tales #1*, 2008, carved carbon graphite, stainless steel, 20 x 6 x 3 cm.

But perhaps I have a lurid imagination, because Erin Keys herself writes that in naming thus her work she was tapping into cultural memory: "...ideas of stories and recipes handed down and... traditions that are stored deep in our subconscious minds." These splendid knives do indeed seem to be embedded in a broader narrative—limited only by the imagination of the viewer.

Regine Schwarzer's gorgeously chunky *Faceted Neckpiece*, comprising sterling silver, nickel silver, and fishing line, confirms this artist's place among Australia's most important contemporary designers and jewelers. By her daring use of combinations and juxtapositions of the valuable alongside the relatively commonplace or ordinary—in this instance, sterling silver threaded onto a length of fishing line—Schwarzer has created jewelry of striking originality. Notwithstanding the quiet understatement of this work, Regine Schwarzer has created a treasure, though she is not one to shout about that.

This German-born artist has other works in this exhibition, too. In these, Schwarzer furthers her continuing explorations or researches into faceted forms inspired by hexagonally shaped gemstones. While the jewelry that Schwarzer creates is alluring, at the same time, it is characterized by a virtuous restraint, allowing us to appreciate its intellectual and sensuous qualities in equal measure.

Another jeweler and object designer, Czech-born Radka Passianova, has assembled a neckpiece (*Poison*, 2008) from 24 carat gold, stainless steel, and brass. As is the case with some of Schwarzer's work, the precious and the everyday are brought together with startling effect. Such bricolage of relatively worthless 'found' and valuable materials is indicative of an increasingly mainstream development in contemporary Australian jewelry making, which in turn reflects international trends.

Juju Haifawi's small amulet that she has called *Sorry Necklet, or Sorry and Hello!* is a small, unostentatious gift that the maker proffers as an apology and as symbolic compensation to Indigenous Australians for the wrongs of the past and present.

This votive offering comprises a container woven from flattened black drinking straws, inside of which are seeds and wooden beads that have been fashioned into a bracelet. Haifawi's gift shows that for this maker, equity and social justice, in conjunction with a genuinely humble, heartfelt apology, encapsulate values that outweigh more quantifiable scales of worth.

At the center of the gallery Meghann Jones's rather unworldly creations, forged from anodized aluminum, held pride of

place. These sleek, highly covetable larger-scale works, made recently while she was undertaking a mentorship with Robert Foster, attracted a good deal of favorable attention on *Wish List*'s opening night.

John Ferguson created a masterpiece with his exquisitely textured ceramic work entitled *3 Shades Black*. Saggared in a kiln (over a ten-hour period), this elegant, understated, conceptual work was, in my view, a very strong contender for 'best in show'. The subtle piercings in the slightly off-center concentric roundels imbue Ferguson's work with a seductive beauty. These tiny holes testify to infinite patience and skill on the part of their maker.

John Ferguson writes that *3 Shades Black* is an integral part of his ongoing "exploration of the closed form." He cites Barbara Hepworth's *oeuvre* as having influenced his own aesthetic, pointing to her *Head* (Mykonos, 1959) and her pierced forms as particularly strong influences. In citing the following excerpt from Henry James's 1932 *Creative Symposium*, Ferguson sheds further light on the philosophy that informs his practice: "The first hole made through a piece of stone is a revelation. The hole connects one side to the other, making it immediately more three-dimensional. A hole can itself have as much shape-meaning as a solid mass."

The constellations of small puncture marks near the center of *3 Shades Black* 'speak to' a calm, gradual rhythm of creation. An enticing tactility is another quality of this virtuosic work. Ferguson's marvelous ceramic works merit a very wide audience.

Other ceramic works in the exhibition, notably Phil Hart's *Bowl*, Stephanie James-Manttan's *Altered Vessel #6* and *Indented Vessel #2*, and South American-born Silvia Stansfield's *Mexican Flavor*, were also greatly admired by *Wish List* audiences.



Phil Hart, Bowl, ceramic wheel thrown, encaustic inlaid slip decoration, pebble burnished surface, glazed interior, 2009, 15 x 20 cm.



Regine Schwarzer, Faceted necklace, 2008, sterling silver, nickel silver, fishing line, 19 diameter 3.5 x 6 x 3 cm.



Radka Passianova, Poison – neck piece (detail), 2008, 24ct gold, stainless steel, brass, 20 x 20 x 7 cm.



John Ferguson, 3 Shades Black, 2009, thrown enclosed form : sawdust saggared-fired, 28 x 28 x 10 cm. Photograph by Grant Hancock. Private collection.



Rebecca Whittemore, Identity Landscape # 28, 2008, giclee print, photograph, 44 x 52 cm.

Other well-received works in *Wish List* included Bev Bills's *Ins and Outs*, a hand-woven shawl in which she used a striking combination of wool and cotton interwoven with linen. Bills's skilful deployment of color contrasts—purple, mauve, and light blue interwoven with black—elicited a good deal of favorable comment. Thomas Buchanan's *First Light* is a mixed-media-on-canvas work, depicting what seems to be an Adelaide cityscape. In this Buchanan deploys bizarrely skewed perspective and a strange, otherworldly palette. The talented Megan O'Hara's *Life's Library*, in which she has positioned seed-pods to simulate the patterns of chromosomes, was also very engaging.

Rebecca Whittemore's 'sculptural photograph' of shipping containers in her *Identity Landscape #28* was a beautifully composed work, evoking travel, distance, and alienation. It does not seem accidental that, in this work, Whittemore, a recent migrant to Australia from the United States, rehearses themes relating to her personal identity, memory, and movement. This small, fetching photograph was preceded by Whittemore's construction of a maquette of these shipping containers (a symphony in boxes?). Shipping containers are symbols, *par excellence*, of global trans-nationalism and of fluid, shifting identities.

Fran Callen's *Dogs in Coober Pedy* was a delightful and skillfully wrought drawing in which she used pen and ink on paper as well as watercolors, tea, and acrylic. In this work, Callen evokes skinny, mangy dogs in a rural South Australian town. Coober Pedy is famous for all of the wrong reasons (bodies that disappear down mine shafts, crimes of passion, and occasional flare-ups among the town's many migrant groups, and problems in race relations). The dogs' 'parts' sag downwards, giving Callen's work a cartoon-like quality. A lot has been packed into this

small work. *Dogs in Coober Pedy* provides quite a detailed sociological sketch of Coober Pedy's priorities (or lack thereof). The primacy of motor vehicles, especially the Toyota, and the lottery outlet, and the preponderance of lean, stray dogs are evident in Callen's beguiling work.

Lauren Arnott demonstrated her fascination with classical themes in *The Medusa*, created with texta brush pens and acrylic. In Robert Habel's work *14 Days in New Zealand with 14 Handkerchiefs*, the artist has oil-painted classic scenes from the New Zealand landscape directly on to a set of rather drab men's handkerchiefs. This work was tongue in cheek and a lot of fun.

Finally, and most certainly not least, Pamela Kouwenhoven's *Pressing Dryland 3*, focusing on monumental and mundane aspects of environmental degradation, climate change, and chronic human maladaptation to the country we call Australia, was a beautifully realized work. Kouwenhoven's conceptual artwork exists at the borderlands between sculptural assemblage and two-dimensional work. *Pressing Dryland 3* has been created (largely) from crumbling, discarded pieces of malthoid, a membranous substance used to line water tanks, and also from bits of disintegrating, derelict water tanks. Kouwenhoven's layered, complex work also involves 'speaking back' to those Indigenous works comprising aerial views of this brown, massively eroded 'country' and often fire-blackened country. It reminds us that the earth has a skin, a membrane. In this respect Kouwenhoven's marvelous work also delivers a strong, although indirect, environmental message.

Wish List was an important celebration of the handmade, and the principles and philosophies that underlie the handmade. For a city like Adelaide that has a history of supporting the arts, the significance of such an exhibition cannot be overestimated. In these days of mass culture and the mass commodity manufacture that flows from it (even in times of economic downturn), there is no replacement for the handmade. The irreplaceability of the handmade goes well beyond simplistic notions that incline human beings towards nostalgia for the past, but goes to the heart of the visual arts' creative process.



Wish List 2009, installation view, Adelaide Central Gallery, Norwood, SA, July 10, 2009. Photograph by Niki Vouis.

In a recent book by Barbara Bolt, entitled *Art Beyond Representation*, the author discusses how art- and craft-making involve the makers' bodies, but most particularly their hands. Among the central ideas that she discusses are ideas about 'handling' and 'handlability' that are involved in art making. These are terms and concepts that she has borrowed from Heidegger. It is important to remember that art-making is a bodily process.

Barbara Bolt, herself a visual artist, also discusses that certain 'indefinable moment' when a work that is being painted or otherwise created, slips out of the artist's conscious control, seemingly taking on a life of its own. This leads to this book's assumption-shattering central proposition: that visual art is not (or not exclusively)

a representational practice, but rather, it is *performative*. As Bolt has written: "...It breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers and generally runs away from me."

The fact that sculptural art and craftworks are 'handmade' is what gives them that breath of life. It should also be noted that handmade objects rescue us from the dull monotony of cultural homogeneity.

Making and painting by hand (and it goes without saying that the imagination and the brain are also involved—in fact, the brain controls the hand) also allow artists and makers to integrate their own personal autobiographies, histories, and life narratives into the objects and paintings that they create. The makers' own stories inhabit these art and craftworks,

actively undermining homogenization, cultural commodification, and the tedium and uniformity of sameness, while also creating conditions in which self-reflective and self-critical practice can develop. *Wish List* reflects this counter-hegemonic tendency, actively maintaining and indeed celebrating the time-honored principles and values underpinning handmade artwork. The success of *Wish List 2009* made it strikingly apparent that in Adelaide there is a large contemporary audience—of both viewers and purchasers—for the handmade. Δ



Pamela Kouwenhoven, *Pressing Dryland – Site 3*, 2009, discarded malthoid on board, 140 x 132.5 cm.

Dr. Christine Nicholls is a contributing editor for Australia for World Sculpture News and Asian Art News. She is based in Adelaide, South Australia, where she teaches at Flinders University, specializing in Indigenous Australian art.