

# "C" is for Craft

by Shelley Adler

craft / *kraft*

noun

1 an activity involving skill in making things by hand: *the craft of bookbinding* | *pewter craft*.

• (crafts) work or objects made by hand: *the shop sells local crafts* | [as adj.] (craft) *a craft fair*.

• a skilled activity or profession: *the historian's craft*.

• skill in carrying out one's work: *a player with plenty of craft*.

• skill used in deceiving others: *her cousin was not her equal in guile and evasive craft*.

• the members of a skilled profession.<sup>1</sup>

Is "craft" really a dirty word? Do people care about craft anymore? Or maybe, the question is: Who's afraid of craft? Well, let's ask the question then: What is craft? Is it the stuff you make using white glue? Or the stuff you have to sew and cram with string? Or strange objects made out of driftwood? Or maybe craft means the *process* of making something—*how* it was actually made, or simply, the *method* . . . of anything. Or maybe it means knowing exactly how much linseed oil and OMS to dip the brush into to get an effect that looks effortless and accidental.

In a time like ours, when ideas are the medium, it may seem strange to shine a light on the age-old traditions of craft. Yet, in a time like ours, does anyone—whether artist or viewer—really care who made the piece? (See, for example, the work of Jeff Koons, Maurizio Cattalan, or Damien Hirst.) After all, aren't we in a "post-craft" era? Well, yes, if your definition of craft involves making something using your hands, you could argue that the reality of our technological and conceptual world really does put us into a post-craft era. But, you could also argue that until our species learns to use technology to do everything, we will still use our arms and legs to make and create, and as a result, connect ourselves to the masters of the past through the continued use of the materials that have always been employed.

## Looking for Magic

When a painter is on his or her game, a painting becomes magical. Haven't we all stood in front of a painting, marveling at the mystery of its surface, its colour and texture, its transparency and glow, and asked ourselves, "now how did they do that?"

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<sup>1</sup> *New Oxford American Dictionary*

Making a painting or sculpture is a long and arduous journey that requires figuring out how to make materials speak in precisely the way the artist wants. That's the artist's craft. And the better the artist is, the more his or her craftsmanship will be hidden from view. The less you notice it, the more likely you will think of the "what" of the work. You will be focused on, or directed by, the subject, or the story, or the object, and less likely to think of the "how." As my friend James Lahey recently remarked, "you see artists in museums getting as close to paintings as possible because they want to know the 'how' of the work. The 'what' of the work seems to be the concerns of others." And that's okay.

So, are artists reluctant to talk about craft? Their *own* craft? You bet they are. It's for them to know and us to find out. In the case of Gord Peteran's work, the viewer might speculate about how things are made, and might get it right. Or wrong. Sticks and twigs that suggest the depth of human fragility cannot be measured by the number of ties and twists in an artwork. And while we are on the subject of twigs, Jay Wilson's work, made with toothpicks and twigs, evokes the fragility of our existence while engaging banal materials. These humble materials are magically transformed, contradicting their very nature, and arranged with a swagger unequalled by the work of most artists, veer into the world of design.

Sheila Gregory has spent her life dripping, pouring, spraying, and brushing paint in to an ever-expanding universe of shapes and textures, her canvases always delighting the eye with new layers and possibilities. And never take for granted a square in a Michael Gerry painting. It may look like just a square brushstroke, or maybe a little rectangular in shape, a little soft on the sides, but it embodies space and volume and the lightness of being as it represents the great and intangible distance from here to there. Brent McIntosh has developed a painting technique that defies description, and no amount of nose-to-the-canvas inspection will reveal how he does it. His painting of the water's edge hovers between abstraction and representation, transcending ordinary significance.

These five artists, along with the thirteen others in the exhibition, are but a slice of those out there in the field perfecting their craft. They have made their choices about which materials speak to them, and are working to ever refine and redefine those materials to whatever ends they choose. Ultimately, for these artists, it's about the materials and processes, and the experiments and investigations required to serve their subject—it all goes hand in hand.

What evolves from that relationship can be absolute magic!