

Ross Annels and Tamsin Kerr

Memory keepers, map makers, and material thinkers: the sustained offerings of craft objects

Abstract

This paper draws upon the landscape memoir work of intellectual Tamsin Kerr and the ecoregionalism of fine furniture designer/maker, Ross Annels. It brings together an emerging body of theory around the arts and environment from Australia with a contemporary place-based craft practice. Becoming more native to place is a deeper ecoregionalism, both multicultural and more-than-human, that remembers the past and shapes our future. This is how natural materials think, exposing the language of place.

This is the potential and the potency of both artisan and natural resource: to teach the memory of elders, to map out more sustainable lifestyles, and to speak the material's voice. Here is how we might use the everyday of craft objects to reconnect with an expanded conception of the world. By adding the depth of cross-cultural understandings of environment and place, we live a richer connection to country. Craft draws down our gaze to more human scale change, uplifting regional identity along with (self)sustainable cultural models. Herein lies the power of craft.

Introduction

This paper centres around a small craft practice, in the middle of nowhere, on the other side of the world. It is a backwater, a sheltering lagoon, in a place on the edge of the world. We argue that studio practices such as this are of great relevancy. The 'thinking through craft'¹ that happens in and around such practices has a great deal to say about one of the pressing issues of our time: how we in the west might live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Ross Annels' studio is located inland from Noosa in rural, subtropical Queensland, Australia in an area inhabited by the Gubbi Gubbi people before colonisation.² In the studio, we produce bespoke contemporary furniture, mostly for domestic clients. We produce both one-off pieces and designs for studio-based batch production. The studio is part of The Cooroora Institute, which hosts events where artists, intellectuals, artisans, designers, composers and performers practice, celebrate, teach and investigate community connectedness to place and environment.³ The Cooroora Institute believes that such creative and material research process builds new cultural relationships to land, to place, to the colonised other, and to re-inhabiting country. An embedded and engaged craft practice provides a range of tools to help collectively negotiate our way towards that future: to draw upon creative

¹ This is a reference to Adamson's 'Thinking through Craft', that discusses the relationship of studio craft to the artistic avant garde. In his conclusion, Adamson states that a 'traditional' craft object (one that does not address the avant garde) does not present an interesting case for theoretical discourse, that his most prized crafted possessions, a bowl and a chair, 'occupy a safe position in the landscape of the visual arts- a lagoon.' (2007: 169) Rather, we have argued that it is always the lagoon and sheltering backwater, especially their swampy and muddy edges, that present the opportunity for the emergence of the unexpected, and of deeply important ideas (as well of course as the banal, the aspirational, and the uninteresting).

² The Gubbi Gubbi traditional Indigenous regional home area is now approximated by the Sunshine Coast region of Queensland, Australia. We are 8km from the nearest small town, 130 km from the regional capital, about 1000km from Sydney and about 17000km from Plymouth.

³ See <http://cooroorainstitute.com> and <http://rossannels.com>

practice so as to 'become more native to place.'⁴

A recipe for landscape memoir:

Ecoregionalism

While the level of decision-making required by sustainability may be global, the level of action needs to be local, reduced to the bioregion. But bioregionalism should not necessarily limit culture; it provides us with an opportunity to develop regional identity and embed ourselves through a sense of place. Ecoregionalism unifies this careful knowing of the more-than-human world along with the best of our human creativity and culture. Ecoregionalism focuses attention on the walkable, the locally specific, the particular and on local tradition. Ecoregionalism is closely aligned to the slow food movement with its focus on locally produced, high quality and regionally diverse foodstuffs. Eco-regionalism seeks to align political and economic activities more closely with ecological and traditional cultural boundaries, so that, for example, materials and foodstuffs are sourced locally wherever possible.

Ecoregionalism contrasts with eco-modernism, which is the most enlightened response of industrial capitalism to environmental concerns. Eco-modernism focuses efforts on reforming industrial production, through increasing eco-efficiency, and substituting environmentally detrimental materials for more benign ones. As Manzini (2009: 8) says, while there have been considerable advances in efficiency of production, aggregate consumption continues to rise, and the use of environmental resources continues to increase. Put simply, we cannot consume more better products to change the world; instead, we need to bring about systemic change. Ecoregionalism offers the opportunities of human scale that eco-modernism has discarded in its optimism for the global market. Ecoregionalism's finest tools are drawn, not from the sciences, but from the arts. Eco-regionalism requires imagination and creativity as much as (if not more) than carbon-taxes and water pricing.

Antipodean studio practice

Ross Annel's studio practice draws upon the resources of his own region – both natural and cultural – to reconnect to an environmental culture. He uses locally grown timbers of the sub-tropics of Australia, developing furniture designs based on steam bending and small dimensions. This engagement with the specifics of local material at the designing and making stage not only draws upon traditional craft practices, but it looks to a reconnection and reinvention of the idea of regionally appropriate vernacular design, a celebration of regional distinctiveness and the importance of the particular.⁵ Ross obtains most of the timber he uses from local salvage and plantation sources, and engages in tree planting and environmental rehabilitation: the basic processes of local environmental stewardship.

But such claims to environmental sustainability are relatively common in craft practice. Ross adds to this approach by expressing country in his work: the basalt columns and volcanic plugs of the mountains, the coloured sands and nearby blue oceans. He embroiders the typography of the land into upholstery, he carves maps and ancient tree rings into wood, and adds words to express a sapling's knowledge, to connect us to this more-than-human world.

But there is another cultural layer to our understanding of place and country. Ross borrows

⁴ This is the book title of David Barnhill, 1999 or Wes Jackson, 1994, but it remains a contentious phrase, especially in terms of misappropriation of indigenous peoples' knowledges.

⁵ In the UK, David Colwell's work with thinnings from local ash forests and steam bending, and Petter Southall's massive oak bending linked to naval forms in coastal Dorset, are both examples of this kind of contemporary reconnection and reinvention of 'vernacular' design.

and draws upon cultural expressions, etching words from local writer's and storytellers into glass: Nancy Cato's Noosa Story sits alongside cartographer's interpretations and Gubbi Gubbi understandings of land. This is deeper ecoregionalism, both multicultural and more-than-human, that remembers the past and shapes our future. This is how natural materials think, exposing the language of place.

Another studio-based, remote antipodean, New Zealander David Trubridge, reinforces that design must engage cultural meaning.⁶ Mackenzie says in *Inside: Interior Design Review*: In many ways, Trubridge's project seemed to take over where William Morris left off in the late 19th century. The godfather of the arts and crafts movement railed against the dehumanising world of the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, Trubridge's investment in design as cultural value makes an appeal to move beyond meeting market demand, towards a design that is essentially a humanist activity (2009: 49).

Pastoralism

The idea of the pastoral has been a key element of craft ideology, from the arts and crafts movement through the craft revival and to the present. However, its offerings are too often subject to a reductionist simplicity. Adamson (2007: 107) typifies pastoralism's contemporary reception as 'characteristically pastoral combination, laudable idealism and tragic self-deception.' Such pastoralism has a particular attraction in the foundational myths of recent colonial societies. In Australia, the idea that colonists sought to make an egalitarian society in a new rich landscape continues to exert a particular power in the national imagination. Australia's settlement was founded on the false notion of terra nullius, and the terrible massacres and cultural displacements of Indigenous Australians that occurred on the frontiers in Australia are still contested history. 'The bush' has been an important national myth, ignoring the ongoing process of Indigenous displacement and disadvantage, our largely urbanised lifestyles, and the industrial nature of our agricultural systems. Leo Marx makes a distinction between sentimental and complex pastoralism. Complex pastoralism places terrain:

as a symbolic repository of meaning and power ... [against the] power of a counterforce, a machine or some other symbol of the forces which have stripped the old idea of most ... meaning. Complex pastoralism, to put it another way, acknowledges the reality of history (Marx 1964: 363).

The deeper ecoregional craft we are describing here seeks to engage this complexity, drawing attention to the multiple layers of landscape: the sublime, the wild, the awe-ful, the mythic alongside our contemporary socio-political and scientific understandings. This is the stuff of landscape memoir.

Landscape memoir

Landscape memoir acknowledges the active role of the land and a more-than-human celebration of place, through a triptych of story, festival, and object. We need art, imagination, festivity, and creativity – the fundamental forces of culture and of society – in order to explain our connection to the local places we inhabit. Visual and performing arts and crafts embody the local to describe landscape memoir: danced along animal migration paths and made with local materials and local wisdoms. Landscape memoir reflects local cultural development, the craft of a people; creative expressions that connect community to place. Landscape memoir, drawn from the visual arts and crafts, captures and records

⁶ For example, in the Australian design magazine *Inside*, Andrew MacKenzie (July 2009, issue 57, p49) writes: Ultimately, Trubridge believes, there is another element that must be calculated aside from the standard indices of material economy. And that is the contribution a design makes to cultural understanding. If a truly seismic shift is required in our thinking about how we live our lives, it requires more than carbon spreadsheets; it requires design that engages cultural meaning.

the immense stillness of place for a human second. Stories and festivals celebrate the land's active force perhaps most powerfully, but, unlike objects, they do not live in our everyday. And we need everyday reminders to keep place alive. Landscape paintings, indigenous art, furniture, and sculpture act as a daily memory of the ways we personally connect to place, covertly shaping the way we live. Such art shows us this small place, this earth, matters. Landscape memoir tells of trustori⁷ connection to place – a mythic archaeology that creatively speaks that which lies at the heart of every geographic community.

The Practice of Craft and Material Thinking

The cultural amnesia generated by the excess of meaningless stuff is reflected in the consequent state of the world. We live in the rubbish of our throw-away mentality. The practice of craft changes how we live in the world, reconnects us with nature through the materials we use, offers a slower appreciation of things, and models non-mediated creative activity. As Sennett (2008) points out, craft practice is based on a different way of valuing and understanding work. Craft work draws meaning from self imposed ideas of quality and engagement with the idea of skill, material specificity and utility. Such ideas echo Karl Marx's preference for material cultural production or environmentalists' preferences for the physically real over the constructed administrative.⁸ Craft practices can and do provide meaningful local employment, and are symbolically important in post-industrial societies as local creators and producers of objects.

The making of craft objects and their consequent everyday use might teach us to think more deeply about our ecoregional places and elicit new ideas. Paul Carter in his book *Material Thinking* suggests that our best ideas may evolve and be explored through creative manual and material practice. In studio practice, the creative collaborations we enter into with other individuals and, most interestingly for craft practice, with the creative intelligence of our materials and processes, are powerful generator of new ideas. The intellectual contribution from material practice is, as Bolt puts it, A non-standard deviation (2006). Contrary to most contemporary thinking, we place the 'craft' of making, that is the making process itself, back to centre stage as an intellectual process, rather than simply as the means to express an idea.

Two examples from Ross' work help illustrate this difference. Ross' table, *Ripples in Country* reflects the landscape that he inhabits and begins to express his love and knowledge of place in a craft object used in the domestic everyday. This table reflects the scientific and Indigenous knowledges that are held on the Sunshine Coast. The many mountains are the remnants of prehistoric volcanic activity that literally created the country. These volcanic plug mountains are translated into Ross' landscape memoir piece, becoming the Australian red cedar supports erupting into the ripples of the crows ash table. The table reflects the Indigenous stories of this place: the largest mountain, Beerwah in the Glasshouse Mountains of southeast Queensland is also known as the mother mountain; Beerwah, pregnant and too slow, was left behind by her consequently punished elder son, 'Crooked Neck' or Tibrogargan, when the family of (now) mountains ran to escape a tidal wave. The anglicised names of the mountains are inscribed into the crows ash timber, poor translations of Indigenous connection to place. Ross' piece begins to ask: what lies beneath? This is landscape memoir: craft expressing a complex idea about human inhabitation, understanding, and connection to a specific locale.

⁷ Trustori ('true story') is a term used by the Aboriginal story teller Paddy Roe (1983) working with writer Stephen Muecke to refer to Indigenous mythologies/ legends. Trustori relies upon creative imagination that uses story to get to the heart of an issue, only borrowing facts when they reinforce the message.

⁸ See for example, Mathews *Reinhabiting Reality* or Richard Sylvan and David Bennett *The Greening of Ethics*, both of whom argue for a return to a material physical reality away from more administrative and economic imagined constructs.

But material thinking might go a step further, playing an active role not only in the making but also in intellectual dialogue. One example of the material conversing with the maker is Ross' chair, Gnutheru. Gnutheru is the local Gubbi Gubbi word for shade and is thought to be the origin for the naming of Noosa. It is a crafted throne for the Sunshine Coast country, made of local silky oak (or Australian lacewood). The chair was made for an exhibition on the themes of loss, destruction, rejuvenation, growth, and restoration. In attempting to express the complicated white/ Indigenous relationships across his ecoregion, Ross found that the object became teacher. He began from a notion of loss: loss of language, loss of country, loss of knowledge. Ross burnt in Gubbi Gubbi words for the non-human, spiralling them around the seat, and then sewed a white grid overlay. We expected that the black words would lose their potency under such rationalist geometry, so were surprised to see that they strengthened each other, forming a more aesthetic and powerful connection. The object showed the power of true reconciliation, of cross-cultural connection to country. Now the chair stands mutely telling this optimistic story again and again at every sitting. In its crafting and its material thinking, the chair has captured its multicultural landscape memoir. Through both its darkness and its light, Gnutheru points the way to a deeper, more embedded, love of place, accessible to all.

Ross' furniture often strays from its locale of making. It travels to other places, inhabits other discussions around the world, taking on new meaning and shaping other stories. But these stories continue to build stronger connection to the material and physical world, understanding about a deeper way of living, and an idea of a more-than-human reconciliation; these stories continue to reflect the power of both crafted object and sustainable idea.

Craft objects hold this important rhetorical role. The crafted object itself has a continuing life outside of the place, means and processes of its making. As Niedderer suggests, contemporary craft objects occupy an ambiguous position on a continuum between art, as visual communication, and design as functional production. A successful object is emotionally compelling and persuasive, continuing discussion away from its inception, while referring back to a functional form. In Buchanan's terms, it engages in a form of ceremonial rhetoric.⁹ This form of rhetoric connects the context of ceremony to the purposes of persuasion. In post industrial society, it is precisely the unusual nature of studio production, and the relative scarcity of the handcrafted in the plethora of the machine-made, that vests the craft object with moral authority, and places it into the domain of ceremonial use. The object itself becomes the teacher, propagandist, seducer, and lover.

Conclusion

Craft objects have a deep educative role: they act as everyday symbolic teachers of a more materially aware world. They can hold the memory of elders within the framework of ceremonial time, collapsing past, present, and future with slow observance. They are maps of cultural emotion, taking the measure of each ecoregional community. And they shape intellectual thinking in their making and their presence.

This is the potential and the potency of both artisan and natural resource: to teach the memory of indigenous knowledge, to map out more sustainable lifestyles, and to speak the material's voice. Here is how we might use the everyday of craft objects to reconnect with an expanded conception of the world. By adding the depth of cross-cultural understandings

⁹ There are three principle forms of rhetoric: legal (which focuses on the past), epideictic or ceremonial (which focuses on the present), and deliberative or political (which focuses on the future).

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awareness of the benefits of creative craft based education to 'see' the world through more sustainable and ethical perspectives. Without thriving craft education, fully integrated into curriculum design, not only do we endanger the crafts as subjects, but also the ability to appreciate their value to stimulate the intellectual potential embedded in craft knowledge, to contribute to a more positive force for society.

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1) Ripples in country: Volcanic plug mountains erupt into the landscape of the Sunshine Coast hinterland, their names poor translations of Indigenous connection to place. But what lies beneath?

Coffee table of crows ash and Australian red cedar by Ross Annels 130 x 80 x 30cm



2) The Glasshouse Mountains are the inspiration for Ross' and many other artists' works on the Sunshine Coast of Australia. They are straightforward waymarks, mapmakers of the community's natural and cultural environment and identity.



3) Detail from Ripples in country.



4) Mountain, the pregnant mother mountain of the Glasshouses.



5) Gnutheru: The leaf-shaped back recognises the support of the more-than-human world as humans sit in ceremonial stillness on this Sunshine Coast throne.

Chair of silky oak and upholstery by Ross Annels 71 x 50 x 110cm



6) Detail from Gnutheru: Indigenous words for country are overlaid with a white rationalist grid to make a powerful and reconciled statement about connecting to place.

All Photos by Ross Annels 2009