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Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick
 Courtesy of the Museum of Fine
 Arts, Boston
 Photo by Lee FATHERREE



Clifford Rainey
Shy Boy
 2005
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
 Photo by Lee FATHERREE

QUESTIONS OF CRAFT

by N.F. Karlins

At Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the fall art season opened with steam shovels and backhoes snorting in the rear of the building, a huge extension in mid-progress. Inside, despite a few bare galleries near the construction zone, the MFA is humming with a new exhibition celebrating its intended leadership role in collecting contemporary craft.

"Shy Boy, She Devil, and Isis: The Art of Conceptual Craft: Selections from the Wornick Collection," Sept. 11, 2006-Jan. 6, 2008, features more than 120 works by more than 100 artists from 20 countries. The collectors Ron and Anita Wornick, both born and educated in the Boston area and now Oakland residents, are giving the museum artworks and money to support contemporary craft collecting.

The MFA is receiving all the pieces in the exhibition and enough additional material to bring the museum a sum of 250 works, representing all traditional craft media, dating largely from 1985 to the present. The Wornicks will have their names on a new gallery once the MFA expansion is complete.

The provocative title of their show takes its inspiration from three of the works on view. Clifford Rainey's *Shy Boy* (2005), one of a series of sculptures commenting on the artist's boyhood in Northern Ireland, consists of a youthful male torso of silvery cast glass, whose legs disappear into a maple plinth, as if frozen in the block and unable to move. Visible inside the torso is a gold-leafed bottle, referring to the artist's ability to speak freely as a young man only when drinking. Rich textural effects underline the multiplicity of techniques used to construct this moving, very personal sculpture.

The most interesting pieces in the show have a similar personal emotional resonance, like Michael Lucero's fanciful *She Devil* (2005), a ceramic kneeling female figure with tiny wings, whose head is wrapped in yarn. The multicolored drips of glaze cascading down the lower body owe a lot to Tang ceramics (as well as to post-war abstraction). On first looking, I thought the odd pixie-ish face covered in colorful yarn might have been prompted by the art of the Huichol Indians of Mexico, but learned from the catalogue that the artist was inspired by yarn produced by the Missoni knitting factory when he was living in Italy. This perky *She Devil* is unique, whatever her forebears.

Peter Voulkos, who single-handedly brought about West Coast funk ceramics, made his imposing fired



Michael Lucero
She Devil
2005
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree



Peter Voulkos
Isis
2001
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree



George Edgar Ohr
A superb two-handled vase
1897-1900
\$132,000
Nov. 16, 2006
Sotheby's New York

stoneware *Isis* (2001) shortly before his death. The heavy slabs of clay are sliced and rearranged into a vessel-less vessel that has a monumental presence yet antediluvian feel, evoking *haniwa* funeral figures from Japan.

The term "Conceptual Craft," preferred by the Wornicks for their material and discussed at length in the catalogue by others, seems to mean functional and non-functional esthetic objects, made by artists originally trained in using wood, clay, fiber, glass and metal, and employing exceptional technical skills for personal purposes. Certainly the works here are adroitly worked and highly finished, whether functional or not.

If some of the works in traditional craft materials here balance on the line between craft and art, the mixed-media pieces quickly obliterate any boundary. I find this exciting area a difficult one to describe, because so many artists have used craft materials in fresh and stimulating ways since WWII. I'm also sure it has little effect on the enjoyment of the pieces, but it is something to ponder as both the fine art and design worlds continue to grow, leaving craftspeople somewhere in the middle.

The objects in the MFA's new gift may use traditional craft media, but they are far too unique to not be considered art, and as they are three-dimensional, why not call them sculpture? The best of craft has been viewed this way for a while (think of George E. Ohr (1857-1918), the Mad Potter of Biloxi, and his folded, creased and crushed pots, for example).

The Studio Craft Movement has made wood, clay, fiber, glass and metal seem like new materials when used for idiosyncratic purposes rather than for producing generic functional items with a bit of decorative flair, but the objects they create look more and more like those being made by artists with traditional training.

In our postmodern world with its emphasis on using new materials -- or in the case of craft materials, old materials used in new ways, with its mix-and-match techniques and styles -- the line where craft meets art has become hard, I would suggest impossible, to define. This is the principal reason that the American Craft Museum has morphed into the Museum of Arts and Design.

Getting back to the Wornicks' Collection, its gigantic multi-part ceramic, *Man with a Jar* (1999) by Viola Frey has the outsized proportions of installation art and its thick creamy glazes the jazzy coloring of paintings. Frey's work has usually been described as sculpture. Or should we think "conceptual craft?"

Wood is a particularly interesting material. It was the focus of the Wornicks' collecting originally. The result was a prominent grouping of gorgeous woods transformed into elegant modern objects. It was after an exhibition of these pieces, "Expressions in Wood" in 1997, that Ron and Anita Wornick decided to expand their collecting into other media,



Viola Frey
Man with Jar II
1999
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree



Grant Vaughan
Split Form
2005
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree



Julian Schwarz
Cherry -- Cup
2004
Lucas Schoormans



John Cederquist's *Wavemaster*
(1999) in "One of a Kind: The
Studio Craft Movement" at the
Metropolitan Museum of Art

resulting in this exhibition.

Among the earlier wood pieces is Peter M. Adams' *Dotoh* (1984), a coffee table of laminated and carved walnut, aptly named for the Japanese term for a big wave. The cool modernist vibe of this and other works resonates differently from the more rough-and-ready, genuinely post-modern pieces on display.

The show includes related pieces by a whole contingent of talented and too-little-known Australian artists. Grant Vaughan, for example, sensitively uses the grain of Australian red cedar to maximum effect in carving the deep, sensual organic folds of his *Split Form* (2005). The notion of "conceptual craft" needs to be pretty big to accommodate both pieces with this pared-down and streamlined esthetic and others more earthy and/or made with mixed-media.

Whatever we call artists who work in wood, clay, glass, fiber and metal, there are a lot of them. And they come from all over the world. I was thinking of this when viewing Julian Schwarz's debut at Lucas Schoormans in New York, Sept. 7-Oct. 13, 2007. This Britain-born and France-based artist, who trained as a painter and sculptor in wood and metal at the Slade School, has developed into a distinctive sculptor in wood. That's what he calls himself, a sculptor. His completely unadorned hand-carved vessels are thick-walled and squat, projecting enormous power and stability. Having all the delicacy of a peasant's knout, they are robust rather than refined.

Schwarz's impressive show is just one of many reasons why it's going to be increasingly difficult to parse what's craft and what's sculpture, though the Metropolitan Museum of Art, like the Museum of Fine Art, is trying in its show "One of a Kind: The Studio Craft Movement." Only a few artists are in both the Met show and the MFA show, like John Cederquist, Olga de Amaral, Norma Minkowitz and Albert Paley, underlining how diverse and lively the contemporary craft scene is.

Barbara Gladstone's current exhibition in Chelsea, "Makers and Modelers," Sept. 8-Oct. 13, 2007, featuring about 30 contemporary artists from several countries using ceramics in one way or another, complicates matters again, raising additional questions. Are artists who use only ceramics to be treated differently from artists who only occasionally use ceramics? How about those who send their ceramics out for fabrication? Or work with a professional potter?

One healthy result of contemporary craft being recognized as art is the huge number of women artists gaining visibility, simply because they have been more active in traditional crafts, especially fiber. Now, they can drop their second-class status.

Even in the most male-dominated area, wood, one of the highlights of the Wornick Collection is Michelle Holzapfel's *Scarf Bowl* (1992), in which an



Sam Durant (Produced by Ye Xing You with craftspeople Xu Fu Fa and Chen Zhong Liang. Kang Youteng, Project manager and Liason)
Light Blue, Unique Mono-Block Resin Chair, Built at Jiao Zhi Studio, Xiamen, China
2006
Gladstone Gallery, New York

illusionistic soft scarf is draped over a bowl and yet manages to prop it up, performing a seeming levitation. Holzapfel employs turned and carved yellow birch to create this entrancing effect.

"Shy Boy, She Devil, and Isis" is organized by Gerald W. R. Ward, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts senior curator of decorative arts and sculpture for the museum's art of the Americas department. He has divided the show into several capacious, overlapping categories: the human figure, ceremony and narrative, organic abstraction, pattern and ornament, and materials and illusionism. These can be applied to all art, not just craft, but the installation looks fine and is more interesting than if the works were organized by media. Other, perhaps more profitable, ways of viewing this material might have been the influence of photography or the legacy of Peter Voulkos, for example.

However one categorizes the works, and no matter what one terms them, the pieces in the Wornicks' Collection provide plenty of excellent viewing. The Museum of Fine Arts also has on display a small number of craft works in its American galleries and, happily, even permits visitors to sit on several recent craft benches -- or maybe sculptures -- distributed throughout the museum.



Michelle Holzapfel
Scarf bowl
1992
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree

N.F. KARLINS is a New York art historian and critic.



Judy Kensley McKie
Chase Table
1989
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree



Dale Chihuly
*Rembrandt Blue and Oxblood
Persian*
1990
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree



Gord Peteran
A Table Made of Wood
2005
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Photo by Lee Fatherree