

Curatorial Statement
By Curator Kristen Pauch-Nolin

Artwork made using the materials and/or processes traditionally defined as craft occupies a unique place in contemporary art discourse. Along with other artistic practices that were formally located on the fringes of high art-like video, photography, performance, design, and installation- craft is recognized as an equally significant and formidable artistic discipline.

Today, visual artists unreservedly incorporate clay, textiles, metal, beads and glass into their art. Dissociating themselves from discipline exclusive titles like craftsperson, painter, potter, sculptor or seamstress, these contemporary art makers have reinvented historically significant and/or traditional media by presenting them in new and innovative ways.

For artists who are particularly interested in issues and subjects of significance to women's lives, this approach is especially attractive. Artists were liberated by the 1960's feminist art movement that ensured a place for quilting, needle point, embroidery, ceramic painting, and other practices formally described as "women's busy work" in formal artistic institutions. As a result artists are able to create work that is contemporary and progressive but still honors a female specific history.

The nine women artists included in *Crafting Contemporary Art* demonstrate this kind of respect for the past while offering a unique and progressive vision for the future. Through their work, Karen Wardle, Bonnie Leyton, Jennifer Smith, Dana Kletke, Nadine Fenton, Leola LeBlanc, Margi Hennen, Fay Jelly, Kerri-Lynne Reeves and Alexandra McCurdy demonstrate how traditional practices like beadwork; quilting, ceramic painting and knitting can be re-envisioned to reflect the ideas and values of a new generation of visual artist.

Karen Wardle and Bonnie Leyton each approach their work with humour, creating whimsical objects with an underlying conceptual complexity. Sculpturally these pieces boldly inhabit their physical space, capturing the attention and imagination of viewers.

Cherry and Dentate, mixed media sculptures by Karen Wardle, are rich in texture and multifarious in content. Combining found domestic objects (tin jelly molds) with sculptor's wire, cotton batten, and various metal pieces; the work juxtaposes beauty with utility and ugliness with practicality. Playing with irony, Wardle hints that she will reveal the innermost secrets of the female body but retracts with materials that are better suited to a well-stocked kitchen than a boudoir.

Similarly, Bonnie Leyton exploits the existing stereotypes and emotional connections associated with domesticity in her piece *Clothesline*. Offering a selection of comically rendered clay garments, that she has roughly arranged across a makeshift wire, the piece confronts the realities of life. Each pair of pants, shirt, or skirt is well worn, the remnant of a personal story that the artist

has left fully exposed and blowing in the wind.

Jennifer Smith, Dana Kletke, Nadine Fenton, and Leola LeBlanc share Leyton's desire to construct abstracted narratives. Each creates work that is intentionally vague, providing few details about their source of inspiration or the story behind it. The result is that viewers can actively participate in the work, drawing upon their own experiences and creativity to access the intended meaning of each piece.

Coloured beads swirling across pieces of fine antique cloth provide little insight into Smith's conceptual intention. It is the titles *I'm sorry-you might not want to shake my hand* and *A beautiful old wives tale* that suggest the source of the images; borrowed from the underlying science of everyday life. Here, bacteria and other microscopic patterns adorn the surface of old cotton garments, offering a strange and surreal beauty.

Kletke's *I'll Wait for You*, is similarly surreal with an installation of fifty wool dolls placed on the floor and casually arranged in groupings of two or three. Richly textured and beautifully simplistic, each doll form is unique featuring round heads and triangular bodies. Constructed to maintain their handmade esthetic, the pieces resemble a combination of alien creatures and stuffed children's toys.

Whimsy and eccentricity also describe the jewelry pieces constructed by Fenton. The rings, bracelets and brooches she makes by hand are knit or crocheted out of precious silver thread. They are fantastical, resembling adornments borrowed from a mystical fairy tale. Embellished with precious stones, pearls and glass beads the pieces are wildly playful and strikingly sophisticated.

Notions of style and the absurdity of what constitutes modishness similarly inspire LeBlanc's miniature installation pieces. *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, *Too Hot to Handle* and *Eat your way to perkier breasts, try new silicone enhanced chocolates* each presents recognizable objects transformed by the artist. Repeated images of a woman's mouth, a nose, a plate of rubber chocolates, and oven mitts inspire viewers to reexamine the impact that a beauty obsessed culture has on women.

The changing role of women in contemporary society and the unique characteristics, history, and context that defines femininity is a theme that many women artists embrace. Like LeBlanc, artists remain motivated by their political stance, inspired to reveal the continued struggles and inequalities that face women. Margi Hennen and Fay Jelly create work that explore gender and issues of discrimination.

Hennen's *Charlotte* and *Helen* offer insight into women's private lives, thoughts, and reactions to the world around them. Exploring issues of self-expression and transformation, the dolls effectively personify women who reclaim their self-image and who choose to express their personality and creativity through dress. Constructed using the most beautiful dyed and textured fabrics, both pieces connect with the tradition of women who have communicated their most intimate experiences and feelings through the creation of works in textiles.

Jelly addresses the exclusion of fabric from the annals of art history through her mixed media paintings *Mondrian Pot Holder Boogie Woogie* and *Vuillard's Elegant Lady*. By combining pieces of found textiles with a painted reproduction of master's works, the artist effectively challenges the continued under-representation of fibre and women artists in major galleries, museums and institutions. Executed with technical finesse and the utmost respect paid to both original works, the finished pieces function as celebrations of craftpersonship rather than just overt political statements.

Creating artwork that incorporates ideas of significance to women, using the processes and materials borrowed from the past, provides contemporary artists with the opportunity to celebrate being female. Acknowledging the significant contribution that women make towards art and society, Kerri-Lynne Reeves and Alexandra McCurdy create pieces that are celebrations of female life and experience.

Home Sweet Home, *Black on Blue*, and *Heroic Hearts* each reflect Reeve's connection to tradition and her personal movement from a rural to an urban community. *Black on Blue* and *Heroic Hearts* offer a contemporary vision of needlepoint, with tight stitches forming graphic patterns over stretched canvas. *Home sweet home* also pays homage to the domestic sphere, with long pieces of horsehair used to spell out the age-old adage offered by the works title.

Like Reeves, McCurdy celebrates the significance of family and home life in *The ties that Bind* and *Mothers/Daughters*. Pieced together like the blocks of a quilt, the ceramic wall hangings explore life's most intimate and personal connections—those between parents and their children. Demonstrating the importance of transferring knowledge from one generation to the next, the work encapsulates the significance of family, history and the knowledge gained through life experience.

The integration of the materials and processes associated with craft into visual art practice provides an opportunity for artists to have a greater choice of materials. By allowing ideas to dictate materials, the concepts become more interesting, accessible, and poignant to their viewers.

For female artists the opportunity to connect their work with the history and traditions of women's lives, without fear of marginalization, results in exciting and provocative artwork that is truly reflective of contemporary life and experiences of all people.