

ABOUT: THE SLOW MOVEMENT PLAYING WITH TIME



The correlation of craft and the Slow Movement is part of the contemporary zeitgeist that sees craft as a site of resistance to consumer culture. The creative potential of DIY, after years of exile in the realm of uncool, has been brought back into fashion by television programmes like the Channel 4 series, *Kirstie's Homemade Home*. On a more intellectual level, the sociologist Richard Sennett explored the perceived value of tacit skill in his book *The Craftsman* (2009). This year Matthew Crawford's *The Case for Working with your Hands: or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good* argues for the empowerment that comes with manual competence, specifically regarding that male philosophical



Above / David Gates - From the series Anon. Jerwood Contemporary Makers Exhibition.

“The debate tries to avoid adhering to the rigid binaries of fast and slow. Slow, as a movement, is more than the antithesis of quick. It is about collaboration, conversation, and consciousness. It does not fetishise actual slowness in the working day.”



Above / David Gates - Threads (detail). Taking Time Exhibition. Credit Richard Batty.

favourite - motorcycle maintenance. Rebel knitter groups like the anonymous guerrillas of Knitta who wrap street furniture with bits of knitting, and the Stockholm-based graffiti knitters, Masquerade, have used graffiti knitting to make serious social comment, while the light-hearted wrapping of street furniture in coloured wool was popularised by the recent Vodafone advertisement. The zeitgeist is fuelled by the North American crafter movement, which positions craft outside mainstream consumerism, while adroitly using the same set of ideas to sell handmade

objects through websites like etsy.com. The politicisation of the act of making has, of course, been around since the days of William Morris, but its contemporary manifestation is a refreshing counterbalance to the drive toward the professionalisation of craft practice which, although both laudable and necessary, tended to take a bit of the fun out of it.

The correlation of craft and 'Slow' uses craft, not so much as an act of protest, as a tin-opener with which to pry open some of life's larger questions. It has generated a number of interesting projects. The latest version of ThinkTank, a forum of leading European thinkers-on-craft, is themed on the notion of 'Speed', and Craft Northern Ireland chose 'Slow' as the theme for August Craft Month 2010. This is the first time that the annual event has danced to a philosophical tune - previous Craft Months have been themed around materials - Silver in 2008; Ceramics ▶



Above / Elizabeth Turrell - Child Of The 1940s. Taking Time Exhibition. Credit-Richard-Batty.



Above/ Esther Knobel - Brooch from the Mind In The Hand Series. Taking Time Exhibition.



► in 2009. But the clearest articulation of the concept of 'Slow' has been generated around *Taking Time: Craft and the Slow Revolution*. This is a touring exhibition from Craftspace, curated with Helen Carnac which showed in the Millennium Court Arts Centre, Portadown, in August/September 2010. Exhibiting the work of a group of makers whose work interrogates time and the awareness of time, *Taking Time* is accompanied by an informative blog* that explores the identity of craft within the Slow Movement.

The debate tries to avoid adhering to the rigid binaries of fast and slow. Slow, as a movement, is more than



Above below and left / Jack Doherty.



the antithesis of quick. It is about collaboration, conversation, and consciousness. It does not fetishise actual slowness in the working day. As the furniture maker David Gates, whose work is shown in *Taking Time*, points out, few contemporary makers are in the privileged position of being able to squander precious time. Out of economic necessity, most craft is efficiently made. Often the slowness

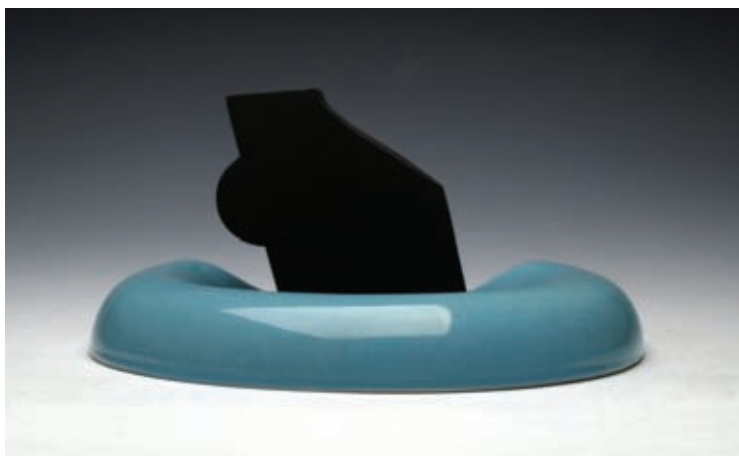
within the work relates not to the process of making, but to the interaction between the work and its recipient: the object is created in such a way that it makes you slow down and think. In Gates' own work the idioms of furniture - legs, enclosed spaces, even the materials of which fridges are made - are assembled in ways that have no conceivable usage. This, by disrupting the civil partnership between furniture and functionality, raises questions, the most obvious of which being: 'what's it for?' Nine out of ten people, Gates says, will raise an eyebrow and move swiftly on. He doesn't mind this: the tenth person will have something interesting to say.

Another potential pitfall is the assumption that to embrace 'Slow' is to deny modernity. This is not a return to that poignant old seventies dream of moving down the country and making things out of wood. In fact most of the work in *Taking Time* is decidedly contemporary and, ►



Above / Yarmbombing.

FEATURE THE SLOW MOVEMENT



► especially to Irish eyes, unusually conceptual. I don't think that we are used to craft that is so overtly driven by ideas or that articulates them so clearly.

Much of the work in *Jerwood Contemporary Makers 2010: Exploring new perspectives in making*, which ran at the Naughton Gallery at Queen's as part of August Craft Month, was similarly ideas-driven. Both exhibitions seem to express a postmodern aspect of craft - ironic and self-referential - that hasn't fully spread its wings on this island, although doubtless we will follow in that direction. *Jerwood Contemporary Makers* comprises work of the winners of the eponymous award for the applied arts, including that of two makers - Gates and the ceramist Dawn Youll - who were also part of *Taking Time*. Youll's piece for *Jerwood Contemporary Makers*, 'After the Event' uses the ceramic object to



Above / Rebecca Earley - PippaShirt. Taking Time Exhibition. Credit Tom Gidley.



Above / Anna Mette Hjornholm, Tall Willow Vase. European Basketmaking Exhibition

Above / Bent Vinkler, Large Frame Basket. European Basketmaking Exhibition.



play with time and dimension. Using a plaster forming process, she rendered the familiar graphics of a road sign (the one where you see a car driving into water and are thereby encouraged not to do the same), into a three dimensional object. This is made on a table-top scale, which associates it with the souvenir, a commemorative object that occurs, as her title says, after the event. But yet a warning sign is intended not to

Left / Dawn Youll - After the Event. Jerwood Contemporary Makers Exhibition.

Below / Nora Fok - Disc-florets. Jerwood Contemporary Makers Exhibition.



commemorate but to prevent that event from happening in the first place. In this case Youll is not merely playing with slowness per se; she is bending time and mapping it back onto itself.

A third exhibition in August Craft Month, the *Jack Doherty Ceramic Exhibition* at the Ormeau Baths Gallery, was in a sense, the antithesis of the other two. To some viewers it may have seemed old-fashioned. Doherty's ceramic vessels represent no discernable concepts. They are simply pots, slightly shabby in their aspect. And yet they are emotionally laden. Using a simple ceramic vocabulary, they express a heartbreaking range of human experience: weariness and defiance, wisdom and folly, brokenness and joy. I do not think that these are young persons' pots. They play with time, not in the experimental sense, but in the sense of lifetime, with all the depth of association that concept brings. ●

Eleanor Flegg

True to the collaborative aspect of Slow, many of the ideas behind this article were evolved in conversation with David Gates and Dawn Youll, who travelled to Belfast to speak as part of August Craft Month 2010. The author is indebted to both of them.

