Get Fresh

Saturday 12 January – Sunday 24 February, 2013

This is a biennial exhibition with the specific remit to show work by new or 'emerging' makers from the South West[1]. Devon Guild of Craftsmen is committed to giving promising new designer-makers an opportunity to show their work at the start of what we hope will be productive careers as designers and makers of contemporary craft. Get Fresh aims to celebrate the commitment and diversity of new or 'emerging' makers whilst providing support and encouragement and most importantly, an audience for their work.

So what exactly is an 'emerging' maker? The term is elastic, just like 'young'; it isn't a simple reference to youth as many people don't start a career in the arts while they could still be described as 'young'. Because, 'emerging' can describe anyone, it is a more accurate description of new makers. Even the Arts Council doesn't have a definitive definition of an 'emerging' artist or maker but this describes the position; 'the artist will have reached a critical moment in their career development, and will require a particular kind of support in order to maximise their potential and to propel them into the next phase of their development'. In terms of visual artists this is quantified as 'beginning to have their work exhibited professionally'.

In a recent survey, *Craft in an Age of Change*[2], commissioned by the national organisations that support, influence and champion crafts in the UK[3], four profiles of makers were identified. These are *Craft careerists* (those who start their businesses shortly after finishing their first or second degree in craft-related subjects), *Artisans* (no academic degrees but nevertheless have made craft their career), *Career changers* (begin their working lives in another field before taking up craft as a second career) and *Returners* (those who trained as makers but who followed another career before - 'returning' to craft later on). Although the majority of Get Fresh exhibitors are recent graduates, the exhibition reflects the above as it has 'Career changers' in it, including a former police officer and a furniture maker whose previous career spanned 35 years in the IT software industry.

Historically, the path to becoming a craftsperson was often through the apprenticeship route. In recent years it has become much more common to take the higher education route and enter the profession with a degree obtained at art school. Now the situation appears to be changing again and *Craft in an Age of Change* found that 'more specialist craft courses have closed (for reasons including cost, lack of demand, lack of space and health and safety issues) than have opened, while there has been a notable rise in the number of interdisciplinary courses incorporating a craft element.' Resource-based learning is expensive; many craft materials, ceramics, glass and non-precious metals, although not expensive in themselves, require lots of energy for their transformation. Hot-glass furnaces are hugely expensive to maintain, kilns use a

[1] The counties of Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Somerset and the unitary authorities of Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, South Gloucestershire, Swindon, North Somerset, Bournemouth, Poole, Plymouth, Torbay and Wiltshire.
[2] *Craft in an Age of Change* – report by BOP Consulting.
[3] Crafts Council, Creative Scotland, Arts Council of Wales & Craft Northern Ireland.

great deal of energy too. 'Practising' with these materials requires time (and yet more energy) to recycle the materials and you cannot teach craft skills to a hundred students at once, in a lecture theatre, with nothing but a projector in the way of equipment. So perhaps it is not surprising that 'specialist' courses are closing in favour of 'mixed' or 'interdisciplinary' craft courses , not necessarily a 'one-size fits all' outlook as long as the quality of teaching and learning remains first-rate.

As well as changes in Higher Education, *Craft in an Age of Change* identified three other principal areas of change in the outlook for makers. These are the rise of the internet and digital technologies, the possible effects of 'global' versus 'local' coupled with other issues of sustainability, and the economic effects of the 'age of austerity'.

Over 50% of makers now use some form of digital technology in their practice or production. As we know, digital technology has and still is transforming the music and publishing industry but its impact on craft is not quite so noticeable – *not yet*. Digital design and computer operated tools (laser cutters and printers for example) are increasingly used in craft and design processes and can be hailed as a tool, albeit a very sophisticated one. But what lies ahead for what we see as the intrinsic quality of craft – the hand-made object – unique, authentic and 'special' - if 3D printing technology continues to develop at its present rate? Where does that place the relationship between object and maker?

As for selling work, though an increasing amount is done online, the favourite, most-used outlets remain commercial exhibitions and galleries, commissions from the general public, craft fairs and direct sales from the home or workshop. Currently 30% of makers sell through their own websites and 13% through third-party websites. Only 6% of makers use their own websites as a primary selling outlet. While this is likely to rise it is also true that the argument for *seeing* a hand-made object before you buy is a good one.

So where does craft sit in the recent globalisation of the marketplace? Many practitioners express a commitment to 'localism', basing their businesses on sustainable, local and/or traditional footings. If this works, and provides a reasonable income, all well and good but, if there are global business opportunities available, then what are the barriers to taking advantage of this? According to the survey, more than 70% of UK makers do not sell their work outside the country. For those who do sell outside the UK, exports account for 20% of sales. Interestingly, the survey also highlights the significant increase in overseas students attending UK universities which includes our highly rated art, craft and design courses. The inference here is that British craft practice has benefited from makers who choose to stay in the UK after graduation, resulting in a positive cultural enrichment as different traditions cross-fertilize and influence each other.

Issues of sustainability, environmental and ethical questions cannot be avoided and while 'craft' sounds friendly and harmless many of the materials used and the energy consumed (particularly for glass and ceramics) have an environmental cost just as their larger, industrial relatives do. Materials of great value, precious metals and stones, risk being obtained through exploitative, dangerous mining practices. Raw fibres used in textiles, cotton, silk and wool, also carry an environmental mixed bag of pesticides, dyeing chemicals, fair trade issues and workers conditions. Wood, once regarded as a cheap, renewable material, becomes increasingly costly as we realise the environmental damage that results in a 'profit first' culture of de-forestation in our use of tropical hardwoods while our native European trees suffer alarming diseases. Almost all furniture makers will consider where their timber comes from and many customers expect work to be made from certified, sustainable sources. More than ever, makers now have to balance their use of materials and processes with their business needs and their own ethics.

The final challenge for makers identified by *Craft in an Age of Change* is the present economic climate. Perhaps surprisingly, the survey found that makers and retailers are cautiously optimistic although makers recognise that they will need to make changes to their practice. These 'changes' are identified as developing new products, finding new markets and using different materials. The survey findings also suggest that globalisation and greater competition may mean that 'the future market for UK craft will become increasingly concentrated at the higher end, where originality and aesthetic value count for more than cost and where skills and knowledge can earn a premium'. Although a heartening statement, this places craft in the 'luxury goods' bracket; a position that, in times of widespread economic hardship, contradicts a good selling climate.

Many makers work part-time in addition to maintaining their practice; some work in related fields (teaching for example) and some are following the growing trend of 'portfolio working' (where a person follows simultaneous career pursuits rather than working full-time for one employer) . Almost 88% of makers are sole traders - which means they are designer, maker and marketer all in one person.

'Emerging' or 'ready' - how will our Get Fresh exhibitors cope with the challenges facing them? Nationally they are a well-qualified bunch with just over 60% having a first or second degree in craft, art or design (which compares to a national statistic of 30% for working-age adults). They are the first generation able to use digital technologies both as making *and* marketing tools; they may choose to keep their practice local but there is an ever-increasing global market available. It's true that most are not in the ranks of the higher-rate tax payers but they take pleasure in their work.

They will need to meet the future by being resourceful and adaptable - but perhaps that is a fundamental aspect of making? After all . . . isn't a 'maker' someone who adapts their resources (materials) into something else?