

# The “C” Word

by Richard Mongiat

Why does the word “craft” send some people scrambling for their six-shooters while others man the barricades and everyone else runs for cover? In 1969 Sol LeWitt wrote: “Ideas can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.”<sup>1</sup> Thus began craft’s long and bumpy roller coaster ride vis-à-vis its relationship with art.

Since the nineteenth century and the invention of the camera, art—its purpose, how it’s made and the way it’s viewed—has changed dramatically. And, of course, the way that art “looks” has also changed no less dramatically. With the exception of some Dadaist works and Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, almost everything that was considered to be art before the 1960s was made by someone’s hand. And to “make something” meant engaging with the concept of craft—whether rejoicing in, re-framing, or battling against, preconceived notions.

Sometimes an artist’s work or career is referred to as a “practice,” implying “practising,” or striving to get better at whatever activity is being undertaken. If you work in one of the more traditional artmaking genres, you soon become aware that certain sectors of the art world hold the view that being too skillful in your use of materials, or taking the formal visual concerns of your art too seriously, is somewhat gauche (though I’ve yet to encounter anyone being accused of being “too good” at installation, conceptual, or video art). To raise the “c” word is to run the risk of being seen as a mere technician, whose work must therefore be devoid of any deep feeling or thought. I have frequently heard artists express concern that their work isn’t “tough” enough (read: ugly, clumsy or harsh), as if only through a determined avoidance of skill (and beauty) will they be taken seriously. While I have no interest in the type of art that steers technical virtuosity towards steely perfectionism, eye-catching yet shallow, I see no reason to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Debates about the uneasy relationship between art and commerce have raged for years, with the art object squarely on the front lines. In the battles waged over seriousness and significance, painting, for example, gets killed off cyclically (of all the art forms practised throughout the past century, why is painting the only one that needs to carry around its own defibrillator?). Art critic/writer Dave Hickey’s claim that any

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<sup>1</sup> Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (New York: 0-9, 1969).

good American salesman could sell a “box of air” as easily as a framed canvas,<sup>2</sup> make most of these arguments, in my opinion, moot.

The artists selected for this exhibition have two things in common. First, they don't want to know the answer before the question has been asked. In the filmed interviews accompanying the exhibition, you will hear them talk about not wanting to have everything worked out in their minds before starting a work. For these artists, the idea of change is automatically incorporated into the making of the work; the spur-of-the-moment decisions, surprises, and even mistakes that happen during the process are crucial elements in the content of the artwork. Secondly, they love the struggle of working with and transforming materials into unique, mysterious, strange, and beautiful objects as a way of describing the world.

Some of the artists, such as ceramicist Susan Collett and furniture maker Gord Peteran, push their practice—albeit kicking and screaming—into the realm of art. Among those working in the more traditional fields of painting and sculpture, I have tried to present a range of styles and genres: from Tom Campbell's rough-and-ready figurative sculptures, the raucous paintings of Sheila Gregory and Scott Sawtell, and Elizabeth Bailey's bed paintings (as visceral as Chaim Soutine's flayed beef carcasses), to the more elegantly handled works of Moira Clark, Gerard Gauci, Howard Podeswa and Tim Zuck; and from Marianne Lovink's and Catherine Beaudette's quirky and clever organic forms, which look as if they've just arrived from another planet, to Susy Oliveira's photo sculpture of a bear and a woman lying together (is this danger . . . or love?). Then there are the intricacies of the delicately cut stencils David McClyment uses to create his paintings, the brooding drama of works by Michael Gerry and Ron Shuebrook, the shimmering surfaces created by Brent McIntosh through the obsessive layering of colour upon colour, and finally, Jay Wilson's meticulous toothpick sculptures and dollar-store-foam wall pieces (does anyone know more about the aesthetic qualities of dollar-store foam than this man?).

An element of this exhibition that's dear to me is the artists' interviews. Although the idea for the exhibition came about through many conversations with fellow artist Shelley Adler, I felt it was important that each of the eighteen artists be invited to address the issue of craft in his or her own voice, as each of them has a particular view on the subject. Any attempt by me to summarize their thoughts, crowding them all under one umbrella (mine), would have robbed the audience of insights far beyond my capabilities.

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<sup>2</sup> This statement was made during a lecture delivered at the University of Toronto in 2009 or 2010.

Finally, this exhibition is not meant to elevate works that engage with craft over those that employ other strategies—hierarchies are not my interest—but to draw attention to the stubborn persistence of craft in the work of serious artists today and the continued relevance of making objects as a viable and worthy activity.

As for the personal struggle of pursuing one's practice in the boxing ring of contemporary art, where the brawn of avant-garde aesthetics is championed and beauty is suspect, I say: Let the delicacy of a butterfly's wing be taken as seriously as the violence of a broken nose.