

Parallel universe: The Gray Street Workshop @20
BY MARGOT OSBORNE

Thanks to Ricky Swallow, it would appear that the handmade object has new credibility amongst arbiters of what's in and out in the contemporary art fashion stakes. This renewed interest in notions of the handmade has been met with bemused resignation by those in the crafts who for many years have based their practices on a cluster of interrelated values embracing the handmade. For the latest discourse professes a whole new take on the subject.

Gray Street Workshop, which is this year celebrating its twentieth anniversary, has pursued a creative work ethic closely aligned to values of the handmade, not as an end *per se* but as a means to evolve a creative language grounded in the interplay between ideas and practice. While Swallow's work has the 'wow' factor of pure spectacle, the aesthetic dimension of work produced by Gray Street Workshop will be perceived by the intimate gaze.

In many respects it is as if the values driving Swallow's large-scale installations and those driving the intimate objects of the Gray Street workshop could exist in parallel universes. The great divide between craft and art still exists. To a large extent craft is shown in different venues and to different audiences (despite some overlap). Writing about craft is largely quarantined from contemporary art journals – Artlink being a notable exception. Few writers, critics, essayists cross the divide. So it is inevitable that there is minimal seepage of ideas and the perpetuation of parallel universes even when an area such as the handmade clearly has relevance to the vast majority of artists working in a wide range of 'traditional' media, including painting and sculpture.

In the Australian crafts movement over the past two decades there has been a gradual evolution of philosophical, ethical and aesthetic thinking around notions of the handmade object. Central to that discourse is the importance of materials-based knowledge as a vehicle for creative language and the aesthetic of the intimate gaze - a poetics of forming and surface mark making; the inherent beauty of organic line, irregularity, asymmetry; the nuances of finish, texture, tone; the beauty of structure, detailing and choice of materials. Associations of the crafted object with utility or fitness for a purpose have increasingly become less relevant as the primary purpose of the one-off object is often aesthetic – to satisfy our craving for beauty.

Over their twenty-year working relationship, the four members of Gray Street Workshop -Julie Blyfield, Sue Lorraine, Leslie Matthews and Catherine Truman - have grown to value engagement with materials as a vital part of their creative process, as a feedback loop where continual input modifies output. In a recent group discussion with me they emphasised the importance of the balance between disciplined design and unexpected creative insights and breakthroughs that occur in the making process; and of slow, incremental creative growth through the continual modification of theory by the insights of practice. It is this through this process that the artist transmutes complex ideas and influences into an abstract form imbued with grace and poetic resonance.

While each has evolved distinctive bodies of work, reflecting individual interests and paths of enquiry, there are points of convergence in a shared interest in natural history and specimen collecting as a departure point for creative investigation. Julie Blyfield's passion for plants and gardening has evolved into a fascination with botanical collections. An old album of pressed arid land plant specimens has become the inspiration for her latest body of work. Her preparatory drawings of the fragile plants capture their spindly organic patterns. At the moment she is experimenting with using watercolour on metal to suggest the subtle muted tones of the dried plants and hammering rich textures into raised silver forms.

Until recently Sue Lorraine's practice focussed on refined abstractions of bodily organs in laser-cut steel. Her most recent piece, featuring laser-cut steel moths fluttering around a light inside a vitrine is motivated by her interest in natural history specimen collecting as a form of obsession. This is in turn the subject of her current Masters degree studies. Leslie Matthews' collections of bones and her studies of the bone structure of the female body inspire the graceful, abstract forms of her silver jewellery and raised forms. The abstracted pelvic bone shape is transmuted into the raised silver folds of a cup or the fluid organic forms of silver pendants. Matthews painstakingly sands and pumices the surface over and over until it achieves a luminous white sheen. She has said that the process of making is 'as essential as drawing breath'.

Catherine Truman is known for her poetic anatomical sculptures carved in lime wood, dyed with red shu-niku ink, burned to charcoal black, or coated in translucent wax. At the moment, however, she is experimenting with wax as a medium in its own right, as a vehicle for exploring notions of portraiture. She is about to start work on a new semi-figurative sculpture at three-quarters human scale, incorporating both limewood carving and wax. Truman does substantial conceptual preparation before even starting to prepare each piece. She makes sketches and does test carvings. But it is in the carving process, in the engagement with her materials, that the fine detail of surface treatment determined. She states 'unless I understand the material and the tools, there is no way I could do what I want to do'.

Another aspect of the exemplary significance of Gray Street Workshop is their collective influence as role models and mentors, in nurturing a disciplined approach to making and critical enquiry in a succession of emerging practitioners through the Gray Street access members program. This mentoring is an instance of the informal tradition of training by example - passing on knowledge orally and through demonstration - that is so important in the crafts. The Gray Street members provide help with techniques but also give moral support, encouraging emerging artists to see the direction they should follow. By early 2005 an impressive total of 59 access members had passed through Gray Street Workshop. An exhibition of the work of these access members is currently in preparation. Meanwhile Blyfield, Lorraine, Matthews and Truman will be holding a 20th anniversary exhibition at galerie ra in Amsterdam in mid 2005.