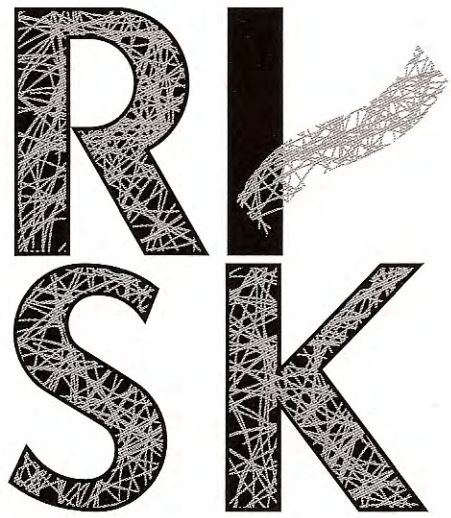

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TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

An important event for the craft sector took place in Auckland in April 1998. Initiated and supported by Creative New Zealand, the conference Korero a te Whatu (The Persuasive Object) was organised and hosted by Unitec. It was a provocative conference with an attendance of almost 300 and it concluded by identifying a number of issues. In particular, the need for more public art museum support of craft and the need for more critical commentary and debate and dialogue about craft were established.

It is in this context that the idea for a significant craft exhibition as part of The Suter's centennial programme emerged. The idea became reality when Kelly Thompson was contracted as managing curator through generous sponsorship for curatorial projects from Robert and Sally Hunt of Paratiho Farms Ltd. Working with Otago Polytechnic colleagues Bridie Lonie and Leoni Schmidt, Kelly has selected the work of fourteen practitioners. Some are emerging and others are more established. All challenge traditions in one way or another.

RISK - Transformative Practices examines objects that cross what have been boundaries between the fine arts and craft. As Kelly Thompson points out in her essay, "they are objects that defy easy categorisation". They are edgy objects that seduce with their materiality and then challenge and subvert through the ideas they are exploring. The exhibition reveals particular works by these artists that to a large extent have been invisible. Now that they are visible, they warrant a closer look.

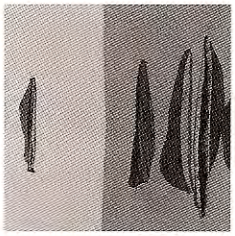
The three catalogue essays do this - each employing a different voice. Each speaks to the works in the exhibition. Bridie Lonie does so in the context of an historical overview of craft design practice and process. Leoni Schmidt looks at the intersections of play and surprise, tactility and abjection, and danger and pain. Kelly Thompson provides an overview that asks questions of both makers and their audiences. The catalogue extends the life of the exhibition, invites comment and - it is hoped - will generate discussion and debate.

The founding support of Paratiho Farms Ltd attracted further support from Creative New Zealand under its programme for Presentation, Promotion and Audience Development. The Otago Polytechnic Research & Development Committee has further assisted the catalogue and Nelson's Origin Pacific Airways has supported most of Kelly's travel to visit artists.

The Suter has been a strong supporter of craft practice in New Zealand for the past forty years. In this, its centennial year, The Suter is proud to present new innovative work that crosses boundaries and takes risks. For that I would finally like to thank and acknowledge the contributing artists for their willing participation.

Helen Telford
Director
The Suter
Te Aratoi o Whakatu

RISK - Transformative Practices asks the viewer to move beyond the aesthetic of the polished craft object, to experience the collision between the domain of craft design and the traditional arena of the fine arts. Risks taken outside the boundaries of safe and familiar practices, markets and audiences are given a forum for debate and interaction. Discourses of identity, memory, the body, the darker domains of experience, location and dislocation, fragility and materiality are inherent in this exhibition.



How will the conversation flow?

Textiles that reference and express notions of the body abound in RISK. However, the conventional framework of cloth, covering or garment, has been transformed, enticing the viewer with the initially familiar, then exposing the darker narratives suggested through surface treatment or structure.

Cloth's comforting associations are questioned.

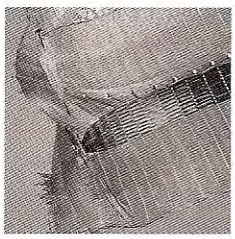
Transparent shrouds, with contrasting pockets, dense, dark, seductive, reflective with subtle details that suggest without informing, alluding to the body; the seams and pockets of common intimacy. Jenny Bain's cloths speak of life, sexuality and birth yet also shimmer with the unknown, hidden fears, death. Coverings of all kinds are referenced here: simple garments constructed with minimal wastage, selvage to selvage, respectful of the skill of hand weavers from traditional societies in which cloth is a marker of identity. Or purdah screens veiling women from public view. Or the seductiveness of sheer cloth focusing attention on that which the moral values of society indicate should be concealed. The subterfuge of *Heart-Body-Soul* lies in the carefully constructed openings, pockets and stitched edges that obscure and hide the precious, intervening into the body of the cloth.

Body of cloth, body of work, body of knowledge - such common phrases that roll off the tongue.

The absent body is also indicated in the fragile shells of Rose Griffin's vestigial sleeves. This component of a garment is constructed from honesty seed heads and silk fabric, a tease of the senses, familiar but highly provocative of the surreal. Solid sleeve cuffs with pearl buttons taper off into the gesture, as if to distance themselves from the potential to be worn. The dislocated garments, *Side-by-Side Sleeves* or *Long Sleeves*, refer to the craft of women, stitching and sewing as honest but undervalued cultural activity, an historical narrative.

Can the absent historical body ever be present?

Comfort and the dictates of fashion, costume and jewellery predominate in the *Collared* series from Deborah Crowe. Perhaps more familiar than amputated sleeves, Crowe echoes detachable collars, silhouettes from Elizabethan ruffs, nineteenth-century high fold-down collars and contemporary shirts, translated through stainless steel mesh, woven nylon and wire. These neckpieces, whether worn or suspended in space, imply the body. However, those pieces that suggest wearability would inflict serious pain if actually worn. Sharp edges and exposed pins evoke starched surfaces on vulnerable skin, or the unexpected pain of stray pins during dressmakers' fittings.



The crafted object requires an audience that is responsive to personal and collective memories of making and function, to whom such objects resonate with familiar and unspoken associations. These makers articulate such elements and thus invite an audience to allow previously silent objects to speak aloud. Such objects challenge the modernist separation of content and design, but in doing so refuse to jettison materiality.

Is Craft seen as 'other'? Is concern with materiality a handicap?

Our First Conversation, 30 Years After Birth and *Made in NZ* speak of other potentially painful body memories, using humour and familiar icons: playpen, nappy and soft toys - to convey difficult notions of genetic and cultural origins. Exquisitely screen- and block-printed fabric drops and multiples of Maori girl with poi, koala bear, boomerang and forlorn babies with attached placentas are excluded or rejected from the central playpen. Jennifer Matheson certainly stretches the repeat production aspect of textiles, appropriating kitsch tourist symbols for intense personal commentary.

Three families of objects from Emily Siddell eloquently engage the sense of touch. *Assimilate, Oscillate* and *Affiliate* each engenders notions of the pleasurable handling of familiar objects, or of repetitious rhythms involving everyday domestic items. *Assimilate* consists of switches, kitchen implements and various other everyday domestic items which have been reproduced in creamy white slip-cast ceramics, creating a likeness, making similar, but retaining an austerity, an edginess to the familiar. Subterranean creatures metamorphose in light and reflective forms woven and crocheted from common plastics, made exotic through repetitious movement as suggested by the title, *Oscillate*. The objects sing with sensitivity.

Valuing traditional craft techniques: evoking memories through tactile associations of the known and unknown.

Simon Pickard and Tania Patterson explore the body as site for interactive adornment. The jeweller's skills of intricate construction and precision of movement are applied to quirkily mechanised objects of fascination. Pickard's watches are highly functional yet take risks with the comfort zone of the user's psychology - blades open to reveal the watch face or multiple cogs cause directional confusion. The selection on exhibition from Patterson includes different adornment items - eyewear, container or pendant - with the common expectation of active participation from the user. *Spectacles, Blinkers* and *Roll Top Box* each eerily magnifies an action of eye or eyelids.

In the process of crafting, the mechanised becomes organic.

Andrea Daly's *Ex-voto medals* encapsulate the iconic Catholic body, the miniature chronicling cultural experience, acting as a vehicle to communicate with the sacred. The use of mechanically reproduced images, photographs, painting, metal plates, text and collage in *Ex-voto* relates strongly to the concerns of installation and the creation of conceptually charged environments through the ordering of common materials in new contexts. The multiple variations of *Ex-voto medals* presented incorporate holy cards with figurative images, metal, beads, resin, red thread and hair evoking the actual body as a sign of offerings. In employing these references, Daly is exploring personal understandings or experiences of the spiritual and questioning the ways in which we gain our personal or cultural identity.

How does the direct experience of the body shape beliefs?

What role does the medium of jewellery as stimulator of the senses play in mediating one's understandings?

The human condition and a frailty of emotive response are dominant themes in the humorous yet edgy portraits from Jim Cooper. The brightly charged characters of his past work have become brutally honest. The spirit is troubled. A huge risk is being taken here; a different practice is emerging.

Risk-taking can be transformative. In a little country it can also be damaging. What risks do you take?

Collective human memory and the cumulative shared experiences of history are revisited in the practices of Gail Gauldie and Terésa Andrew. The dark and light aspects of time, memory and personal experience are evoked through symbol and metaphor, cloth and text. The spiritual and physical experiences of the 'forgotten people' of the past are kept alive, evoked through the present in the work of these two artists.

Andrew's *Sins of the Fathers and the Mothers* is an installation of the familiar domestic, a somewhat forlorn washstand with white enamel basin, jug, folded cloth and polished resin soaps complete with admonishments floating within. It quietly reminds one of daily rituals and the tragedy of loss and compromise. Gauldie reconstructs memory, valuing the time-honoured skills of women through mending, patching, piecing and stitching of cloth, physically and metaphorically connecting to history, but also inscribing the verses of past lives and emotions into the dark surface.

Memory is subjective, reconstructed, retold, fragmentary, often distorted.
History pretends otherwise, but it is all these things too.

The exhibitors in RISK - Transformative Practices have all studied for a minimum of three years in craft, art or design programmes in New Zealand or elsewhere. While certainly not a prerequisite for producing powerful work, the articulation of concepts in an environment of critical challenges and technical facilitation has engendered change in New Zealand craft art in the last ten years. With strong craft allegiances, the exhibitors in RISK primarily manifest a conceptual foundation, with intuition, material understanding and process providing the means of production.

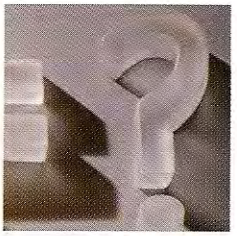
The idealism and rhetoric of the mid-to-late 1980s, when formalised craft education was being extended in this country, viewed craft as a potential employment creator - a vocation with a lucrative expanding market. Nine polytechnics in 1986 accepted enrolments for a new two-year Certificate in Craft Design, working across a diversity of media. Diploma programmes followed rapidly. As the 1990s progressed in the context of political reforms and restructuring, many of these programmes have diversified into cross-media, visual art or design courses, with the discourses of the fine arts increasingly being drawn on. The dearth of historical or contemporary research, documentation and critical analysis of serious craft activities made this inevitable, but certainly not irreversible. Design and computing based courses are increasingly marketing the culture of image, style and identity, creating a differing perception of professional opportunities from that of craft design. However, the slippage between the domains of art, craft and design is potentially fertile ground for practitioners who choose to mix contexts and to defy easy categorisation.

The domestic/industrial narrative interface is explored in Dafydd Thomas's *Magazine Vessels* and *Light Boxes*, architecture for the interior context. Baskets woven from strapping plastics and tailoring tape measures are suspended in aluminium frames with concrete anchors, a hybrid of Pacific modernist. Translucent education department film strips are woven together, much like history, with clear sharp fragments and other aspects becoming overlaid, unreadable with memories aglow from the nostalgia of a different era.

A sparse aesthetic that utilises urban materials to summon up a sense of time, place, and identity - Aotearoa.

Light and translucency are key factors in the work of Jo Nuttall and Emma Camden. The seemingly cool restraint of cast glass belies the intensity of passion

and process involved in its production. Jo Nuttall's *Weighting* series evokes a sense of tension through contrasting but chemically related materials. The lead crystal glass appears fluid, lucent, momentarily tensioned between the dense white lead metal as if thought has been caught and frozen, substantial and insubstantial. The seemingly spontaneous extrusions, ambiguous forms, nevertheless have a vital relationship of edge to surface.



Appearing as ritualistic relics of unknown origin, objects of intrigue and mystery. Surely this is not the only fate of the crafted object?

Extending her *Boxing My Lover Series*, Camden's architectural forms are topped with clear glass, trapped words arousing emotions, suggesting fidelity and betrayal; or acting as signposts on life's journey. Floating symbols link the house structures, while the narrative changes on arrangement - what is being questioned here, whose truth, what trust? A sense of unease is conveyed through light transforming the glass and text.

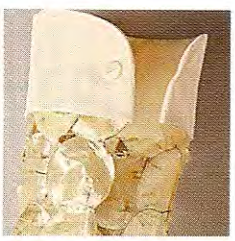
An architectural symbol of security is destabilised through the uncertainty of human experience. What is fragile?

In various contexts new and multi-media boundary crossings for conversations and presentation of work are being experimented with. The world-wide web is increasingly being accessed for communication and the resurgence of Maori and Pacific Island culture is helping to distinguish Aotearoa/New Zealand identity. Contemporary craft practices contribute to this shaping through personal adornment, fashion and textile interfaces, furniture and interior design, and other objects of intrigue and contemplation. The time is ripe for more public institutions to extend their exhibition parameters to the crossover and hybridisation that is occurring in order to salute the histories and herald the innovators. This will be risky territory for many - familiar and safe paradigms may not be effective and mistakes will inevitably be made.

Managing risk is the institutional terminology, but where would art be without mistakes and discoveries?

Writing pertaining to craft that explores differing voices and intentions needs fostering - absence makes the field invisible. The specificity of the many disciplines of crafts and the diversity of contribution to the cultural context of Aotearoa/New Zealand need analysis and articulation. This discourse needs to extend beyond the promotional voice of makers or dealers. Referencing of fine art critiques provides one model; design, film, literature and women's studies can provide others. Craft risks become irrelevant if we do not create the conversations and forums to convince ourselves otherwise.

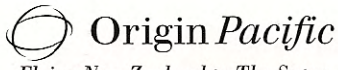
The tactile persuades - the virtual evokes, stimulates a different conversation. Materiality convinces - can you imagine humans not being captured by the sensual, seduced by the exquisite?



The persuasive object? What language does it speak? Is it the experiential knowing of the body? The visual engaging of the intellect? Or is it the slow burning of memories, the disappearing and recreating of history?

Kelly Thompson
December 1999

The Suter
Te Aratoi o Whakatu



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