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Selling the Forever: The use of display in contemporary craft exhibitions

Introduction

Purchasing a piece of craft is investing in longevity: I contend that sustainability means choosing to buy a crafted object that will endure as a treasured item over a mass-produced one that is unlikely to. Owning the forever, not the throwaway, is the ultimate socially accountable consumerism.

The manner in which craft is positioned to consumers in order to emphasise its unique and enduring qualities is a dimension that requires examination, as does the way craft retail can challenge consumer attitudes and offer a more engaging customer experience or ‘an alternative hedonism’ (Soper, *Making Futures II*, 2011.) This paper – which has helped inform the development of my business, *Crafting Spaces* – offers an exploration of the impact display can have on commercial craft exhibitions, and how styling techniques can help influence consumers’ perception of craft as a forever purchase.

A *Crafting Spaces* exhibition shows contemporary craft in a recognisable, but stylised, domestic context to give a suggestion of how pieces of craft can work together in the home. Exhibiting craft in this way also creates a more engaging environment to allow both potential and existing craft buyers to experience the allure of beautiful, unique work. For this paper I conducted interviews with attendees to my exhibitions: a focus group held in February 2012, the findings of which informed my subsequent exhibition – *A Bed of Roses*; and to interviews with ten attendees to that exhibition. These responses are supplemented by the findings of follow-up interviews conducted in August 2013 with four respondents, from the group of ten, who purchased craft pieces at *A Bed of Roses*.

Although this study is limited in its scope and sample size, and cannot be taken as a definitive measure of the success of my display concept, it can give a tentative understanding of the impact display can have on craft consumers.

What makes it forever?

To coincide with *Making Futures III*, Malcolm Ferris invited me to curate a foyer exhibition at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery – *Lifecycles of Material Worlds*. All the pieces I selected for the exhibition were new works of craft created out of unwanted and dismissed items. These pieces are now arguably much more desirable and more likely to be ‘forever’ items in their new form than they were in their previous lives: more treasured as a stunning Magie Hollingworth pot than as the discarded paper from which it is made; more likely to become an heirloom as a Mirjana Smith assemblage teapot than as an empty Bisto tin.

While there are of course works of craft that by their nature won’t last forever – that will have a short natural lifecycle – I contend that much craft endures and is a forever purchase.

But, what makes craft something to treasure forever? Why is a work of craft something that can outlive decorative fads and fashions? Is it because it is a skilled, handcrafted item? Or because of the medium from which it is made? Or is it because of the way in which the consumer interprets its value?

The respondents I interviewed following my *Crafting Spaces* exhibition *A Bed of Roses* (May 2012, Westcroft Gallery, Kingsand, Cornwall) were asked for their initial reaction to a piece of desired craft:

‘When I first saw it, something inside recognised straight away that it had something to say about who I am.’

‘It was a real physical feeling that I just wanted it.’

‘I loved the skulls and roses detail – it seemed to describe my personality, I just fell in love with it.’

‘It’s all gut reaction: gimme, gimme. I hate the thought that someone else would get it first.’

These responses indicate that seeing a ‘forever’ piece is a physical reaction – an item connects to the potential purchaser.

Is this a purely chemical reaction to a desirable object, a happenstance or a reaction that can be encouraged by the way in which a piece is presented for sale?

I would contend that the way that craft is displayed colours the consumer's impression of the piece. As one respondent commented:

'If work is presented badly or in a cluttered fashion you don't feel enough emphasis has been put on the value of them. I'm not going to want to buy something the gallery owner hasn't invested enough effort in trying to sell.'

Can craft retail stimulate buyers to see craft as a must-have purchase – as well as a forever one? Can exhibitions encourage buyers to view craft in this way? And at the same time offer them a consumer experience as memorable as the craft?

Socially accountable consumerism shouldn't require a return to more basic and pre-industrial forms of selling; rather, it should stimulate new, imaginative directions. I think there is a degree of complacency in the craft world: galleries, retailers – and often makers themselves – expect work to sell itself and do little to give it the display it deserves to illustrate its unique traits or consumer offer. As online sales opportunities increase, craft galleries and shops should look to – and beyond – the trends and techniques of visual merchandising to offer an engaging, multi-sensory experience worthy of the unique nature of the work, and which online cannot – currently – offer.

I think there are two key elements missing from most commercial craft exhibitions: context, and a sense of theatre.

Context

Firstly, context. I believe that craft – whether functional or purely decorative – should be shown in a way that gives consumers a suggestion of how it could look in its ultimate destination – the home.

All too often works of craft, intended for use in the home, are either positioned on a white plinth in a white cube gallery and venerated as a piece of art or are squashed on to an overfilled shelf in a crowded craft shop.

As glass artist Charlotte Sale observes:

'In plinth exhibitions – the craft isn't in the environment [the buyer] is taking it home to. Who has white walls, floors and tables in their home? Very few!'
(Interview with author, 2012)

I would contend that by stripping craft of its domestic aura, it diminishes its nature as a crafted item. Craft that is shown and judged in a fine art context has to divest itself of much of its origins. It is interacting with works of craft, whether they are purely functional or not, that gives them identity. As Paul Greenhalgh observes, 'we prefer to drink out of glasses rather than look at them ... pottery is best when held' (2002: 12). Presenting craft in a recognisable and appropriate context where the viewer or user can identify with it is fundamental to our understanding of the relationship we have with the pieces.

Greenhalgh asserts:

The majority of the genres associated with the crafts were not invented for displays in galleries, museums and other public spaces and are intrinsically unsuited to them ...when an object enters into a museum its context automatically changes. It may well still remain a great work of art, but it won't be the same, and in some cases, notably most of the crafts, it may well lose something vital. (2002: 13)

For museum, read white cube.

It would seem that for a piece of craft to be deemed as 'museum-worthy', the further removed it is from any suggestion of domesticity the better. In an essay for the *Collect 2012* catalogue, Emma Crichton-Miller (2012: 25) observes that:

Interestingly, there is some disagreement about the best environment to display contemporary craft. Sarah Myerscough¹ believes that exhibiting turned wood in her white cube gallery off Bond Street has, 'really made a difference. As soon as you put it in that context people do re-evaluate it. These pieces are now securing museum sales.'

These exquisite pieces of wood just beg to be touched and stroked – and it is unlikely that this will be allowed in the 'captivity' of the white cube, for Robert Cook despairs that craft in gallery exhibitions

is 'withering for ... lack of human contact ... frozen in an inglorious moment of rictus' (Cook 2002: 25).

The origin of much contemporary craft is the studio. Gloria Hickey suggests that seeing work in the maker's studio is the only 'authentic way' (Hickey 1997: 96) to buy and experience craft. 'The majority of craft in a retail environment is more often promoted, sold and bought as a distinctive article, an objet d'art or collectible than as craft' (1997: 96).

Why should craft not be all three? Its attractiveness and uniqueness do not stem solely from the work being shown by the maker – some admit that they much prefer others to do the exhibiting and selling for them:

Ceramicist Remon Jephcott says:

'I don't like open studios as I find it intrusive. I prefer gallery settings for my work. I like to see how differently my work is set out and also the viewer is given another opinion on the work than my own.'

(Interview by author, June 2012)

While I agree with Hickey's view that 'sources of inspiration, delight in materials and the making process ... are frequently lost or misplaced in the retail context' (Hickey 1997: 96), I disagree this is because the pieces are divorced from their maker. Rather, many craft shops, galleries and museums, and even makers themselves, do little to enhance the originality, 'forever-ness', and even purpose of the pieces they are showing.

Some craft exhibitions are bringing a flavour of the home into the white cube. In September 2010 hotelier and designer Kit Kemp curated *A Living Space* at London's Contemporary Applied Arts; her 'Bloomsbury Group' inspired sitting room featured work designed and made by CAA members. The gallery followed this in September 2012 with *Domestic Matters*, an exhibition that married modernist furniture with contemporary craft to create a domestic setting.

Both these exhibitions featured stunning craft, stylishly and beautifully curated. Offering context and the suggestion of how craft can look in the home is wonderful but, for me, without an extra layer of narrative I didn't feel drawn into the exhibitions or totally connected to the work. Without an extra-sensory component it felt just a bit too much like being in Heals or John Lewis's furniture department.

But both those businesses sell lots of products ...

Theatre

Ken Parker asserts, 'many of our desires and aspirations are created in retail centres; who we want to be, or how we want our home to look, is represented in shop window displays' (Parker 2001: 1).

It is the job of marketing and visual display to tempt consumers into a store and present the products to highlight their qualities and desirability: 'It is not objects that people really desire but their lush coating of images and dreams' (Cummings and Lewandowska 2000: 76).

Since the advent of department stores in the mid-nineteenth century, retailers have embraced visual merchandising – turning shopping from a previously dull necessity of everyday life into 'an astonishing, sensory experience' (Parker 2001: 3).

The great expositions of the period created a new phenomenon in display methods that the early French department stores adopted: theatrical flourish and luxurious settings transformed everyday goods into sought-after objects of desire (Cummings and Lewandowska 2000).

In the current economic climate craft has the opportunity to be positioned to consumers as a genuine luxury product: a unique, handcrafted object. The inherent qualities of most craft may not need 'aesthetically appealing arrangements to maximise their desirability' (Parker 2001: 1), but using display techniques could enhance craft's individuality, its enduring appeal – and the consumer's experience of shopping for it.

Women are the key consumers of products for the home, and indeed of craft.² Marketing consultants Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts note that 'the female aim is to create a safe, secure environment ... women are engaged in a continual effort to improve the state of things and enhance their surroundings' (2006: 18). They avow that brands that 'sell the whole aesthetic ... offer women a vision of an aesthetically enhanced world ... and the chance to buy a little piece of it' (2006: 81).

They cite The White Company³ as a shop where 'everything allows you to participate in their vision of utopia, and gives you a sense that you have been given access to a charmed and beautiful place' (2006: 83).

I think that the offer to a craft consumer should be a mix. It should offer beautiful works of craft curated in a cohesive and stylish way – the feeling of the whole aesthetic, where buying just one product feels like buying a part of the overall atmosphere – but it should also have a bit of theatrical spectacle; something which surprises and delights.

In her keynote speech for Making Futures II, Kate Soper described craft's potential to offer 'an alternative hedonism' or a different way of consuming; an alternative to what she saw as retail environments that 'blunt sensory delight' (2011). The sociologist Colin Campbell also uses the word hedonism when he talks of the 'joy of longing' or daydreaming about the pleasure of expectation of a purchase rather than the short-lived satisfaction of buying (Campbell 2005: 95).

To offer a more enhanced experience I believe the way craft is displayed should offer consumers an enriched experience where they can be in a space to daydream and imagine; an environment which, as Cummings and Lewandowska put it, is 'both seductive and interactive' (2000: 76).

I want to offer craft lovers – and craft makers – a new kind of experience that *is* both seductive and interactive. To show craft in the context for which it was intended, but to add a bit of theatre and by doing so give visitors an experience – irrespective of whether they purchase or not.

But what do the consumers think?

I've conducted research both informally and formally after the three Crafting Spaces exhibitions I've staged since 2010 – the findings have fed into my evolving curatorial approach and the business development date of my new gallery, The Byre, which opened in October 2013 with the exhibition *Made in Colour*.

My first Crafting Spaces exhibition *Expectations* in September 2010 offered plenty of theatre – but perhaps not as much appealing aesthetic: a dining room setting offered an instantly recognisable domestic environment – as well as the practical solution of surfaces on which to display work; a narrative theme of Gothic Revival informed the décor: dark green walls, black-painted furniture.



Expectations, Westcroft Gallery, October 2010. Photo by Elaine Dye

Expectations was well received and was thought dramatic – if slightly unsettling – as revealed by the twelve participants in the focus group I held in February 2012:

'*Expectations* had real wow factor – it was so different.'

'*Expectations* was all about high drama; [it] turned people's perception of the gallery upside down. It made you stop on the threshold, pause and take in what you were seeing ... everything needed examination because nothing was what it seemed to be.'

But the high impact was not for everyone and did not really create an aspirational aesthetic:

'I was a bit daunted by [*Expectations*] ... I didn't like staying in there too long, I was interested but I was unsettled ... I didn't think there would be anything I would want to buy.'

But *On Reflection*, staged in September 2011, was closer to achieving the 'buying the whole aesthetic look'. For a more tranquil aesthetic – and a more feminine-appealing theme – I chose pale blue walls and pieces of craft in complementary cool shades.



On Reflection, Westcroft Gallery, October 2011. Photo by Elaine Dye

‘The real success was getting people to look at pieces that they may not envisage for the home and making them appear accessible.’

‘The dining table in *On Reflection* was a masterstroke – it was a domestic piece of furniture but using mirror on the top created impact – it felt like the glass pieces were floating.’

‘Tables are sociable, you can talk over them. If you see something on a plinth you look at it as a piece of art, if you look at something on a table you have a very different relationship and interaction with it.’

‘I loved the feel of the room you created – the colours, it was so cool.’
 ‘The display was stunning: clean and fresh and inviting.’

The emotive language was one of ‘inviting’ and ‘feel’ – creating the aesthetic I wanted.

The domestic setting of both exhibitions as a vehicle for exhibiting craft was commented on positively with furniture being seen as a more interactive – and less restrictive – way to experience craft.

I used this feedback to help create *A Bed of Roses*, my third *Crafting Spaces* exhibition held in summer 2012. It was an unashamedly feminine setting with just a few dark edges in the narrative – metaphorically hidden under the chintz.



A Bed of Roses, Westcroft Gallery, May 2012. Photo by Elaine Dye

The findings here are from ten face-to-face interviews: eight women and two men, a mix of ages and backgrounds. Five purchased – four for themselves and one as a gift. Obviously this is a very small sample and, as noted earlier, should not be taken as a definitive measure of the success of my method of exhibiting craft.

In summary, I asked the interviewees about context: did displaying craft in the suggestion of a domestic context as opposed to a white cube affect how they perceived – and interacted – with the craft? Did a domestic setting enable them to envisage the work in their own home? Did the setting help to illustrate the originality of the work and its inherent value as a desirable ‘forever’ object? And theatre: did the setting and the suggestion of a narrative enhance their visit to the exhibition? Did they think an element of theatre in a gallery setting made their purchase more likely?

Six out of the eight women interviewees responded very positively to the initial impression of the setting:

‘The overwhelming feeling was wanting to have everything in the exhibition because everything seemed so lovely.’
 ‘I could quite come and live here; a dream of a bedsit.’
 ‘I felt as though I was in an exquisite feminine room where everything was carefully placed and chosen.’
 ‘It was welcoming because it didn’t look like an art gallery – and those fantastic pinks, and the wallpaper.’
 ‘The feel of the space was very cosy ... I could see [the work] in my own home ... If I’d just seen these pieces in a cold studio I don’t

think I would have had the same emotional attachment to them. Seeing them in context is what you need.'

Two were less enthusiastic:

'A girly boudoir – part of me likes it but part of me thinks it's not intellectual enough for me.'
'A more gender orientated display than the previous exhibitions ... [I was] a little overwhelmed by the intense colour.'

The response to the setting was not solely gender based, as both men commented positively:

'Luscious. Impressed by the whole experience.'
'I thought the overall setting was stunning ... quite contradictory to my normal tastes.'

The male responses may be explained by the welcome surprise of a new experience, or by the 'romance' of Westcroft Gallery's setting in a picturesque Cornish fishing village. One of the male respondents who had not previously visited the gallery or a Crafting Spaces exhibition commented:

'It was an adventure getting from the car park to the exhibition: winding smuggler's lane ... the narrative seemed to start at the street ... so by the time I reached the exhibition there was anticipation about what might lie ahead.'

This response suggests Colin Campbell's (2005) 'daydreaming' and 'fantasising' in the build-up to a purchase. While these male responses are positive, the point made by the earlier respondent is valid: creating too 'gender-orientated' a space could be alienating to both men and women.

In terms of interaction with the craft, the use of furniture was commented on positively:

'The bed ... really encouraged interaction with the pieces on it and beside it – I think people can be nervous about touching because craft is such a precious thing but it [is] very tactile and I think this exhibition encouraged that.'

'The whole place felt warm and welcoming – and you could touch things, which you don't feel you can do with plinths. People are less inhibited about touching something on a piece of furniture – a white plinth feels more museumy.'

But it didn't work for everyone:

'As beautiful pieces in their own right I would have preferred to see them in a more gender-neutral setting. The exhibition lay-out was more like a bedroom setting in an interiors store than an interpretive piece – not what I was expecting based on the previous exhibition.'

'In a white cube gallery you just look at the object, but with the setting and the narrative aspect ... there was a distraction in a way, I didn't see [the pieces] in quite the same way; you look at them as if they all belong together whereas they don't and you know that they don't.'

This would imply that craft isn't something that the user has a relationship with – quite contrary to the intentions of most makers.

Creating a narrative in what is almost a theatrical set is a key part of my Crafting Spaces offer – to give an enhanced customer experience irrespective of purchase. For some of the respondents this worked:

'[The setting] made me look more closely at the work ... I felt I was looking at a story rather than just individual interesting objects.'

'The narrative was subtle, it never got in the way of the work nor was it overplayed ... the pieces held subtle stories that only revealed themselves on closer inspection. I found myself thinking about the exhibition afterwards ... and piecing together strands of the story – the whole was far greater than the sum of the parts but the realisation took time to mature.'

'Initially you are walking into a beautiful room where everything is lovely and very feminine, but as you went around things weren't quite the way they seemed, which added interest for me – very slightly off-kilter.'

Creating an overall aesthetic, which consumers find attractive and want to spend time in to 'daydream', should also encourage exploration of the individual works of craft:

'I really couldn't wait to start looking at specific pieces and I looked forward to coming back when there wasn't such a crush [at private view].'

Charlotte Sale's glass 'spritz' bowls sold very well: three pieces at private view, then a further six; her work was one of the most commented on among those who didn't purchase:

'The glass pieces were ... particularly 'wow-ful' with a delicious jewel-like quality.'

For those who bought the glass, the reasons given for purchasing were display:

'[The setting] made me much more inclined to buy – the whole way it was put together it was so inviting. The glass pieces stood out immediately because of how they were displayed – they were like jewels.'

'It hit me immediately, sitting on the mirror ... If I'd just seen that sitting on a wooden shelf ... [it] wouldn't have had the same impact, the setting absolutely made me more attracted.'

For the other purchasers, how did the setting and aesthetic influence them?

'I believe the setting did influence the decision. I might have bought the piece anyway ... but the setting had a drama and a sense of immediacy about it, and I suspect I was caught up in that ... I was excited to be part of the drama and play a part, by – literally – buying in to the narrative.'

'The setting definitely helped, because I could see that piece working with other things I have in my home. If there wasn't any suggestion with the setting then it might not have had the same emotional response.'

None of the purchasers had planned to buy at the exhibition – though one who has bought at both previous Crafting Spaces exhibitions thought she might; two have previously never bought craft.

Of those who didn't buy, for some, the aesthetic played a large part in their enjoyment of the exhibition – irrespective of purchase, offering some of Soper's 'alternative hedonism' (2011).

'[The setting] made me more attracted to the work, definitely ... I would have loved to have bought ... but just can't afford it at the moment.'

'I thought even the props were wonderful – the chair, the overmantle – I could covet all those things ... but I didn't have a reason to buy this time. I loved the glass bowls but I'm not sure where it would go.'

It should not be assumed that creating an attractive environment in which to show craft will always encourage sales. All consumers are driven by different desires, and practical considerations can override an emotional response to the setting.

'Buying for me is rational ... I don't think the setting affected me one way or another in terms of buying something. I like to think I'm not affected by advertising and if I like something, I like something.'

For those who did buy, what does owning a piece of craft mean to them?

'I think it reflects my personality; and I think it's human nature to want to have something that no one else does – to have something that suggests you don't follow the crowd.'

'I think having original craft is about values: buying from an individual producer rather than mass-market – it's buying inspiration rather than something dictated by a focus-group. The works you choose reflect something private, and choosing to reveal a part of yourself in such a way changes the feel of your home – in a really positive way.'

'I'm not afraid to buy pieces that are different and not always viewed as safe. So perhaps people may see what I own as an illustration of my personality ... and it makes me feel good about myself in that I chose it and own it.'

'I'm not a victim of chain store hype about "this season's look and colours"; investing in original and beautiful pieces gives me great pleasure.'

This would suggest that craft items they bought were very personal purchases that held the potential to become treasured items, forever pieces. But a year on, what is their relationship with the piece? The following findings are from the four interviewees who purchased pieces from *A Bed of Roses* and were re-interviewed in August 2013 and asked about their relationship with their piece of craft a year later: is it a forever piece or has the thrill worn off?

‘I have a huge emotional attachment to it; I can’t see me being parted from it or imagine it belonging to anyone else.’

‘They are my treasures and will be with me always. They are not for the charity shop or dump when high street fashion changes.’

‘The glass piece has been in three homes in the past 12 months. It’s amazing how a strange house becomes home when a loved craft work is unpacked and given a place. The piece is a physical expression of who I am. In each house, there has always seemed to be a right place for the piece; it’s been obvious.’

‘A forever piece? Well, yes – they are what I’d grab if the house was on fire.’

And what of the impact of the exhibition? Do the respondents still think it played a part in the purchase? Does the event still register a year on?

‘Part of the joy of the piece is the way it brings back memories of the exhibition. I thought it was so special that it almost lives on as an echo in the craft work.’

‘I remember it felt warm and welcoming and really wanting to buy something – and then seeing the Anja Lubach piece and my heart sang.’

‘It was such a different experience to have in a gallery that buying that bowl was a much more memorable experience.’

‘I remember the colours – and the Charlotte Sale bowls – and wanting to buy the big one, but being happy I could afford a small one. Is she in your next show?’

Conclusion

Craft can be a forever purchase – an investment in longevity. It can offer a deeply personal connection as it makes a narrative contribution to the home – something that I contend is much less likely to happen with a mass-produced item.

I believe that exhibiting craft in the suggestion of domestic context allows audiences to envisage how pieces of contemporary craft could be shown in the home, and allows audiences to engage with the work in a way a traditional gallery setting cannot. However, any setting has to retain the craft’s integrity and not

devalue it. I’m not suggesting that all galleries should create a homogenised retail-focused environment to lure consumers into sales; rather, they should use imaginative means to give consumers more of an opportunity to develop a relationship with a piece of craft – by experiencing it in a way that emphasises its unique qualities.

In responses to *A Bed of Roses*, a number of the interviewees commented on the success of using a domestic setting to illustrate how craft could look in the home. However, I don’t believe it was solely domesticity that enhanced the customer experience. The domestic setting gave the work a context, and allowed for interaction with the craft, but it was an element of narrative, of theatre, which helped to create ‘an atmosphere that was both seductive and interactive’ (Cummings and Lewandowska 2000: 22) and that gave consumers an indulgent experience, a chance to daydream.

Notes

1. Of Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London
2. Craft buyers are more likely to be older females: 57% female (compared to 35% of those not in the market to buy craft) and 53% aged 45 or above (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2010: 16).
3. The White company was established in 1993 as a mail order company specialising in high quality but affordable white products for the home. It now has shops throughout the UK – including a ‘lifestyle store’ in central London.

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