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Carol McNicoll, Contemporary Craft Series, Tanya Harrod and RoseLee Goldberg, The City Gallery, Leicester in association with Lund Humphries, 2003, 128pp., 107 col. pls., 19 b&w pls. £25 cloth. ISBN 0-85331-883-2; Jim Partridge, Contemporary Craft Series, Alison Britton and Katherine Swift, Manchester City Galleries in association with Lund Humphries, 2003, 127pp., 87 col. pls., 26 b&w pls. £25 cloth. ISBN 0-85331-890-5; Michael Rowe, Contemporary Craft Series, Richard Hill and Martina Margetts, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery in association with Lund Humphries, 2003, 126pp., 87 col. pls., 28 b&w pls. £25 cloth. ISBN 0-85331-886-7; Richard Slee, Contemporary Craft Series, Garth Clark and Cathy Courtney, The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent in association with Lund Humphries, 2003, 128pp. 91 col. pls., 22 b&w pls. £25 cloth. ISBN 0-85331-884-0; Ann Sutton, Contemporary Craft Series, Diane Sheehan and Susan Tebby, The Crafts Council in association with Lund Humphries, 2003, 125pp., 75 col. pls., 34 b&w pls. £25 cloth. ISBN 0-85331-885-9.

Following her appointment as Director for the Crafts Council in June 2002, Louise Taylor set about championing a new vision for the organisation: principally to make the work of the Crafts Council continue to be relevant and appropriate to the needs of crafts in the 21st century. This was no easy task, as the heralding of the new century brought with it no obvious clearing of the mists surrounding that which Paul Greenhalgh appositely described as ‘a supremely messy word’.¹ Taylor has said that she is chiefly concerned with positioning craft as an art form and with raising the profile of craft both nationally and regionally. To this end, the Show5 partnership (2003), a collaborative venture between five British museums and galleries, initiated by the Crafts Council, is a good example of how that might be achieved. Each Show5 venue focused on the work of one of five leading makers, who in Taylor’s opinion, have helped define the territory of contemporary craft. To accompany the exhibitions, Show5 teamed with publishers Lund Humphries to produce a series of five lavish monographs to mark the careers of the Show5 artists, and it is these five monographs which form the basis of this review.

¹ P. Greenhalgh, ‘Craft in a Changing World’, The Persistence of Craft, A&C Black: London, 2002. p. 1

Given the fluidity surrounding contemporary applications and perceptions of craft practice, the remit of selecting five individuals who could be defined as both shaping and influencing the British modern craft movement during the past thirty years, must not have been an easy one for the Crafts Council. For this reason, the choice of Carol McNicoll (ceramics), Jim Partridge (wood), Michael Rowe (metal), Richard Slee (ceramics), and Ann Sutton (textiles) makes a valiant attempt at trying to provide a democratic cross section of makers worthy of celebration. The Show5 venues (The City Gallery, Leicester; Manchester Art Gallery; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke on Trent; Crafts Council Gallery, London) were initially responsible for proposing makers to be selected in their bid to participate in the exhibition. Their choice was largely representative of makers whose work has had a particular connection to the venue's collection or geographic location, and ensured that the selection was more widely representative of regional craft activity. In its final selection, the Crafts Council tried to reflect a balance between the five makers' medium and variety of media, and stipulated that makers had to be mid to late career. Although impossible to achieve a balance pleasing to everyone, this series of five monographs makes a valuable contribution to the very underrepresented raft of existing literature on British craft practitioners. Recent publications such as Craft and Contemporary Theory (Allen & Unwin 1998), The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century (Yale University Press 1999), The Persistence of Craft (A&C Black, 2002) have added to the historiography and contemporary debates surrounding the meaning of craft, but there has been a paucity of comprehensive biographical material on individual makers, which is why this series is to be commended.

The five publications are each handsomely presented in a large-scale format allowing the sumptuous reproduction of a generous and comprehensive quantity of colour images, generally not afforded in books on the crafts. Lest the reader think that these seductive books are destined solely for the coffee table, it is reassuring to find that all images are properly referenced, and include both archival and newly commissioned colour photography. There is also a wide range of appropriate contextual images used to juxtapose each maker's work, something that readers less familiar with the genre should

find enlightening. Overall, there is a satisfying symmetry about these books which the publishers have attempted to maintain throughout the series in terms of layout and structure; so that once you have navigated through one book you will find the others comfortingly familiar. Although they can be consumed individually, they have clearly been designed to complement each other as a series, however at £25 per publication, this might prove prohibitive to all but the most serious consumer.

The general emphasis on quality of text, reproduction and design is something more familiar in monographs on artists and is a welcome and encouraging sight, should craft be trying to assert its position with the 'big boys'. Taylor's ambition to reposition craft as an artform is clearly evident in these publications, and hopefully sets a precedent for future publications of this kind. Each book comes with an introduction by the host gallery/museum as well as a detailed chronology of the maker, list of exhibitions, commissions and collections, a comprehensive bibliography, and in some volumes, a glossary (McNicoll and Sutton). The detailed bibliography will be an invaluable resource to any researcher, although some inconsistencies were noticed across the volumes (e.g.: the Sutton bibliography was found to include more general, contextual references as well as specific references to Sutton, whereas the other volumes had restricted their bibliographies to references citing solely the maker). The volumes also include two well-chosen critical essays by recognized authorities from the fields of design history, criticism, museology, and the applied arts, who are in some way connected with the maker, either as a personal friend, or in a professional context. The decision to include a pair of essays to complement each book gives some scope for critical debate within each volume and although clearly celebratory, these books have a critical dimension that will be well received by both scholars and gallery professionals alike, as well as general enthusiasts of the applied arts.

It is, obviously, in the choice of maker and essayist that these books begin to differentiate themselves, and illustrate not only the conceptual 'messiness' continually associated with craft, but also the richness and hybridity that is encompassed under this broad umbrella. Fortunately, and wisely perhaps, none of the volumes attempt to define what craft might

be; instead the essayists carefully navigate through the choppy semantic waters by referring to their makers as being either craftspeople, artists, designers, makers, or all four (and in the case of Richard Slee, none of the above). What is interesting about these volumes from a design (or craft) historical perspective is that through delivering a narrative of the lives and work of these five different makers, the authors inadvertently chronicle the general evolution of postwar British craft. Sharing roughly similar backgrounds in terms of having attended art school in the 1960s and 70s, each maker would have been exposed to roughly the same influence and subsequent rejection of modernism, they would also have experienced the same conceptual debates about art and authorship, as well as the challenging of their chosen craft 'genre'. This commonality of experience has interestingly led to very different personal philosophies and approaches to making, as is evidenced in these volumes.

The books are largely the first major publications on each of the makers, and the essayists have been carefully chosen to complement the maker. The Carol McNicoll volume, for example, includes critical essays by both Tanya Harrod and RoseLee Goldberg. Goldberg, a writer and curator specialising in performance art, is also a friend of McNicoll's, as well as a collector of her work, as is the author and critic Tanya Harrod. Both Harrod and Goldberg place McNicoll's work largely in a historiographic context of art, fashion and music of the 1970s and 80s, tracing her post-war upbringing in Birmingham, her subsequent art school training, and later experiences in London as a designer and maker. Harrod rightly argues that historical context is essential to understanding McNicoll's work and its exploration into issues such as cultural identity, material culture, consumerism and politics.

Harrod has an impressive background in craft literature and is the author of The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century (Yale University Press, 1999), the most comprehensive historiography on British craft to date, and is well placed to write a critical review of this kind. As a lifelong friend of McNicoll, she brings to her essay the kind of familial details, anecdotal references and excerpts from personal letters that bring to life the person behind the work, without becoming overly sentimental or subjective. Intimate

descriptions, for example, of the oriental carpets, Chinese paintings and general bric-a-brac that surrounded McNicoll's childhood home, provide a vivid visual image of the aesthetic language which eventually led to McNicoll's very eclectic style and fascination with material culture and the everyday. Goldberg's essay takes the form of an interview with McNicoll, and again, one is treated to an intimacy with the maker that immediately engenders a greater affinity with her work.

Similarly in the Richard Slee volume, writer and oral historian, Cathy Courtney, writes compellingly about Slee's austere, and almost colourless upbringing in post-war Carlisle, attributing this to his subsequent desire to subvert concepts such as the domestic and the familiar in his work as a ceramicist. Slee, like McNicoll, was heavily influenced by everyday, kitschy objects found in his relatives' houses, and shares many points of commonality with McNicoll, in his postmodern references to the everyday, politics, sociology, popular culture and history. Courtney concentrates heavily on the significance of individual objects surrounding Slee as he grew up, and there are wonderfully evocative descriptions of the eclectic interiors and kitschy domestic accoutrements which figured in Slee's childhood, as well as reproductions of some of the objects and designs which later inspired him (Arabia dinnerware and Nautilus fabric). As with McNicoll, Courtney argues that context and the significance of period are important in understanding Slee's work, his extensive knowledge of ceramic history and its techniques. Garth Clark, curator and ceramics author, also places importance on historical context, and situates Slee against a background of Pop Art and 'neo-pop', citing Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg as key influences, and comparing his work with that of Keith Haring and Jeff Koons. As with all the books in this series, this volume makes good use of the format and generous allowance of images to provide a richly detailed and visually descriptive contextual background to Slee and his work.

The Jim Partridge monograph includes critical essays by Alison Britton, and Katherine Swift. Britton, one of Britain's leading ceramicists and also a prolific writer on the applied arts, was a good choice: a contemporary of Partridge's who although working in a different medium, shares a similarity of context, having established herself as a maker

in her field at around the same time. Both Britton and Partridge experimented with the outer limits of function and material in trying to bring relevance to their respective craft mediums during the 70s and 80s, and Britton uses this first major solo exhibition of Partridge's work as an opportunity to reflect on his career as a maker. As with the McNicoll and Slee essays, she follows a chronological trajectory, plotting significant milestones in Partridge's life along the way. She contextualises his work by citing major influences, both historical and contemporary, and traces his career by examining both his choice of form and material. Partridge, Britton explains, is a reluctant writer, communicating largely through making, and it is in his approach to form and material that she distils philosophic and aesthetic meaning. Britton's prose is poetically descriptive and very visual, and she responds to Partridge very much as one maker to another. This volume also includes an essay by Katherine Swift, a garden historian who examines Partridge's outdoor commissions, concentrating on his site-specific work for national parks.

The Sutton volume is somewhat less biographical than those on McNicoll, Slee and Partridge. Sutton is best known for her invention of innovative techniques in textiles, being the first female practitioner to use computers in creating loom-woven textiles, and of the five makers in this series was the keenest to embrace technology and links with industry. Sutton is also a prolific writer herself, having produced many books on weaving and technique that are still commonly used in textile teaching. It is her co-author of these books, Diane Sheehan, a professional textile artist and international lecturer, who has contributed to this volume. Sheehan's analysis of Sutton is, not surprisingly because of the background they share, largely to do with technique, material and processes. She traces Sutton's background and includes anecdotes of childhood memories, which confirm Sutton's early interests in shape, colour and pattern. She also examines Sutton's work against the context of Constructivism, which has had a profound influence on Sutton's practice, leading her to make compositional decisions based on 'rules of design' rather than 'aesthetic choices' (p.21) Like the others in the series, Sutton fought against prevailing negative preconceptions of the medium in which she worked, employing traditional techniques but using non-traditional materials. In this way she challenged

existing notions of the nature of textiles and in doing so, elevated the status of applied arts at this time.

Susan Tebby's essay on Sutton adopts a wholly historical methodology, and concentrates on the legacy of Constructivism and the influence this had on Sutton's work. She provides a sound contextual background, citing Naum Gabo, Antione Pevsner's 'Realist Manifesto' of 1920, as well as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth as key influences. Tebby chooses to single out a few key works of Suttons, as exemplars of her expression of Constructivism and interest in mathematics and numerical ordering, and uses images of Roman mosaic pavements and Islamic stone carving for comparison to readers unfamiliar with these concepts.

The Michael Rowe book, with essays by Martina Margetts and Richard Hill, stands out from the series in that its essays dispense largely with chronology and biography and follow a more conceptual and theoretical trajectory. This is not surprising given the choice of essayists, but jars slightly in comparison to the methodologies employed in the other books, which are pitched at a more general audience. Margetts is a lecturer in Critical and Historical Studies at the Royal College of Art and was editor of Crafts magazine for nine years, and she brings to the essay her substantial background as a theorist and critic on the crafts, making parallels with Rowe's experimentation with form and geometry and the theories of semiotics, phenomenology and structuralism. This theoretical approach, Margetts argues, is what differentiates Rowe's work from that of makers who choose to work with their material more intuitively, and is possibly what differentiates Rowe from the other makers featured in this series. Margetts concentrates less on specific objects, when discussing his work, but is more interested in the ideas behind them, and again this is at odds with the other volumes, which make more immediate contextual connections (both textual and visual) with the objects depicted.

Margetts draws parallels with Rowe's work and the writings of an impressive role call of academics, philosophers, writers and artists, including Gaston Bachelard, Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Sigmund Freud to

name a few, arguably more examples than necessary to make the point that Rowe's work is predicated on deep conceptual foundations. This kind of sophisticated theoretical analysis is often desperately lacking in craft writing, and for that reason is welcome in this series, however it left Margetts somewhat at odds with the more visual and familiar approach taken by the other authors. This is clearly the most academically ambitious of the five books, and from the text one is left with the possibly misleading impression that Rowe is the most intellectual of the five, with his aptitude for paradigms of architecture, linguistics, philosophy and morphology underpinning his work.

Richard Hill's essay complements Margetts's by taking an equally theoretical tack, and he uses his background as an architect and architectural theoretician to shed interesting light on the complexities behind Rowe's work. Hill makes insightful comparisons with Rowe and the work of architects such as Eisenman, in their challenging of 'the conventional assumption that architecture and the applied arts have as their basis the satisfying of function' (p. 36). In particular, Hill is able to argue for the situation of Rowe in a 'deconstructionist' modernist context (or anti-modern modern), something which is evident in the subversion of usefulness in Rowe's vessels. This is an interpretation that could be applied to the work of many of the makers featured in this series, and is no coincidence given their commonality of chronology in background and education. In this way, Hill elevates the analysis in a manner that is both accessible and useful to the target audience of these books (perhaps more so than Margetts) and makes a valuable contribution to elevating the discourse of the applied arts.

The overarching aim of the Show5 collaborative was to celebrate the achievements of makers who have redefined contemporary craft. To this end, these volumes have clearly fulfilled their brief. There are the obvious problems of trying to narrow the selection of makers down to simply five, and there are clearly many other makers who would have benefited from such a retrospective. Indeed, one criticism that could be leveled at this series, which purports to represent *British* craft, is the notable absence of Scottish or Welsh makers; a similar complaint was made of Tanya Harrod's book [The Crafts in](#)

Britain in the 20th Century (Yale University Press, 1999), which was largely Anglocentric in perspective.

There is also a difficulty of trying to package five such individual makers as a cohesive set; despite forming part of a collective of makers who in the 1970s began to differentiate themselves from their modernist craft forebears, these makers are associated with constructing a new identity for crafts which has proven to be as varied and contradictory as the past from which they came. Challenging the notions of piety associated with craft objects, as well as the prevailing fetishism of tools and technique over ideas, these volumes have shown that there are many ways of interpreting the word craft, and indeed, craftsman. The essays within also illustrate that there are many ways of writing about craft, from the straightforward historiographic narrative, to the more challenging theoretical discourse. This series makes a very worthy attempt to present craft on an even playing field with fine art, and will hopefully set a precedent which can now allow younger generations of craft practitioners to be recognised and celebrated.

Andrea Peach

Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen