

## Women in the crafts

Meredith Hinchliffe 27 October 2006

**Abstract:** The period of the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s was one of considerable social change in Australia. They were heady days and we lived in exciting times. We were optimistic that we could change things - and we did. We worked together in whatever sphere captured our enthusiasm, and joined organisations to fight for what we believed in. Meredith Hinchliffe responds to the exhibition, The Crafted Objects 1960s - 80s, and writes about the studio craft movement in Australia during this time.

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The period of the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s was one of considerable social change in Australia. Don Aitkin speaks of "... the extraordinary developments in the texture and maturity of Australian society that took place in the second half of the twentieth century." <sup>2</sup>

They were heady days and we lived in exciting times. We were optimistic that we could change things - and we did. We worked together in whatever sphere captured our enthusiasm, and joined organisations to fight for what we believed in.

In many ways, the contemporary crafts movement parallels these changes in our society and were integral to the recognition of the importance of the arts in Australia.

As Robert Bell states:

The twenty years between 1965 to 1985 were characterised by radicalism, social upheaval and change, generational conflict, the exploration and politicisation of gender issues, war and global concerns for the state of the environment, all fuelled by increased access to information and the accelerating availability of new technologies. <sup>3</sup>

Young people at the time had many more influences than their pre-World War II counterparts. Overseas travel opened up many avenues and many craftspeople explored non-traditional Australian materials, techniques and design motifs.

Activity in the crafts - as well as other art forms - burgeoned and women became more involved, at all levels. "There was a new spirit of equality between men and women, especially among the young." <sup>4</sup>

April Hersey claims that the success of the crafts at the time "can be directly attributed to the vision of a small group of women ..." In 1975, Craft Australia devoted a special edition of its quarterly magazine to celebrate International Women's Year, edited by Hersey.

Australian women were instrumental in establishing the national craft organisation that became the Crafts

Council of Australia, with the NSW Association being the nucleus. Gradually organisations were established in each state and territory and the national body received a grant to enable it to have an office with staff.

The Crafts Board of the Australia Council was established in 1973, and in the previous five years or so there had been a push for crafts "not to [be] denigrated as inferior in some way to the other arts, but accepted as a vital living force in the community." <sup>5</sup>

Craft media were just not treated seriously. Ceramic sculptor Marea Gazzard claimed that "...only pottery, with the Potters' Society had any voice and the others craftsmen (sic) were really off in the wilderness somewhere". <sup>6</sup> Marea was later invited - the only woman to be so - to chair the Crafts Board, one of seven boards of the Australia Council. She gave up her work completely for a year to work on the Board. There was no staff, no policy and around three quarters of a million dollars to administer. The Board had to make the first year count otherwise there might not be another. <sup>7</sup>

The Crafts Board saw the establishment of Traineeships, grants to individuals and organisations, funds to assist regional galleries purchase objects, and travelling exhibitions of jewellery, ceramics, wood and textiles - both nationally and internationally. <sup>8</sup>

The perennial tussle between arts/crafts gives us a lead as to why women were largely ignored as craftspeople. In speaking about the classifications of artistic value within the visual arts Gillian Swanson and Patricia Wise, state that "...the value of visual arts is derived from inspiration of consciousness or intellect, internal referentiality and innovative conceptual focus, whereas crafts are seen to be distinctive for their use of manual or mechanical technique, and their base in organic form, functionality and everyday use rather than an innovative and self-reflexive aesthetic or materiality." <sup>9</sup> They go on to argue that while there is a class base to this distinction, there is also a concomitant gender base. The intellectual role of the designer was integral to this - men were the designers of many of the feminine accomplishments and women were given little public acknowledgement of their contribution to design.

Bell states that "Feminism ... opened up modes of critical inquiry into what had been categorised and marginalised as women's craft, politicising materials, techniques and approaches to production." <sup>10</sup>

Nearly 10 years after International Women's Year the 1982 report, *Women in the Arts*, found that in surveys of occupations, "women tended to define themselves in terms of another occupation - housewife, teacher, even though their first choice, in an ideal situation, would be artist." (their emphasis) And, "Women were underrepresented in positions of creative influence, or of decision-making power in arts organisations." <sup>11</sup>

The report states that while there was no evidence to suggest that the Australia Council was discriminating against women as applicants for individual grants, it was clear that on average one-third of applications were from women and that on average women applied for 86% of the amount requested by male applicants. The *Women in the Arts* report also notes that census figures at the time did not capture part time workers and it was thought that the majority of these would be women. <sup>12</sup>

In *Going for Broke*, Swanson and Wise quote a study by Throsby and Thompson published in 1994, that states that visual arts, crafts and community arts constitute three of the five areas in which women's involvement comprises more than double that of men. <sup>13</sup>

Published in 2003, *Don't give up your day job*, a study undertaken on behalf of the Australia Council into the numbers of professional artists, their career patterns and income, David Throsby and Virginia Hollister found that the numbers of practising professional artists in the survey was fairly evenly split between women and men: 49 per cent women and 51 per cent men. However, for those who classified themselves as craft practitioners, 61 per cent were women, and 39 percent were men. <sup>14</sup>

What we don't learn from the Throsby and Hollister report is the break down of other relevant information by

gender, so we do not know how many women earn less (or more) from their creative practice than men, or how many hours they spend on their main creative practice. We are unable to tell how many women have had solo exhibitions or have been included in group shows. All are traditional ways of measuring the level of discrimination - either overt or covert. Do women still make up the majority of part time workers? As women make up the majority of craftspeople, it would be valuable to know more about their practice, and perhaps it is time to do another study.

However, I believe that the crafts are now where the most exciting work is occurring in the visual arts in Australia today, and women are right up there. Traditional craft techniques and media are being used by visual artists to create their work.

The work I have done in conjunction with Robert Bell at the Gallery in the last couple of years, has demonstrated that Australian craftspeople regularly exhibit overseas in solo show and group exhibitions, and I suggest that many are more well known internationally than most other Australian visual artists.

Whilst uncomfortable about the way the crafts are being pushed into 'design', I think some exciting links are being forged by craftspeople such as those included in *Freestyle*.<sup>15</sup> Many are experienced female craftspeople, finding ways of working with industry and exploring greater use of technology. Janet DeBoos and Jennifer Robertson are two good examples.

Craftspeople engage in political and social debates through their practices to the same extent as other visual artists. They are adventurous in their choice and use of materials and techniques of manufacture. Craftspeople are entrepreneurial in the ways in which they continue their artistic practice and make a living. Alice Whish and Morley Grainger are exploring ways of bringing their work to a much wider audience.<sup>16</sup>

Women are continuing to make their mark in the crafts - and it is up to us all to ensure they get due recognition.

Meredith Hinchliffe  
30 October 2006

Meredith Hinchliffe is a freelance arts advocate and writer living in working in Canberra. She began work at the Craft Association of the ACT in 1978 and has been actively involved in the crafts since that time.

#### Footnotes

1. *The Crafted Object: 1960s-80s*, Robert Bell, National Gallery of Australia, 2006
2. *What Was it all For? The Reshaping of Australia*, Don Aitkin, Allen & Unwin, 2005, p ix
3. Robert Bell
4. Don Aitkin
5. *Women in Australian Craft, A special edition of Craft Australia to mark International Women's Year*, April Hersey, Crafts Council of Australia, 1975
6. April Hersey
7. April Hersey
8. These collections were donated to the National Gallery of Australia in 1980 and many works are exhibited in *The Crafted Object: 1660s-80s*
9. *Going for Broke*, Gillian Swanson and Patricia Wise, Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, Griffith University, Queensland, 1998(?) p 95
10. Robert Bell
11. *Women in the Arts: A study by the Research Advisory Group of the Women and Arts Project*, Sydney, 1982, p 24
12. *Women in the Arts*, p 7

13. *Going for Broke*, p 102
14. *Don't Give up your Day Job: an economic study of professional artists in Australia*, David Throsby and Virginia Hollister, Australia Council, 2003
15. *Freestyle*
16. *Artists sustaining their practice in different ways*, Meredith Hinchliffe, *Art Monthly*, 194 October 2006, pp 14 17

## Context

The Contemporary studio craft movement in Australia is the focus of the exhibition *Crafted Objects 60s-80s*, presented by the National Gallery of Australia and curated by decorative arts curator Robert Bell. The exhibition is a timely reminder of the legacy of the early protagonists of this movement and the influence they have had on the development of the practice over the past thirty years. While the show focuses on the role these celebrated artists have played in the sector, what is remarkable about the exhibition is the social dimension to the movement. Robert Bell has highlighted this by presenting the exhibition in themes that draw attention to the interconnectedness of the makers and their socio political affiliation of the time. Much of what inspired the work appears politically radical in our contemporary context where artists and creative commentators are now bound by new anti sedition legislation that curbs freedom of speech. This coupled with the recent anti bias legislation which defines ABC coverage, and we have to ask how have we progressed over the past thirty odd years.

Craft Australia's 30 year history as the peak advocacy organisation for the sector has been associated with the development of the movement and has been influential in shaping the directions and outcomes that we now consider a regular component of the Australian cultural landscape. To draw attention to some of these issues, Craft Australia has commissioned two celebrated writers who have been critical commentators on contemporary craft practice to write about the studio craft movement.

These two commissioned articles serve to highlight the trajectory of the movement from a historical perspective, as well as placing the early movement in a contemporary context. The first of these articles is *Women in the crafts - 1960s to 1980s and 2006* written by Meredith Hinchliffe.

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General Manager  
Craft Australia  
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