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Lou Lynn
Brendan Lee
Satish Tang
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MATERIALLY SPEAKING

RICHMOND ART GALLERY
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What’s the Matter: Craft Knowledge, Material Histories, and Deferred Skill

Essay by Nicole Burisch

In response to proposed budget cuts and possible amalgamation or closure, the students, faculty, and support staff of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design recently produced the *Manifesto For a Vibrant, Strong and Independent NSCAD*. It outlines and affirms the values at the heart of the 125-year-old art school and was delivered to the provincial NDP government on February 6, 2013. Notable among the *Manifesto*’s clauses, is an explicit call for the recognition and preservation of the school’s craft departments: “While other art institutions have systematically cut their craft departments, NSCAD’s remains a pillar of the school. The legacy technology and expertise of our faculty and technicians is what attracts many of our students.” The *Manifesto* also goes on to affirm the importance of other material-based facilities (such as wood, plastic, metal and print shops), as well as the skilled technicians that staff these spaces. At a moment when craft materials and processes are appearing with increasing frequency within contemporary art, cuts to craft departments would seem at odds with the aims of a comprehensive arts education. But as the *NSCAD Manifesto* points out, these kinds of cuts are not isolated. If anything, they may even be representative of a shifting attitude towards the role of craft within contemporary art and popular culture.

The works in the *Materially speaking* exhibition are all engaged in a dialogue with the materials and techniques of traditional craft practice. They are the products of a transmission of information, skill, and history related to their respective materials: ceramics, textiles, metal, glass. Even as the artists adapt their chosen materials to address contemporary subject matter, the works in this exhibition would not be possible without a longstanding legacy of technological and material knowledge. Recently, discussions around the return of skill (or “reskilling”) have surfaced in dialogues about contemporary art. Reskilling in this context is seen as a response to the supposed “deskilling” of practices that distance themselves from “the role of technical savoir-
fai.ii Deskilling, in this case, goes hand-in-hand with the supposed “dematerialization” of late 20th century art and a move from object-centred practices towards conceptually driven, site-specific, and ephemeral works. It would make sense then, that as contemporary art continues to “rematerialize,” it would also take up considerations of skill (and associated concerns of handwork, labour, and process). However, the reskilling frame falls short in relation to practices like those of the artists in Materially speaking. These practices are clearly connected to a lineage of object-centred work as well as histories of making that were never deskilled or dematerialized to begin with.

As artistic practices of the last 60 years have continued to re-negotiate the significance of the individual artist’s hand and labour, craft was quietly being taught not only in art schools across Canada, but in community centres, guilds, shared studios, and more recently in online videos, web tutorials, Stitch n’ Bitch groups, and a booming indie craft scene. While it may be useful in some instances, the deskilling/reskilling frame problematically implies that there was a moment when skill was somehow lost or forgotten and must now be relearned. In contrast, when considering works like the ones in this exhibition and their connection to a rich history of craft knowledge, a more accurate view would be to speak of deferred or displaced skill. The notion of deferred skill not only acknowledges the people, institutions, and networks who have continued to work in these ways, but also makes room for the myriad other forms of skilled labour that fuel artistic production and circulation: that of cultural workers, hired assistants, outsourced labour, and those who work outside of a Euro-Western context.

If skill (and more broadly, craft) has indeed been deferred rather than lost, then it becomes interesting to question why and how it is now being taken up as a site for investigation. What does it mean for artists to once again position skill, technique, and material as the focus of their work? Or for institutions like the Richmond Art Gallery to mount an exhibition of these kinds of practices? Often these questions are answered by positioning craft as a nostalgic response to the dehumanizing effects of a technologically saturated world, but this is an overly simplistic view. Taken together, the works in this exhibition clearly question the traditional relationships between craft, technology, and tools in a way that makes it impossible to think of them as old-fashioned or nostalgic. Rather, they blend old and new, high and low to address the ways in which we use, adapt, and customize the objects and technologies around us. Notably, the artists in Materially speaking all produce work that foregrounds high levels of skill and a decidedly polished approach to their materials. This approach would seem to be the opposite of so-called “sloppy craft,” a term coined by artist/educator Anne Wilson to describe the intentionally under-skilled use of craft materials in recent art and craft practice.iv

Nevertheless, both skilled and sloppy approaches to craft exemplify a renewed interest in the value and communicative potential of materials and materiality.
Brendan Lee Satish Tang, *Manga Ormolu 4.1-b*, 2011, ceramic and mixed media, 20" x 9.5" x 8"
Lou Lynn, *Tools As Artifacts* (detail), 2008, glass & bronze, dimensions/installation: 3’ x 34’ running feet, (photo: Janet Dwyer)
Julie York, *White on White Series*, 2012, paper, 28” x 36” (photo: Candace Meyer)
Jen Aitken, *components*, 2011, vinyl, leatherette, spandex, dimensions variable
Artist Luanne Martineau has written that “the role of craft within this particular moment of post-studio art practice is...[to seek] a more direct and intimate model of material and social engagement.” Theorist Amelia Jones recently curated an exhibition of materially-based practices that show “signs of having been made,” in order to engage viewers in more direct or embodied ways. Here, works that foreground craft or process (whether sloppy or skilled) are being valued for the way they use materiality to both reveal and acknowledge the labour, time, and sensorial experiences involved in making.

To return to where we began, potential or actual cuts to post-secondary craft departments may well be linked to a view of craft that values materiality as a mode of representation, rather than specific material histories. Or put another way: in a sloppy post-studio moment, craft has become useful as a signifier of embodied or material engagement with the world. It is something to be taught or used on an as-needed basis rather than through a long-term commitment to mastery (an approach that is clearly being fueled by a continued democratization of craft practices and skills through online channels). This is not necessarily a bad thing. A fragmented approach to craft knowledge can help us to better isolate and understand features of skill, material, process, time, labour. Conversely, it risks missing the ways that craft history has uniquely considered these features together or in relation to one another. It would probably be a mistake to do away with craft departments, the knowledge and history that they contain, or the infrastructures (both material and human) that sustain them. To speak about material – or more broadly, about materiality – is to necessarily reflect upon the ways that these materials remain connected to a history of objects and makers. It remains to be seen how the sites of craft education will continue to shift, but as both the NSCAD Manifesto and this exhibition make clear, there is still value in maintaining and transmitting this legacy.

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i “NSCAD Manifesto,” NSCAD is Alive website. At the time of writing, the students are still awaiting a response from the government. A full copy of the manifesto and background information can be found at nscadisalive.wordpress.com.


iii The dates and the extent of what Lucy Lippard identified as the “dematerialization of the art object” have both been called into question. Glenn Adamson points to the sculptural and Process Art practices of the late 60s and early 70s as being very much “materialized,” and Amelia Jones has recently argued that the “…turn from materiality was more definitive from the 1980s through the 1990s…” when artists increasingly began to work with appropriated materials and images. See: Lucy Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972, New York: Praeger, 1973; Glenn Adamson, Thinking Through Craft, New York: Berg, 2007, 58-64; and Amelia Jones, “Material Traces: Process, Matter, and Interrelationality in Contemporary Art,” an essay published in conjunction with the exhibition Material Traces: Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art, Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery/Concordia University, 2013, 5-6.


BIOGRAPHIES

JEN AITKEN is an emerging Canadian artist. She was born in Edmonton in 1985 and grew up in Toronto. After studying fashion design at Ryerson University, she moved to Vancouver where she completed her BFA at Emily Carr University in 2010. She has a rigorous and intuitive studio practice, investigating and synthesizing her interests in sculpture, design, sexuality and the body. Her work has been included in several exhibitions, including most recently a solo show called components at Trench Contemporary Art in Vancouver. Aitken is currently in the MFA program at the University of Guelph in Ontario.

LOU LYNN began exploring the sculptural potential of glass in the mid-1980s, attributing her interest in the use of glass to studies she undertook at the Pilchuck Glass School, in Washington. Her work draws from an interest in archaic and industrial tools and artifacts. Working in glass and bronze, Lynn creates a tension between the materials’ strength and fragility and is central in her re-interpretation of tools and artifacts that once held a prominent place in industrial and domestic environments.

Lynn’s sculpture has been widely exhibited and is displayed in prominent public collections in Canada and internationally. Lynn is the recipient of the Vancouver Foundation VADA Award and in 2006 the Gerson Award for Excellence, Innovation & Leadership from the Craft Council of BC. She has twice been nominated for the Governor General’s Award (Saidye Bronfman Award). Lou Lynn lives and maintains a studio in Winlaw, BC.

BRENDAN LEE SATISH TANG was born in Dublin, Ireland of Trinidadian parents and is a naturalized citizen of Canada. He earned his formal art education on both Canadian coasts and the American Midwest, where he learned to appreciate the ceramic medium. Tang has lectured at conferences and academic institutions across the country, and his professional practice has also taken him to India, Trinidad and Japan. He has been a resident artist at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts (Helena, MT) and at the European Ceramic Work Centre (s-Hertogenbosch, NL).

Tang’s work is exhibited in Canada and internationally. He has been profiled by The Knowledge Network, and featured in printed publications including The National Post, Wired (UK and Italy), and ELLE (Canada). In 2012 Tang received the RBC Emerging Artist People’s Choice Award. Tang lives and works in Vancouver, BC.

JULIE YORK is an artist who works in traditional craft materials using non-traditional approaches. She is one of a handful of recognized art makers currently redefining the use of clay in sculptural work. York has received a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, the Independence Foundation Fellowship, and two Creative Production Grants from the Canada Council for the Arts. Her work has been included in numerous shows internationally, including a solo exhibition at the Garth Clark Gallery in New York City; her work is also part of numerous permanent and private collections.

York is an Associate Professor of Visual Arts and Material Practice at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. She received her BFA from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and her MFA from New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. Subsequently, she has held fellowships and residencies at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, and International Ceramic Research Centre, Guldagergaard, Skaelskor, Denmark.

NICOLE BURISCH is a Canadian curator, artist, critic, and cultural worker. She holds a BFA in Ceramics from the Alberta College of Art and Design and an MA in Art History from Concordia University. Her work focuses on contemporary craft and craft theory and she has researched, published, exhibited, and presented on this topic in Canada and internationally. Her essay (with Anthea Black) on curatorial strategies for politically engaged craft practices is included in The Craft Reader (Berg) and Extra/ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art (Duke University Press), and her writing has also been included in Utopic Impulses: Essays in Contemporary Ceramics (Ronsdale) and the Cahiers métiers d’art/ Craft Journal.