

Guy Martin, Whole Life Cost

11 March – 23 April 2006
Supporting notes



A Touring Exhibition from the Devon Guild of Craftsmen

Guy Martin made a sailing dinghy when he was at secondary school. An ambitious project for a schoolboy which shows that not only was Guy good at making things from a young age but that he had, in his Secondary Modern school, an unusually good woodwork teacher who was able to help his pupils achieve their ambitions. Today it is difficult to imagine a school Design and Technology department providing the resources or the time to produce anything so fine.

In *Beginnings*¹ Guy describes himself as 'a jobbing maker', making things from what is at hand. In the process of accumulating experience and skill - if it doesn't work, try something else - he was concerned with his job description and the perennial question that makers are asked to define: is it art or is it craft? Happily, Guy is no longer bothered if he's a furniture-maker, an artist, a craftsman, a designer, a designer-maker or a sculptor. The category is unimportant as now he is able to say,

I trust in and apply my sense of making.

As his woodwork teacher knew he would and as Anthony Caro says in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue,

He has always made things extremely well.

Guy's father, Frank Martin, was Head of Sculpture at St Martin's Art College in the late 1960s, a time when the course was rated the best in the world. He was an influential man who provided a background in fine art which Guy has combined with an intensely practical ability with materials and process.

Whole Life Cost tells the story of Guy's progression, 'the key to his creative journey'. Starting with an earlier piece, *The Pithill Chair*, Guy says,

It is self-indulgent and barely functional and bears little understanding of furniture design.

Next to the other chairs it looks like an attention-seeking show-off, unconcerned with comfort or practicality. Including this piece in the exhibition highlights the change in the work, and the ethics behind the work, which influence the design and were prompted by the changes in Guy's life. The other pieces shown are selected from the last twelve years of his career.

As Guy moves on from his younger influences, he replaces the word 'self' with 'service'. The realisation of the difference only came about during his teaching years when he became Design Tutor (1988 -1994) on the renowned furniture making course, set up by John Makepeace, at Parnham College.

Being a designer is very different to being a fine artist. Design is about responsibility and service.

Guy is grateful to John Makepeace for 'taking a risk' in employing him. He worked hard to prove himself and then introduced life drawing and a strong visual arts element to the course. Teaching at Parnham was clearly a two-way flow. Guy gave a lot to the course and learned a great deal in return.

His decision to make the collaborative pieces for this exhibition stems partly from this time as Design Tutor where he experienced what he describes as the release of creative energy that comes from working with other people.

Guy chose his collaborators using the following criteria. He wanted them all to be Devon Guild Members as he is favourably disposed to the ethos of the Guild. They needed to be geographically accessible and their own work had to be fresh with either a strong interest in the natural world (ecology) or use of sustainable materials.

All four of the invited collaborators have expressed enormous benefit from working with Guy, finding it both a challenge and a privilege to work with him.

Jane Price was asked to collaborate with Guy as he was taken with her paper 'quilt' exhibited in The Devon Guild Summer Exhibition 2005 and then saw her 2D earth pigment work in her Terrace Café exhibition, December 2005. Jane's approach to her work is always investigative, driven by the possibilities of the materials and process rather than the saleability of the end product. *Charmouth Beach Walk, Toward Lyme* came about, Jane says, because of her current obsession with mud (pigment) – the colour of the coast. When Guy approached her about working together, at first she thought he was joking. Now, having had the dialogue which resulted in the finished work, she says it pulled her to a place she had never been before.

Buffy Forgham was also amazed to be asked but her work with recycled tin cans and rubber inner tubes possessed the freshness that Guy was looking for. *Twist in the Tale* is somewhat different from the other collaborations as the materials are completely integrated in contrast to the 'vehicle and passenger' aspect of the other pieces. Buffy too is wholly positive about the experience of working with Guy,

Collaborating breathes new life into work.

Yuli Sömme and Guy have worked together before and decided to revisit their original collaboration of bier and shroud.

Yuli's working practice and the way she lives her life has always shown a passionate commitment to sustainability. The shroud, made mostly from pure white Devon Long Wool fleece, is concerned with sustainable burial. The first bier and shroud, exhibited in *Treading Lightly*³, provoked many conversations about death, a subject none of us can ignore. Yuli says that the making of the first shroud was 'a way of confronting her fear'.

On working with Guy, Yuli admits to a huge respect for his work and says the experience of working with him was so rich, especially in the light of her often solitary working practice.

Debby Mason's initial response to Guy's invitation to collaborate was 'crumbs!' But Guy knew that he and Debby had a shared passion for diving and behind every one of Debby's prints, a serious commitment to marine conservation exists. She is extremely concerned about our vast industrial fishing industry bent on decimating marine species and habitats in the pursuit of profit and unsustainable eating habits.

*Trawling on an industrial scale in the North Sea smashes everything it does not catch, taking 16lbs of marine animals to produce just 1lb of sole.*²

The canvas part of *The Fish are Flying* was first constructed in paper. Paper fish were glued onto paper sails (to scale) and then silk screened onto canvas. Perhaps the collaborations are best summed up by Guy,

To explore new territory through collaborations is scary but exciting.

Guy's work and life have converged with the same underlying values underpinning everything he does. He now works almost exclusively in locally grown English Ash. A resource he describes as amazing in that it grows like a weed and has to be thinned (thinning is one of the processes for managing a woodland, where young trees are selectively removed at ground level to allow the best specimens to grow to maturity). Guy uses these thinnings which would normally be left to rot. Ash has enormous tensile strength, can be steamed green and steams very well. Used in the round it's very strong. The growing conditions affect the wood so Guy tries to source his timber where he knows what the growing conditions are and where the wood is taken in a manner that leaves the ecosystem intact.

Guy's work has recently moved into an architectural context. His buildings are as well designed and thought out as his furniture and have the same qualities. Designed with the needs of the user/occupier at the forefront and, using a combination of traditional English and unorthodox methods of construction, he does not restrict himself with 'rules'. If a machine process is needed, then a machine process is used.

The title of this exhibition, *Whole Life Cost*, refers to the building industry equation of understanding the balance between 'capital costs' and 'costs in use' (also called 'revenue costs' and 'life cycle' or 'through life costs') to deliver the performance or service level required for that asset. In other words, the cost of something is not just the initial cost of materials and construction, it's the cost of the product for its entire existence.

The ethics of 'sustainable' production take the 'cost' of the materials into account, the methods and energy used to produce them and, perhaps more importantly, the cost of replacing them. Guy's work aims to have minimal Life Costs, a position reached through the knowledge that life, and the resources that sustain life, should be treated with respect.

P. de Burlet
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1. Beginnings. Catalogue for Guy Martin, *Whole Life Cost* 2006
2. *The End of the line. How overfishing is changing the world and what we eat.* Charles Clover
3. The Devon Guild of Craftsmen, exhibition, 2005