

Open House: 3rd Tamworth Textile Triennial

Glenn Barkley

In recent years, there has been a global shift to the hand-made. Online forums, stitch-‘n’-bitch groups, master classes across the country, workshops, university and TAFE courses, and private studios are all running at full capacity, with a flood of eager makers curious about this thing called ‘craft’.

Paradoxically, this revival of interest in the hand-made has happened at a time when the screen has come to dominate our lives; when ‘downtime’ is the time spent waiting while we download a movie from the internet. That precious interlude has become a place for making. While the internet can dull the mind, it also enables us to make – or at least to see how to make – virtually anything, with YouTube art tutorials available in the comfort of our own home.

Instagram has made it possible for art and craft makers to survive in a global marketplace. Something made in Newcastle can now be premiered online instantaneously to audiences from Paris to Hong Kong.

For artists, this has led to an increased awareness both of the hand-made and of the conceptual and social limits of craft production.

For many artists working within the construct of the ‘art world’, as opposed to the ‘craft world’, textiles appeal for the same reasons as do ceramics: for the sense of social inclusion and the sheer aesthetic and conceptual unruliness; for the sense of ‘anything goes’ and ‘anyone can do it’ – LOLz galore; and because of a palpable flattening of hierarchy and gender. Simultaneously, the art world itself has changed, especially the high temples of the ‘artspace’ and the ‘art gallery’, and the openness suggested by the postmodern, ‘anything goes’ world

is now a reality (for some) of increased opportunities to show and sell their work.

The English potter Alison Britton describes craft as follows: 'Absorbing and stimulating and weird because it is marginal, unfenced and up for grabs ... craft is not a definable kind of practice with its own rules, but insinuates itself across the fields of art and design[;] it is more dynamic and complex than is often assumed.'¹

It is these factors – the 'weirdness', coupled with the craft's connections to the everyday, domestic sphere – that give textiles an authenticity that makers find appealing and, importantly, comforting.

The disciplines of work and labour, the activity of making, the social exchanges in the store or the studio or the workshop, seal the deal.

Open House: 3rd Tamworth Textile Triennial encapsulates many of these ideas and celebrates the open-ended, porous nature of textiles practice today. It introduces a group of artists who have not previously exhibited in the triennial.

All the participating artists are linked in some way to a sense of broader engagement with things outside of themselves and their studios. Many, but not all, celebrate the process of belonging that comes from working with and/or alongside other artists.

In some instances, the artists are part of a much larger group. For the artists from Noongar Doll Makers and the Gomeri Gaaynggal Centre in Tamworth, their making is just one aspect of a much broader activity of social engagement that is a combination of grassroots community care, social wellbeing,

¹ Alison Britton, 'Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design', *Occasional Papers*, 2013.

and the everyday act of coming together – to talk, eat and support one another – as a form of mindfulness. In essence, their work sits at the centre of *Open House* and its influence ripples outwards.

In both of these examples, the process of making expands the definition of what it is to be a maker. Some of the participants may not even consider themselves to be artists. The emphasis is not on the end result, but on the time that is spent in making. The primary social outcome is in the doing, which outweighs the importance of the finished object.

There is a certain kind of homespun radicalness and ‘community engagement’ program² that is pertinent to this. The American academic Jenni Sorkin describes how the mid-20th-century communal studio – in her case, the ceramics studio, but more broadly the ‘craft’ studio – ‘expand[s] and enrich[es] our current understanding of what socially engaged artistic practice is today... it was modern craft and not modern art that spearheaded non-hierarchical and participatory experiences, through the experiential properties endemic to craft practices... Today, many artistic practices focus heavily on “socially engaged art,” “institutional transformations,” and “knowledge-exchange” between artist and audience. Mid-century crafts is an important but unacknowledged antecedent to the activist principles that service such contemporary ideologies.’³

Although Sorkin is talking about a particular moment and a particular group of makers, I feel that this is still the context in which the collaborative studio operates.

² I use this term with a sense of irony and some trepidation. Often overused, the term has come to mean an artist/s being dropped into a situation for a community’s own good, who then makes high-end contemporary art for the delectation of others, rather than for the participants and their communities. But when it works, as I believe it does in the case of Noongar Doll Makers and the Gomeroi Gaaynggal Centre, its potential for community wellbeing and transformation is limitless.

³ Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community*, University of Chicago Press, 2016.

In 2013, I curated the exhibition *String Theory* at the MCA Australia. I then posited the important position that I felt Indigenous practice in Australia had in terms of textile- or fibre-based art and the mainstream contemporary art world as ‘a clear indication of Aboriginal art’s radical ability to rupture contemporary art’s trajectory. Indigenous art is innovative, suggesting a certain kind of “newness”, while also being grounded in tradition. It blurs the clear distinction between the trained and the un-trained. It is both folk art and contemporary art of the highest order. To use a maligned and perhaps misunderstood phrase, it is on the one hand “outsider” – in a formal, artistic and political sense – yet very much a vital “insider”.’⁴

It’s interesting to revisit something you have written in the past and to see how you feel about it in the present. I still agree with most of what I wrote above, and I do feel that the space opened up by Indigenous art has been populated for the most part by artists who have taken on the role that textiles could play in the contemporary art museum, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

As in most things, there is a feeling that Australia may lag behind international models (though I think we are actually way ahead, due to the aforementioned role of Indigenous art). But the inclusion of artists such as Sheila Hicks (most definitely a ‘textile artist’) and of Lee Ming Wei’s *Mending Project* in recent iterations of the Biennale of Sydney, among others, and the high number of textile-based works in the 2017 iteration of the Venice Biennale, demonstrates that the divide between craft and art has now been dissolved. The ‘ceramics’ moment has given way to that of the weaver.

As contemporary art and its associated programs begin to rule

⁴ Glenn Barkley, ‘A painting can be a weaving. A photo can be a basket’, from *String Theory: Focus on Contemporary Australia Art* (Exhibition Catalogue), MCA Australia, 2013.

the gallery and museum sector, there is also, for good and bad, a further breakdown of areas of specialisation. Decorative Arts, for instance, is being brought into the mainstream contemporary art department. In at least one high-profile case, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, contemporary artists now work with a collection and a program which previously had much more of an emphasis on the worlds (and words) of craft and design. In a perfect world, we may be heading towards what the artist, collector and advocate of outsider art Jean Dubuffet described as 'horizontal proliferation', where the vertical hierarchies of the State are dissolved in favour of a more democratic system of cultural openness.⁵

This shift in emphasis will have major ramifications in terms of how contemporary artists working with textiles, or any other 'craft'-based form, will be collected and exhibited. There are dangers, but there is also the potential to see any number of 'niche' art, craft – or even design – forms brought to broader notice.

These changes and ideas provide a backdrop against which *Open House* must be considered. All of the makers have some aspect of social engagement attached to their practice. All artists live and work in the *now*. You can't make in a vacuum. *Open House* explores the expansion and contraction of this network. In some works it is explicit, and very much a part of the work's meaning; in others, the artists' experiences, although very personal, have connections to a collective memory that manifests in both the digital and personal realms.

Finally, some artists use their practice to take on wide-ranging issues: from Trump-ism, to the debate around marriage equality; from the need to care for the environment, to the artist's place in a world beset by social and cultural upheaval. Textiles have always been used as a vehicle for political protest and dissent – whether in the form of banners or costume or

⁵ Jean Dubuffet, 'Asphyxiating Culture', in *Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings*, Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 1988.

dress – in part, due to the accessibility of the medium. The sense of ‘making do’, together with the labour and craft, that is often seen in banners and textiles of protest is an important aesthetic and conceptual hook that attracts contemporary artists. There is also an overlay of the ‘performance’ aspect of incorporating textiles into protest activities, which is appealing both to the ‘crowd’ and the media.

Bringing it all together is a kind of openness and honesty created through making, talking, creating and exhibiting, which involves both the artist and the viewer as equal participants.

Importantly, some of the artists in *Open House* have chosen Tamworth itself as their subject and extended their practice to the makers and producers of the city. Some works touch on the lives of local people, while others explore global concerns as they are manifested on a local level. All the works have a kind of honesty that can only be achieved through thoughtful application of ideas and materials.

In *Open House*, the creative process is shown to be of equal importance to the created works themselves. The conversations carried on among makers while creating and showing their work create a generous space where all ideas and responses are welcomed.