

Arts and Crafts

CraftHouston 2006: Texas
Houston Center for Contemporary Craft
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Reviewed by Kelly Klaasmeyer

What's the difference between art and craft? That's a question that easily sparks debate in the art world. But while curators, critics, and historians may still care about distinguishing between the two, fewer and fewer artists bother with such traditional boundaries. Pluralism is the hallmark of today's art scene, and in that scene the "art or craft" question is increasingly irrelevant.

Which brings us to the *CraftHouston 2006: Texas* show at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft. This juried exhibition was designed to offer a survey of the current state of craft in Texas. Art historian and *Metalsmith Magazine* editor Suzanne Ramljak curated the show, and she has included an admirably wide range of objects under the craft tent. But unfortunately the objects have an equally wide range of success and failure.

Some of the show's objects fit naturally into a fine art context, even though they were made using craft techniques. Todd Campbell, for instance, uses the "craft" of metal forging to fabricate floor sculptures. One doesn't really care what camp the sculptures are supposed to fall into. All that matters is that how well they work.

His *Growth* (2005) uses forged and welded metal segments arranged so that they grow organically across the floor like mushrooms or giant mold spores. *Hairline* (2005) is a snaking line delineated on both sides by short, curved pieces of metal. Although somewhat distractingly presented on a wide white plinth, the piece has a weirdly fascinating, centipede-like quality. In his sculptures, Campbell skillfully used the centuries-old craft of the blacksmith to create highly contemporary works.

Likewise, *Love Handles* (2004), a witty, body-referential work by Erin Cunningham, is art with surrealist overtones. It consists of two pieces of metal

that look like they were cast from the fat over someone's hips. Adorned with "punny," actual handles, they're presented as a removable accessory. Cunningham has given the metal a fleshy patina, and the material imparts a weight and tactility that evokes hefty slabs of flesh.

Heavy on the sexual with a dash of the surreal, William Luft and Edward McCartney make decadently conceptual cast silver ... um ... implements in their series *The Seven Deadly Sins*. There's *Anger*, an ice pick-like tool, and *Gluttony*, a four-way utensil with a mutant knife, spoon, fork, and corkscrew. But *Lust* (2005), is the most surreal and explicit of the pieces. Luft and McCartney crafted an object that has a heavily veined sterling silver phallus on one end, a mouth in the center, and a silicone tongue that holds a tiny pearl at the end. *Lust* is as well crafted as it is attention getting.

The show also features some objects made using craft techniques that function well as craft in the traditional sense. Deborah Harrison's weaving *Deutsche Werkstätten Rug* (2005) is one of the best. It's crisply and beautifully executed, blending the artist's skill with a striking geometric design tightly woven in black and a range of red-toned fibers. It's an incredibly well made object that's easy to covet.

Two small, footed, cast-glass bowls by Ellen Abbott and Mark Leva aren't quite as effortless in feeling, but they do have a lovely frostiness. The most successful is *Kiddish Cup* (2006), which is edged with a bas-relief green grapevine against a bluish tinged glass. In the center of the bowl lies a raised cluster of deep purple grapes. It's certainly an arty religious accessory.

Also creating decorative tableware, Deborah Berry crafted a tea set modeled on the shape of a vintage oil can and accessorized with automotive hose clamps. It's nicely executed as well as amusing.

But there is a no man's land between successful art and successful craft, and unfortunately that is where a large number of this show's objects fall. They are made with craft techniques, but



Todd Campbell's *Hairline* (2005), created using the craft techniques common to the blacksmith, has a fascinating, centipede-like quality.

they are frightfully unsuccessful either as art or craft.

Daryl McCracken's teapot-ish *Oil Can Relic* (2005) is, strangely, another oil can reference. But McCracken takes things from the whimsical to the hideous. There are some George Ohr, the mad potter of Biloxi, overtones to his piece, but while Ohr's work was engagingly odd, this is just plain bad. Weird organic additions are smashed onto a fairly conventional teapot shape, but it's just not icky enough to be interesting. Purposefully ugly can work, but you have to make a concerted effort. Incidentally ugly doesn't cut it.

Sharbani Das Gupta also embraces the ugly—albeit unintentionally—in *Hurricane Season* (2006), a conceptually heavy-handed work. It's a wall-mounted piece with a hurricane-shaped swirl of shredded clay meant to look like torn newspapers. Unfortunately, it just looks like a pretentious mess.

There are pieces in the show that seem to involve great technical challenges,

and yet they are visually bereft. Anyone who blows glass probably knows how difficult it is to create a vase like Richard Moiel's and Kathy Poepfel's, with its basket-weave effect using cane glass. But the problem is, the vase still looks like banal home décor circa 1983. In the end it doesn't matter how hard it was to make. Craft, like art, is not ice skating; you don't get separate points for technical and artistic merit. What works, works. What doesn't, doesn't.

Becoming enamored with technique is a hazard for those who inhabit the craft world, though the problem is by no means exclusive to them. Painters, photographers, and printmakers, among others, can also become so caught up in technical effects that they forget the final product has to be successful as a work of art—not just as a display of technical expertise.

Ultimately "art" and "craft" are defined not by what media you use, but by what you do with it. *CraftHouston 2006: Texas* offers an effective overview of what, and what not, to do. ■