Marginalised artists express themselves

Radical Craft: Alternative Ways of Making
Pallant House Gallery, Chichester
12 March – 12 June 2016 (then touring)
Reviewed by Marcus Field

In 1943 Judith Scott was born in the US with Down’s syndrome and found to be profoundly deaf. From the age of seven she lived in an institution until her sister became her legal guardian in 1985. At that time she enrolled at an arts centre in California and began making sculptures by wrapping everyday objects in lengths of coloured string, cloth and yarn. She made over 200 of these extraordinary sculptures before her death in 2005, and they are now collected by museums and galleries around the world.

One of Scott’s mysterious pieces provides a fitting opening to this compelling show staged by Craftspace in collaboration with Outside In, the organisation that provides support for artists who face barriers to the conventional art world. All of the exhibitors have been marginalised, whether through illness, disability or in other ways, but the common thread is that they express themselves by making things. For Radical Craft, a panel has selected examples by 21 of these artists from open submissions and displayed them alongside works by 10 invited guests, and three renowned practitioners (Scott, Willem van Genk and Angus McPhee) who are now dead.

The range of skills and approaches on display is broad and every visitor will respond more strongly to some works than to others. Inevitably, it’s almost impossible to suspend your normal criteria for making judgements, especially since this show is staged in a gallery with a permanent collection of modern art. So, for me, what stand out are the pieces that most clearly share...
The state of ceramics today

New Directions in Ceramics: From Spectacle to Trace
by Jo Dahn, published by Bloomsbury, £35 hb

Subversive Ceramics
by Claudia Clare, published by Bloomsbury, £35 hb

Reviewed by Shane Enright

Two recent titles from Bloomsbury shed an informed and sometimes provocative light on contemporary ceramics. Jo Dahn’s New Directions in Ceramics turns out to be a thorough, intriguing and finely argued survey of the wilder frontiers of contemporary practice – with hardly a vessel in sight – while Claudia Clare sets herself the substantial challenge of defining Subversive Ceramics. Where Dahn highlights the intangible, provisional, and ambiguous possibilities of clay as a medium and material, Clare locates work that explicitly transgresses social norms or contexts.

Dahn’s opening essay is worthy of the price of her book alone. It is a masterly road trip through contemporary theory, arguing for an expanded field of play that goes beyond the studio and adroitly laying to rest the art-versus-craft albatross that has debilitated our discourse for way too long.

Dahn divides her survey into four terrains: performance, installation, raw clay and figuration. Erudite essays and multiple images match each maker or practice. The description of Keith Harrison’s Lucie Rie vs Grindacore – in which bonding wheels are converted into record decks simultaneously playing a porcelain slip-coated album alongside the original vinyl LP, in the V&A Ceramics Galleries in 2012-13 – shows how disruptive and disrupting these new freedoms can be.

Although Dahn turns from time to time to seminal works – James Melchert’s ‘happenings’ or Ryoji Koie’s cacophonous durational pieces – most of the makers highlighted and works reviewed are recent or current, making her selection remarkably accessible.

Marcus Field is a freelance writer

the characteristics of contemporary art. I particularly admired the baffling but beautiful work made by Nnena Kalu, who, like Judith Scott, obsessively wraps and binds her pieces until they resemble large and often colourful cocoons. Part of the attraction of Kalu’s sculptures are that they, almost uniquely here, appear to have no narrative at all; they are pure form.

Other stand-out pieces may appear abstract but in fact have subtle narratives. Michael Smith does not communicate verbally; he makes work using recycled materials at the Barrington Farm day centre in Norfolk. In a series of pieces featuring jeans, he has cut up the garments and wrapped them in masking tape in a visionary act of reshaping. The exhibition label reveals that this is a response to his fascination with cowboys.

Elsewhere, a page of scribbles on the wall is labelled as a love letter written by Dr Tassini, the alter-ego of Pascal Tassini who works at a centre for people with learning disabilities in Belgium. His ongoing project is a fabric house filled with his textile sculptures and writings. A small display of wedding attire from the house is on display here, revealing a narrative on love and commitment.

Figurative work features strongly too, and I particularly admired the stained glass by Pinkie Maclure, which shows all the landfill from the earth erupting to punish the people who buried it there. Another favourite is the embroidered sampler of exotic birds by James Gladwell, an artist of Romany descent whose grandmother taught him needlework over 50 years ago. His naive but colourful birds have a direct appeal that makes them stand out from the more technically accomplished works, such as the microscopic lead carvings by Dalton Ghetti or the painstakingly produced models of cranes and trams by Roland Kappel and Willem van Genk.

The term ‘outsider art’, with all its problematic implications, is treated gingerly by the organisers of Radical Craft, but the content essentially conforms to Jean Dubuffet’s 1949 definition as ‘works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture… who derive everything… from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art’. And, like all shows of outsider art, this one raises many issues. Is it art or is it craft? Is some of the work better than other work and who has the right to decide? All the questions are valid, but don’t let that stop you enjoying this terrific display simply for the pleasure of seeing remarkable work made by remarkable people.

Marcus Field is a freelance writer
Amongst the novelties I was taken aback by Alexandra Engelfriet, who wrestles with a trench (Tranchée) of unfired clay. There are three performances, Engelfriet explains: the registration of the making, the registration of the firing and the registration of the viewer passing through the enormous structure. I am struck here by a comparison with the masterful Japanese maker Satoru Hoshino, whose tearing and gouging of clay blocks seem positively demur by comparison, though arguably equivalent in terms of the registers. The chapter on installation duly acknowledges Edmund de Waal, Neil Brownword and Clare Twomey, and I was delighted to see Anders Ruhwald’s uncanny and enigmatic objects among her selection. The chapter on raw clay brings to light a group of largely North American makers who are entirely unknown to me.

Dahn completes her survey with a look at figuration. Antony Gormley’s Field for the British Isles gets a nod, while the makers reviewed include Christie Brown and Barnaby Barford, whose Hogarthian tableaux present us with modern morality tales. Throughout, Dahn does not shy away from the wider critical context: the dematerialisation of art, site specificity and institutional critique all help to usefully frame her arguments, and her lightly carried erudition makes this volume a joy to read.

Claudia Clare, on the other hand, sets herself a challenging task in trying to tease out what are, or might be, subversive ceramics. Her first difficulty is definitional: the subversion she wants to address is revolutionary – work that seeks to overthrow or overturn an established political or social order. Her lens is principally a feminist one and the arguments sometimes get lost in debate about domesticity and tableware and patriarchal gender divisions in production. Nevertheless, she makes a powerful point that, as in much political propaganda, what is described as subversive is more often satirical. Like Dahn, her survey is loosely thematic. An opening chapter presents a range of ‘political’ makers – Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party makes an appearance – but none of Clare’s selection is recent, though her vignette on Grayson Perry properly identifies him as an urbanist rather than urban guerrilla. A chapter on the history of protest ceramics, which meanders from ancient Athenian Attic ware to Soviet porcelain, simply reminds us that ceramics routinely provide canvases for propaganda of one sort or another. This ground, though, has been much more ably covered in Paul Mathieu’s seminal 2003 Sex Pots, so I am disappointed that his work is not acknowledged.

Clare’s survey comes to life in the chapter on new methods of production where the ‘subversion’ being explored is, rather, the transgression of the ceramic medium itself. It is refreshing to read her very different take on some of the makers also covered in Dahn’s account: Neil Brownword and Clare Twomey both meet her approval, whereas she damns Barnaby Barford with very faint praise.

Both volumes, refreshingly, embrace an art-critical language that is attuned to the practices described, and left me convinced that contemporary ceramics are alive and well, if sometimes unruly. Shane Enright is a freelance writer on crafts and contemporary culture.

Books Round Up

Unspoken Spaces
The past two decades of Olafur Eliasson are covered in this hefty monograph. Though known for installations such as his 2003 Weather Project in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, material is central to Eliasson’s work and this book traces his interest in space, from his career-long practice of abstract model-making to his architectural pavilions. Essays by Carol Diihl, introduction by Olafur Eliasson. Published by Thames & Hudson, £60 hb

Art in the Making:
From Paint to Crowdsourcing
We’re always interested in what Crafts regular Glenn Adamson has to say, and his new book is no exception. Art in the Making focuses on the production of fine art, arguing that materials and processes are key to current thinking on authorship and the economics of art. By Glenn Adamson and Julia Bryan-Wilson. Published by Thames and Hudson USA, $39.95 hb

Failed It!
Art director Erik Kessels makes an impassioned plea on behalf of the importance of making mistakes in creativity. Part photo-book, part manifesto, Kessels takes the reader on a tour of his favourite examples where imperfection and failure are something to be celebrated. (See feature on page 80.) By Erik Kessels. Published by Phaidon, £6.95 pb

Hands: What we do with them – and why
British psychoanalyst Darian Leader ponders the history of hands. It sounds a fascinating subject, particularly for a craft audience, and the author draws on examples from popular culture, art history, technology and clinical research. It contains some fascinating anecdotes, yet somehow the whole endeavour feels a little meandering. Ultimately, we were left wanting more on making and fewer references to Hollywood movies. By Darian Leader. Published by Hamish Hamilton, £12.99 hb

Open Space – Mind Maps:
Positions in Contemporary Jewellery
A sumptuous round-up of current developments in art jewellery, proving (as if you didn’t already know) that the discipline is much more than merely decorative. Includes work from the likes of David Bielander and Maisie Broadhead. By Ellen Maurer Zillioli (ed). Published by Arnoldsche Art Publishers, £25 hb
The enduring beauty of silver

Silver Speaks: Idea to Object
Silver Galleries, V&A, London SW7
8 March 2016 – 31 January 2017
Reviewed by Sarah Brownlee

I have a friend about the same age as me (the far end of 30-something) who has an enviably cool home, as quietly impressive as anything you’ll see in the pages of ELLE Decoration. It’s an unassuming ex-council maisonette with an open, modernist feel and it’s just so stylish and homely (she’s Swedish so she’s got that ‘hygge’ thing going on). There’s plenty of nice furniture and furnishings, but its success is just as much down to the careful selection of objects. And in among some mid-century ornaments and a potted succulent or two is some amazing contemporary silverware, and it looks just right and very now. So, I don’t need much convincing that silver is making a comeback. I’ve seen it and I covet some myself, but it could still do with some enthusiastic promotion and this exhibition, part of a wider programme of events led by Contemporary British Silversmiths, shouts loud and proud that silver is back in fashion and has a great future.

Objects by 18 different silversmiths, all members of CBS and all at the top of their game, reveal ‘the exceptional level of skill and creativity’ to be found on the British silversmithing scene today. Each piece was specially commissioned for the exhibition by its curator, Corinne Julius, who is also a design and applied arts critic and a huge fan of the material. (See Crafts no. 259 March/April 2016.)

As the show’s subtitle implies, the ideas behind the finished works are also unveiled, revealing the thinking behind the craft as well as the various processes involved – some more traditional than others, with plenty of scope for experimentation. The organic form of Abigail Brown’s Boscauen-Un vessel may be familiar to some, for example, but not so the unusual decoration. Inspired by ancient Cornish monuments and the colourful organisms that grow on them, Brown tried out new techniques for the exhibition, including the application of vitreous enamel to produce the effect of lichen on stone. ‘The exhibition has given us [participants] a chance to pause in our practice and also put our work in context,’
A bold installation falls short

Anton Alvarez - Alphabet Aerobics
National Centre for Craft and Design, Sleaford
19 March – 5 June 2016
Reviewed by Grant Gibson

Anton Alvarez came to international attention after his Royal College of Art graduation show in 2012 with his extraordinary Thread Wrapping Machine. Part of a generation of designers wary of adding to the world’s clutter, he instead decided to create a machine that allowed him the option of making furniture, joining pieces of timber by cocooning them in polyester thread, with often extraordinary results. When we last spoke in 2014 he seemed committed to his craft: ‘I’ve seen too many times when some designers come up with a process or are making something, and then they are like magicians. They have to come up with another process. Perhaps they don’t have the commitment. I’ve been working on this for nearly two years and I’m becoming better all the time, finding new ways of working with it. It’s important to trust it and stay in it for a bit.’ Which he duly did, scaling his pieces up and wondering the role of maker, artist and curator’, according to the show’s official blurb (although it should be pointed out that it’s a question that has been posed almost continually in the fine art world since Marcel Duchamp).

Instead, gallery assistants are on hand to show visitors how it works over three sessions a day. It’s a simple enough process: clay is inserted at the top of the cylinder and then pushed downwards, finally being extruded out through a steel plate in which Alvarez has cut a letter of the alphabet in a typically idiosyncratic fashion. The machine operator can control the speed at which the clay is pushed out and the height that it falls into the board below, altering its shape.

Sounds interesting, doesn’t it? And if you turn up during the demonstration it’s a bit of a treat. However, there is a flaw in the exhibition’s concept. The notion is that the show starts with a series of empty plinths that are gradually filled with three-dimensional letters as its run progresses. This is fine but it does leave a lot of empty space for a protracted period of time. When I arrived to review Alphabet Aerobics on its fourth day, a handful of pieces were drying under polythene on shelves waiting to go into the centre’s kilns, but otherwise there was nothing on display. And while I enjoyed the demonstration, having spent over £70 on a train ticket from London to Sleaford I felt more than a little short-changed. Could they not have made a few pieces before the show started to give people something to look at, I wonder? Or even had some of his thread work on display that his new ceramic alphabet could have complemented?

There’s no doubt that Alvarez is a talent with which to be reckoned. He is by turns inventive, witty and resourceful – sitting on the boundaries of fine art, craft and industrial design. And it was a bold decision by the NCCD to stage such an installation. It may be that by the end of its run this turns out to be a fine exhibition, but my tip would be not to go until its final week.

Grant Gibson is editor of ‘Crafts’ magazine

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"Says silversmith Rebecca de Quin, who showcases her own exquisite four-vessel set, placed on a strokable slab of Corian. ‘I think it has really stretched us all.’"

A matt black, pared-down exhibition design provides the perfect backdrop for the objects. Julius worked with multidisciplinary designer and artist Marcin Rusak to ensure that while the show has a ‘strong presence’, it doesn’t ‘compete or fight’ with other displays in the V&A’s Silver Galleries. It stands like a modest totem of modernity in among the permanent collections and everything has space to breathe – from the bigger sculptural pieces by the likes of Kevin Grey and Juliette Bigley through to the more functional Pillow cutlery set, hand-formed by Angela Cork. Along with Cara Murphy’s playful cups with brick handles, you couldn’t find a better advertisement for contemporary silver tableware.

Julius’s only regret is that the audience can’t hold the work: ‘Silver should be handled and touched. I wish it didn’t have to be behind glass.’ It does, of course, because it’s still an expensive material, even though she is keen for it to shed its somewhat elitist image: ‘Silver is not just about luxury. I think nowadays people are interested in having objects in their homes that are beautiful but at the same time enduring.’ And while some might still regard silver as high-maintenance, this surely makes it perfectly suited to our new age of mindfulness? I mean, who needs an adult colouring book when you have the option of making furniture, joining pieces of timber by cocooning a delightful piece of commissioned silver?

Sarah Brownlee is a journalist specialising in design, architecture and contemporary crafts.
Bringing the underground to the surface

Underground: 100 Years of Edward Johnston’s Lettering for London
Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft, Hassocks
12 March – 11 September 2016
Reviewed by Patrick Myles

As part of a recent design brief, I was asked to present some fonts that were representative of London. An obvious example was Albertus, the typeface of choice for the Corporation of London. It can be seen on plaques, road signs and buildings, and even used alongside the coat of arms of the City of London itself.

Yet still more prevalent across the capital is the typeface for the London Underground. So much so, its design by Edward Johnston remains as much of an icon of London as the red double-decker bus, but remarkably has barely changed in 100 years in service.

An exhibition to celebrate this centenary is being held in a quiet East Sussex village where Johnston began to hand draw the first letterforms for the metropolitan Underground system. He was encouraged to move to Ditchling in 1912 by his friend and former student, Eric Gill. Gill had previously relocated something of an artists’ commune, and who transformed art and design through a series of original, exquisite drawings and prototypes that led to a development of the design process and graphic design consultant.

The Underground typeface was one of the most iconic developments to emerge from this and, alongside Johnston’s early work as a calligrapher, this small exhibition charts the fascinating development of the design process through a series of original, exquisite drawings and prototypes that led to a new and ground-breaking typeface.

Frank Pick, commercial manager of London Underground Railway, proposed the project that initially led to the typeface in 1913. It was a time when disparate companies that had made up the Tube network were being merged into a single organisation. Therefore a new and modern identity was required for the Underground system.

Johnston responded to this by designing an alphabet that is simplicity in itself and radically modern for its time.

However, its design is rooted in the traditional proportions of Roman capital letters. He took inspiration from as far back as Trajan’s Column, with its precisely carved stone-cut lettering. Gill had travelled to Rome in 1906 with his new wife, Gladys, and there are some photographs on display showing him looking at the Trajan letterforms that also inspired his typeface designs. (Gill was so enamoured that there were many photographs in the honeymoon album of Roman lettering, but only one of Gladys.)

Johnston reduced the traditional Roman capital to a modern sans serif letterform, and continued to simplify it but without sacrificing its character. A distinctive feature is the diamond-shaped full point that is also repeated above the lower-case ‘I’ and ‘J’. The typeface is known as Underground or Johnston Sans, and is considered the basis on which Eric Gill designed Gill Sans, which was later released in 1928.

Central to the exhibition is a London Underground sign that hangs above the jewel-like displays. ‘Taken out of context, it encourages the viewer to look at the familiar roundel with fresh eyes.’ Memorable yet almost invisible in daily use, it reminds me of the first time I saw a full-sized British motorway sign hung on a gallery wall in a show about graphic design. The national road signs by Jock Kinnieir and Margaret Calvert introduced in the 1960s are still in use today and also have a classic design status.

To take the time to view what is normally seen in passing allows for a new appreciation of the craft involved. By visiting Underground you are given a similar opportunity to enjoy Johnston’s designs in a different and unique setting.

Patrick Myles is a London-based art director and graphic design consultant.

The spoken word made tangible

Well Said!
Favourite Shakespeare Quotes
Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon
19 March – 18 September 2016
Reviewed by Teleri Lloyd-Jones

For Well Said!, the Royal Shakespeare Company has asked actors and writers to select their favourite lines from across the playwright’s oeuvre. Those lines were then given to artists and craftspeople to inspire a piece of work, to make the intangible real.

As interpretations go, it doesn’t get more weighty than Gary Breeze’s stone globe carved all around with Hamlet’s quote: ‘O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.’ This was selected by Paapa Essiedu, the actor currently playing Hamlet at the RSC, for ‘how in a handful of words he crystallised the limitless of the mind’s power and its potential to release as well as imprison’. From an
Craft as a platform for social debate

Hidden Agenda: Socially Conscious Craft
Crafting Change: Community, Protest, Utopia
The Wilson, Cheltenham
5 March – 5 June 2016
Reviewed by Emma Crichton Miller

Gloucestershire has long been a haven for makers at odds with the mainstream. It was here that the Arts and Crafts movement found its spiritual home, expressing utopian ideals in opposition to industrial capitalism through the hand-crafting of distinctive furniture, ceramics, textiles, metalwork and jewellery. From 1871, William Morris spent his summers at Kelmscott Manor; in the 1890s the architect-designers, Ernest Gimson and the brothers Ernest and Sidney Barnsley settled near Cirencester, while in 1902 C. R. Ashbee brought his Guild of Handicraft, which he had set up in London’s East End in 1888, to Chipping Campden. Michael Cardew restarted the Greut Pottery in Winchcombe in 1926, dedicated to producing functional and affordable English slipware.

The Wilson in Cheltenham, holds both local and national Arts and Crafts collections, making it an ideal venue to host the Crafts Council’s touring show Hidden Agenda: Socially Conscious Craft, which considers the continuing history of craft as a platform for both social and political comment. Alongside it, The Wilson has curated its own exhibition, Crafting Change: Community, Protest, Utopia, to provide historical context.

The provocation for Hidden Agenda, which opened at The Granary Gallery in Berwick-upon-Tweed, was a new work by Doug Jones, a startling installation of 54 pairs of chicken feet cast in bronze and individually finished by Jones and a team of workers at a foundry in southern China. Displayed here at one end of the room, it shows how crafting is an action that can be analysed on many levels. A cheap snack for millions in the Far East is memorialised in bronze. But beyond the juxtaposition of subject and material, the meaning of the work, entitled Generation, is deepened by Jones’s care that the method and process of manufacture and the sourcing of materials are ethically and socially responsible.

To offer context for Jones’s preoccupations are 13 works from the

Clockwise from above: detail of Karina Thompson’s artwork (showing in Well Said!); Prototype XLI Chair, Michael Marriott, 1991; RCP2 Chair – Prototype, Jane Atfield, 1992 (both showing in Hidden Agenda)
Crafts Council collection, and one other recent piece, Claudia Clare’s remarkable broken, gilt-edged, flower-painted vase Remembering Atefeh. This had formed part of a performance in 2011 in remembrance of the Iranian girl, Atefeh Rajabi Sahaleh, executed in 2004, aged 16, for crimes against chastity, in which the pot had been smashed outside the Iranian Embassy in London. There is a small portrait of Atefeh, lost to us, deep inside the pot, against a yellow, flower-scattered background and visible only through the jagged broken window of the half-reconstructed pot.

The piece resonates powerfully with other ceramic works here: Paul Scott’s A Willow for Ai Weiwei, where he has erased all the figures from a traditional Willow Pattern platter in protest at Ai Weiwei’s 2011 police detention, depicting him as a white silhouette in the centre of the bridge, dropping a Han dynasty urn; or Stephen Dixon’s ironic anti-war pot, Our Finest Hour, an anarchic assemblage of clay oil-drum and petrol-can shapes, with collaged elements. Grayson Perry’s Mad Kid’s Bedroom Wall Pot, gleaming, circular and disturbing, reminds us how he recognised the potential of seemingly docile pottery to plumb societal and autobiographical depths.

Textiles feature, too: Lynn Setterington’s DIY, a subtle feminist celebration of, well, doing it yourself, contrasts with Michele Walker’s much more assertive, large hanging quilt, Remember Me, made from recycled grey wire wool and black plastic bags. Audrey Walker’s Observed Incident shows how the ancient technique of tapestry can be used to explore the disturbing contemporary event of a scene of armoured riot police, observed by a woman from her window.

Michael Marriott’s utopian Prototype XL1 Chair, made from recycled tea chest plywood and found oak timber – a model for honest, affordable but pleasing functional furniture – offers an interesting comparison with Jane Atfield’s RCP2 Chair – Prototype, with its conspicuously colourful use of compressed chips of recycled plastic bottles, an environmental icon.

Finally, as those old Gloucestershire makers knew, socially committed craft does not have to be angry or didactic. For example, Angela O’Kelly’s necklace Hundreds and Thousands, made from copies of the Financial Times, is a sophisticated luxury, while Lois Walpole’s witty Apple Laundry Basket, made from recycled juice cartons, is sheer joy. To say their agenda is hidden is to go too far, but it is subservient to pleasure.

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