

# FOREWORD

PHILIP CLARKE  
DIRECTOR

'Putting objects into play in the culture' is the vision of Objectspace. **Talking About** is an important project in which a group of experienced 'players' engage objects of their choice in some serious and strong play and in doing so creates a new opportunity for critical writing, and reading, about the handmade object. What is principally on show at **Talking About** is the writing. In a rather neat reversal to the more usual exhibition, the objects are here to illuminate the writing rather than the writing illuminating the object. And as writing is to the fore in **Talking About**, we encourage visitors to read as much as they look.

**Talking About** foregrounds the necessary and powerful role of discourse and critical thought around the production and consumption of objects. One of the unique features of the cultural / creative sector is the moment and place of 'reception', that stage in the overall cultural production / consumption chain where works are received into a culture. This is the moment of 'talking about' where works are discussed and meanings ascribed. Critically, taking the time to 'talk about' strengthens a whole sector and creates new possibilities and platforms for future cultural productions.

The original concept for **Talking About** was developed by Damian Skinner and Moyra Elliott and from this initial discussion **Talking About** has taken shape. We were delighted that Damian agreed to act as curator/editor for the project and it has been a great pleasure, as the project's coordinator, to work with him. The idea for **Talking About** was to ask a number of contributors to select an object, or group of related objects, and to write about them in some depth drawing in some way upon the discourses of craft and design. When we drew up a list of possible contributors we looked first at people with a track record in writing about objects, regardless of the disciplines in which they have been trained. Our thanks go to the **Talking About** contributors; Don Bassett, Moyra Elliott, Ngarino Ellis, Richard Fahey, Bronwyn Fletcher, Louis Le Valliant & Rigel Sorzano, Sean Mallon, Anna Miles, Cushla Parekowhai, Elizabeth Rankin and Grant Thompson who responded to the opportunity with alacrity and whose writings so richly engage and stimulate the reader in relation to the cultural, historical, social and technological dimensions of their chosen objects.

The contributions mirror the diversity of Aotearoa, and range from the anecdotal to the art historical. These essays reveal that it is impossible, and probably undesirable, to suggest that object discourse in Aotearoa has any set features, or must necessarily assume certain rhetorical or genre forms. **Talking About** reveals the seriousness with which many writers approach objects, and the importance that craft and design can assume when thinking through contemporary critical issues.

FW	po1	PHILIP CLARKE Director
01	po2	DON BASSETT 1925 Souvenir Cloth
02	po3	RICHARD FAHEY 3 Blunted Vases by Peter Hawkesby
03	po4	BRONWYN FLETCHER 4 Works by Katharina Jaeger
04	po6	MOYRA ELLIOTT 2 Porcelain Bowls by Gwyn Hannsen Piggott
05	po7	NGARINO ELLIS 3 Hei tiki by Rangi Kipa
06	po8	LOUIS LE VAILLANT WITH RIGEL SORZANO Toy Truck by Albert Hughes
07	po10	SEAN MALLON Toki
08	po11	ANNA MILES 'Lokki' for Marimekko
09	po12	CUSHLA PAREKOWHAI Primary Mirror for a 12 Inch Cassegrain Telescope
10	po14	ELIZABETH RANKIN Ndebele Liphotho
11	po15	GRANT THOMPSON Wallpaper Brick by Madeline Childs & Philip Jarvis

Objectspace would like to thank all the lenders of works to **Talking About**. These include private collectors, FHE Galleries and Piece Ltd. **Talking About** could not have been undertaken without the support provided by Objectspace's major supporters; Creative New Zealand, Corbans Wines and The Cube. Inhouse Design, MaryAnn Crick and Sean Duxfield have importantly contributed to the realization of **Talking About**. We are delighted to acknowledge all of these supporters together with **Talking About's** curator and contributors.

The exhibition and the **Talking About** publication we hope will extend the kind of dialogue about objects that takes place in this country, a space in which established commentators and writers can contribute to a small but growing literature about the special nature of objects and their place in the wider culture. In a time when border crossings between disciplines is a common and often productive activity, **Talking About** suggests that it is still useful to acknowledge the specific histories of craft, design, and the object, while remaining open to various new interpretations that alternative methods of knowing, and writing, can offer. END <

# SOUVENIR CLOTH, NEW ZEALAND AND SOUTH SEAS INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION, DUNEDIN, 1925–26.



Unknown Designer/Maker  
1925–26 New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition Souvenir Cloth  
Cotton  
1925  
Private Collection

DON BASSETT

This cotton square (900 x 860 mm) was printed as part of the celebrations surrounding the New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition, Dunedin, 1925–6. Since the cloth bears inscriptions, it has right and wrong sides suggesting its expected use was to be display, though it could equally be used as a scarf or a cover or centrepiece for a table. While it is readable when pinned to a wall, the arrangement of the motifs around the cloth makes its use on a table the most plausible option. According to Joyce Storey, commemorative textile squares or 'handkerchiefs' were printed in Britain by the copper-plate process as far back as the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly for an American market.<sup>1</sup> As with other commercial objects associated with trade exhibitions – mugs, badges, tea towels, post-cards and other knick-knackery – such things are mementos of the event in lieu of photographs.

As it happens, the 1925 exhibition cloth includes photographic views of Dunedin arranged as if pinned to a board. The views, like old photos, are sepia set in grey perforated frames, with studs at their corners. They are placed upon a deep olive ground, with red, grey, white and half strength olive and red for the other motifs. The views act as peep holes, puncturing the flatness of the cloth in contrast to the decorative borders of scrolls, a striped ribbon, and a 'tear-drop' motif. These are printed in flat colour areas limiting recession, and thus conform to the precepts of good design as laid down by nineteenth-century reformers such as Owen Jones and Christopher Dresser. Nature should not be copied illusionistically but 'conventionalised' so as not to compromise the flatness of the surface of the two-dimensional object on which the pattern is placed. The peep-hole views (which flout this principle) will have been printed by means of photographic- or process- engraving separately from the rest of the cloth, where block-printing is apparent.

Varying in shape, the photographic views are arranged radially around the cloth, facing towards the edges. Circular views are contained within ornate hexagonal frames at each of its corners; triangular views occupy the middle of the four sides; and horizontal rectangular views overlapping each other are positioned in a square formation to frame the centre-piece. This is a view of Edmund Anscombe's exhibition buildings, all domes and colonnades, in a rectangle, bigger

than the rest and placed diagonally so as to be readable from two sides of the cloth. Heraldic emblems flank this centre-piece. The resemblance of the grey frames to strips of Meccano (the children's building sets made of metal, popular in the early twentieth century) with their rounded ends is probably not the intention so much as a suggestion of shadows cast by the overlapping of the various frames. There is, nonetheless, an educational feel, even a certain school-boyish quality, to the cloth. The views are of prominent Dunedin buildings, the Robert Burns Monument and vistas of the harbour and the suburb of St. Clair. Each is neatly labelled. The corner roundels have scrolls draped across them bearing grander inscriptions.

Like previous international exhibitions in this country the 1925–6 event was largely a trade and industries fair. The name, New Zealand and South Seas International Exhibition, is something of a misnomer. Only four nations apart from New Zealand enjoyed any prominence and were grouped in pavilions to each side of the main entrance gates. These were Great Britain, Australia, Canada and Fiji. Since the Fijian Court contained, according to the **Official Souvenir Catalogue**, 'strange sights and products more or less common to all the Pacific Islands', further 'South Seas' representation may have seemed hardly necessary to the organisers, though displays associated with the New Zealand Department of Internal and External Affairs

included Māori and Pacific Island crafts.<sup>2</sup>

A 'Māori House' that had recently been on display at Wembley in London was also included. Although the exhibition's 'Art Gallery' contained paintings from France and the US ('by living artists'), a more accurate name for the exhibition might have been, 'The British Empire in the Pacific'. New Zealand industries and retailers predominated, Otago to the fore, naturally enough. In addition there was a bandstand, a fernery, a restaurant, and other amenities. Beyond these there was entertainment aplenty: a 'Big Scenic Railway', a 'Merry Mix-up', and the like.

How far, we might ask, does the souvenir cloth reveal the nature of the exhibition as suggested by its name, or even the reality of its contents? Dunedin's architecture dominates, as is appropriate. Unsurprising also is the inclusion of patriotic devices surrounding the central picture of Anscombe's exhibition pavilions. These emblems are not what one would expect, however. True, there is the 1911 New Zealand coat of arms surmounted by a rampant lion and Union Jack, the latter half-obiterated by a lozenge device reading 'Dunedin 1925–26'. Also obscured is the motto 'Onward', which (with the Union Jack and lion) was to be replaced when the arms were redesigned in 1956. To left and right the shield is supported, as now, by a European woman and a Māori warrior, though not facing each other as in the 1956 redesign.

Diagonally situated from the coat of arms on the other side of the view of the exhibition buildings are crossed flag-poles. Contrary to expectation they carry not the New Zealand flag, but, in both cases, the Australian one with its extra (and different-shaped) stars, depicted in red to suit the cloth's colour scheme, not the white on blue of actuality. Elsewhere on the cloth there are further sprinklings of the six-pointed Star of David used on the Australian flag. The only other flags present are the nearly obliterated Union Jack already mentioned and the drooping and unreadable one held by the woman on the New Zealand arms. In this context we can only hope it was intended as the New Zealand specimen. Another of the four corners of the central space contains a kiwi. In the fourth are two crossed paddles. These, surprisingly, are not elaborately carved Māori taonga, but are painted



grey with a red chevron. Perhaps they belong to the eight canoes that are placed beneath the rectangular views of Dunedin sites; not waka as one would expect, but the North American birch-bark canoe with curved prow and stern, the prows adorned with a star. Nor are the oarsmen Māori but from the North American continent, with red head-bands and feathers.

There seem to be two possible explanations for this configuration, neither of them attractive. One is that some attempt has been made to convey the international nature of the enterprise: New Zealand is represented by a kiwi and our coat of arms; Australia scores the flags; and Canada gets to celebrate its indigenous culture. Mother Britain is excluded except for the largely obscured Union Jack above the New Zealand arms, and Fiji is omitted altogether. The other possibility is an unintended confusion. The cloth would almost certainly have been printed in England, possibly by Horrockses, Crewdson & Co. Ltd. of Manchester, cotton spinners and manufacturers, whose advertisement in the official catalogue boasted an output of six hundred miles of fabric

per week.<sup>3</sup> New Zealand's own textile industry at that date was limited to woollen goods as is clear from the listed exhibitors. Perhaps the British printers, with little knowledge of distant New Zealand, received an incomplete or too-sketchy description of what was required. A deliberate display of the international presence seems more likely, however.

That Māori culture is short-changed by this design is not hard to comprehend when we look at their representation in the exhibition itself and the extent to which they are mentioned in the official catalogue. The display in the Internal Affairs Court receives a mere six lines in that document.<sup>4</sup> The whare is not mentioned. Nor do the Māori as a people fare better. In the most fleeting account of the country's history (taken from J.B. Condliffe's *Short History of New Zealand*) Māori arrival in New Zealand is recorded: ironically they came in 'the famous canoes to which the old Maori of today delight to trace back their descent [sic]', and which the memorial cloth signally fails to depict. Between the visits of Tasman and Cook, the reader is told,

New Zealand remained 'No Man's Land'. The country's scenic attractions are itemised from region to region without any further reference to New Zealand's indigenous people, even in the Rotorua area. One further reference to Māori is to be found, but only to indicate how advanced New Zealand was in 1925 compared with the primitive state of 1830.<sup>5</sup>

The omission of Māori reference from this celebratory souvenir fabric suggests a marginalization of the tangata whenua that the catalogue confirms. Only 'old Maori' (the catalogue seems to say) cared to remember their separate arrival hundreds of years before the white man's ships sailed into these waters. We are invited to believe that younger Māori had a different vision. Whether this cloth was intended as a youthful memento or a domestic souvenir, it seems to confirm a widely held ideal of racial assimilation and a cultural future for the young dominion that was firmly aligned with the British Empire.

END <

< FOOTNOTES > 1 Two are illustrated in Joyce Storey, *The Thames and Hudson Manual of Textile Printing*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1974, pp.64-5.

> 2 N.Z. & South Seas International Exhibition, Dunedin, 1925-1926; Official Souvenir Catalogue. Dunedin, 1925, p.67. > 3 Ibid, p.122. > 4 Ibid, p.74. > 5 Ibid, p.73.

# RELIQUARY IN REPOSE: THE BLUNTED VASES OF PETER HAWKESBY

RICHARD FAHEY

The exhibition **Talking About** is a timely provocation to give consideration to the ways in which we attach value to the cultural production of craft / design objects. The most recent event to register on the national radar was the acclaimed production of Peter Jackson's **Lord Of The Rings** trilogy. It provided a branding opportunity to project a New Zealand distinctiveness into the global trafficking of cultural capital, whilst domestically it was purported as an exemplar of the 'knowledge economy'.

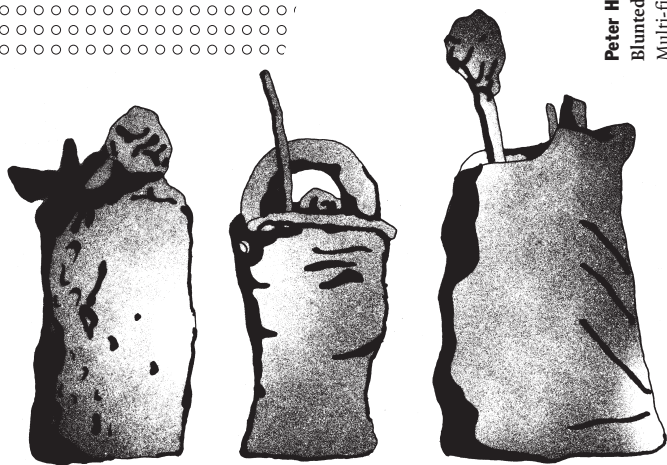
Aside from this fin de siècle morality tale about the self-defining struggle between an axis of good and evil being disturbingly reminiscent of George Bush's world theatre of foreign policy, Jackson's pictorial adaptation resonates a more visceral echo. For this author, who grew up in provincial New Zealand of the 1960s and 1970s, the props and accessories decorating the sets of this pastoral pantomime recall the effervescent flourishing of handicraft production during these decades. Church and school fairs were commonplace events throughout the regions, ostensibly providing an excuse for New Zealanders to exercise their sense of 'community' and thereby a way of mapping nationhood. Hangi kai, cake raffles and trestle tables bestowed with an array of inexpensive homemade goods; Agee jar preserves, homespun woolly jumpers, woven cane Ali baba baskets, hand-crafted leather goods, hand potted coffee cups and ceramic salt pigs. The majority of Pākehā New Zealand at the time had a

somewhat estranged view towards the indigenous Māori culture, which was expressed in airport art, souvenir tea-towels, sports personalities and mis-pronounced placenames.

Twentieth century modernism had by necessity taken a circuitous route to find its way to these cloudy Isles. On its belated arrival it was commanded by the cultural accountants, who re-packaged it as a marriage of romanticism and nationalism. The pursuit of a nationalist canon in cultural production was implicitly aligned with the post-war production boom, import substitution and trade protectionism. Consequently the economic strategy underpinning the prevailing ethos was one of self-sufficiency through self-determination and self-definition. It was if the New Zealand socio-political economy was playing at grown-ups, whilst all the time exhibiting those traits of an awkward and insecure adolescence.

In a process of colonialization, transplanted constructs can often take on a veracity more pervasive

Peter Hawkesby  
Blunted Vases with Loops, Wands and Daggers  
Multi-fired and salt-glazed Orapiti swamp clay and Stoke on Trent porcelain  
1980 to 1998  
Private Collection



than from where they originated. New Zealand’s geo-political distance and diminutive demographics provides an occasion for a particular ethos to take persuasive hold over the cultural imagination of its population. The flip-side, of course, is that New Zealand will forever remain light on its feet. Such was the case with the messianic adherence within New Zealand to the Englishman, Bernard Leach’s prescription of studio pottery. Arguably Leach’s project was not a great commercial success in England during the 1930s. In post-war Britain, the continual patronage of a middle class cultural elite ensured further ideas in the development of contemporary ceramics. Leach’s marriage of his interest in traditional Japanese stoneware with a conception of early English slipware resulted in a fetishized construct of folk-art and peasantware. He developed an aesthetic sensibility that prescribed integrity of function and truthfulness to materials as the means of unconsciously arriving at an idealized notion of ‘beauty’.

The logic was to produce forms that could only arise from the symbiosis between materials and the procedures and processes needed to fashion them. The studio potter was one who could claim authenticity, since they had carried out virtually every process from the digging and pugging of one’s own regional clays, to the firing of their own individually constructed and idiosyncratic kiln. The humanist intent was laudable, if somewhat conservative in its pastoral evocation of a Ruskinian world-view of the 19th century Arts and Craft movement. The Leach mantra found an audience in New Zealand during the 1950s which had grown to constitute a professional industry by the 1970s – to the extent that it led to such inestimable claims about there being more studio potters per head of population in New Zealand than anywhere else in the English-speaking world.

The cold war rhetoric of the 1970s, technological obsolescence and a perceived energy crisis, real or otherwise, encouraged an economic self-sufficiency and inspired a bucolic pastoralism – homespun egalitarianism with neo-survivalist tendencies. It also accounted for the extraordinary array of ceramic pots being made that resembled traditional Japanese peasantware, many of which can still be found languishing in holiday baches throughout New Zealand.

During 1977 Peter Hawkesby, in his mid-twenties, returned to his hometown of Auckland after

spending two years in rural Matakana apprenticing himself as a studio potter. He had felt frustrated at what appeared to be a lack of critical discussion within the clay fraternity.<sup>1</sup> It seemed to consist only in the trading of tenmoku and shino glaze recipes, and arguing the ethical dimensions of the **New Zealand Whole Earth Catalogue**.

Armed with a resolve not to be a production lifestyle potter but a desire to continue to work with clay, coupled with an incorrigible attitude, Hawkesby sought out the company of a kindred spirit in Denis O’Connor. O’Connor was an experienced studio potter who lived and worked on Waiheke Island. There began a working relationship and collaborative undertaking to explore alternate ways of implicating and complicating the language of clay. This was to last until 1983 when Hawkesby left New Zealand to live in Japan for an extended period and O’Connor went on to pursue his practice through other media, principally stone. Resident also of Waiheke Island was the ceramic artist Bronwyn Cornish. The ensuing dialogue called for a radicalizing of the means and purposes for which clay could be utilized and exploited. Endorsement grew from a small number of the clay community, notably fellow studio potters Warren Tippet and Ian Smail, with support from James Mack of the Dowse Museum.

By the late 1970s the socio-political culture had begun to slowly unravel. Rob Muldoon’s overly proprietorial hand was losing its grip. The twin towers of modernism and nationalism were starting to show signs of seismic shake. Metropolitan Auckland offered a constellation of conversations in close proximity. Hawkesby recalls an awareness at the time of other practitioners who were similarly interrogating the conventions and normative values associated with their respective crafts, with a desire to navigate new contexts within which their practice might be understood. There were the painters Richard McWhannell and Denys Watkins, the photographer Megan Jenkinson, the sculptor Warren Viscoe and the filmmaker Peter Wells. Many of this generation were beneficiaries of state funded tertiary education in the Visual Arts. This confluence of discursive discourses was given further impetus through the ever-increasing importation of specialist literature into New Zealand.

Re-mortgaging the Waiheke house enabled Hawkesby and O’Connor to travel to the United States in 1978,

meeting the iconoclast of American ceramics, Peter Voulkos and the likes of Michael Frimkiss, Ron Nagel and James Melchert. It was not a case of wanting to emulate their work, as the West Coast movement and the American Funk tradition were uniquely constituted within an American cultural milieu, but to gain a better sense of this action by meeting the people behind it.

The starting point was always the clay itself. In recollecting the work that Hawkesby made in the late 1970s his first impulse was a lyrical evocation of Waiheke’s Oripu swamp clay. He scraped through a gelatinous grey marine silt to generously delve into a dark red living substrate, rich in magnesium that had been incubated and preserved within this coastal cache. Hawkesby’s allergy to the wheel thrown form with its accompanying tyranny of symmetry, repetition and ‘neatness’ saw him employ more physical means of fashioning clay: rolling, folding, wrapping, compressing, tearing and piercing. He refers to this as the ‘seeing hand’ – the haptic and somatic intelligence necessary to acquire mastery over the plastic expressiveness that is clay. Each work from the **Blunted Vase** series is imbued with a distinct record of its own making, the palpable presence of the ‘hand’ and a residual emotional resonance of its maker, which is then artificially suspended through the act of vitrifying clay with fire. These **Blunted Vases** appear to have a confrontational and insouciant swagger whilst simultaneously adopting a languid and elegiac pose. Hawkesby refers to the items within as ‘wands’, ‘daggers’ and ‘loops’ – the metaphysical accoutrements of

‘magic’. This is a secularized spirituality, not in some emancipatory act of redemption, but a reliquary in repose.

Resembling the scale of tableware, the **Blunted Vases** remain tied to a vestigial notion of utilitarian containment. The ceramic vessel is a metaphoric ‘body’, suggestive of animate existence. Here the metaphorical is premised on a relational rather than a reductive view of life. Striations on the exterior perform as ribs that mirror the contained ‘loops’ within. Repeated exposure to the abusive extremes of high temperatures has pock-marked the surface as a blistered sclerotic skin.

The initial construction of these vases occurred in 1980, interrupted by Hawkesby’s decision to live in Japan. They were boxed up and stored in the backyard of his sister’s house in Mt Eden. On his return to New Zealand he played paleontologist one weekend and excavated the vases from where they had lain for a decade beneath a compost heap. The box had long since perished. They were subsequently re-fired several more times in 1998 to assume their present incarnation.

This anecdotal account of the curious provenance of these vases in some manner reflects the trajectory of Hawkesby’s significance as a practitioner. The period that he was making work in New Zealand was at the cusp of a transition in cultural production. The year he left was the election of a neo-liberal post-modern Labour government. It now appears timely for these vases to be unearthed again to dispel their magic. END <

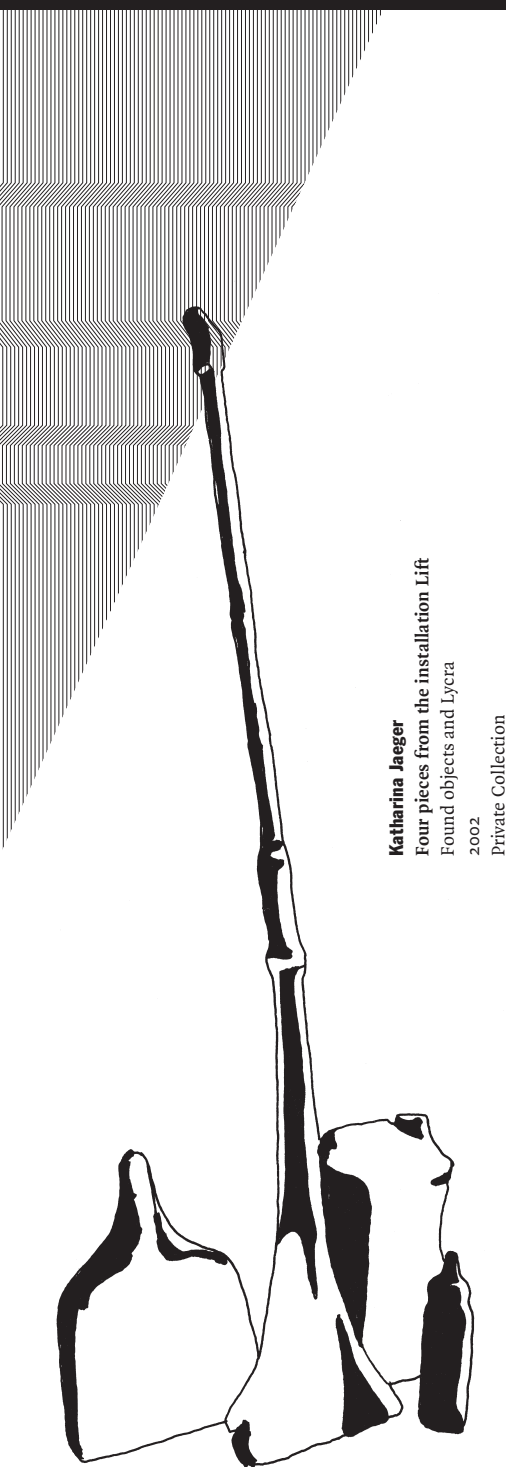
< FOOTNOTES > 1 The author gratefully acknowledges conversations with Peter Hawkesby, Bronwyn Cornish and Lex Dawson.

BRONWYN FLETCHER

# THE GIFT.

In May last year an oddly shaped package appeared on my doorstep. It was a mass of corrugated card and tape with a long narrow stem protruding from a carefully wrapped box. When I had worked my way through the layers of card and bubble-wrap I discovered that the parcel contained four objects: a baby’s bottle, a floor mop, a dustpan, and a plastic flask. Each item was covered in a flesh-pink lycra skin that had been cut and sewn to shape, fitted like a stocking over the objects, and hand-stitched closed along the least visible seam.





Katharina Jaeger  
Four pieces from the installation *Lift*  
Found objects and Lycra  
2002  
Private Collection

The group of objects was a gift from Christchurch textile artist Katharina Jaeger. They had been part of Katharina's 2002 exhibition *Lift* at the Physics Room, which featured a diverse assortment of objects concealed in pink lycra, ranging in type and scale from a toy pistol and a small bear to a toilet, washing machine and lawn mower.

As happy as I was to receive this unexpected and generous gift my feelings of surprise and delight were accompanied by an odd sense of guilt. An invitation to participate in the exhibition *Talking About* provides me with the opportunity to explore the nature of this guilt in relation to Katharina's gift.

I met Katharina while I was working as a curator at Lopdell House Gallery. While her partner Tony Bond was installing his work for the 2002 *Portage Ceramic Awards*, I chatted to Katharina in the tearoom upstairs and she showed me

photographs of her then recent exhibition *Outlet* at COCA. The body of work included a series of pink and orange stuffed torsos that could be zipped together and arranged on the floor in clusters; a line of starched calico sleeves that hung from the wall in an eerily disembodied state; and an assemblage of unusually shaped pouches and cushions, one with a keyhole shaped cavity traced from the outline of Katharina's collection of antique hand mirrors.

Among the pictures of Katharina's stuffed, starched, and zipped objects there was one work that in my view stood apart from the rest. It was a larger than life-size white calico rabbit. The creature had no head, a black zip indicating the point of severance and a disquieting blood-red calico insert at the neck. A second zip traversing the centre of the torso separated the rabbit's forequarters from its hindquarters, revealing red calico lining the inside of the cauterized joint.

The white rabbit, called *Alice*, conjured in my mind not only an image of Lewis Carroll's harassed and hurried little character, but also my favourite Grimm's fairytales, in their original form. The bloodied slipper from the wicked sisters' severed toes, the many and varied amputations; as well as those gruesome Hilaire Belloc cautionary tales where naughty children inevitably lost their heads.

When Katharina was invited to exhibit *Outlet* at Lopdell House in March 2003 I arranged to visit her in Christchurch to view the work, and to write an essay about it. The artist's studio was filled with objects and her walls and worktables were covered with sewing patterns and templates, notes and sketches. The flaccid pink skin of the lawnmower was pinned to the wall (its working contents returned to the owner after the *Lift* exhibition), where it was quietly generating a new idea about the skin of things that Katharina was thinking about pursuing.

When I saw the white rabbit in the flesh, so to speak, I knew that it was this object in particular that I wanted to know more about. Although Katharina had not made any distinction between the rabbit and the other objects in her exhibition, in the course of our conversation she told me an astonishing story about her childhood in Switzerland. Her father's passion for breeding exotic rabbits meant that many weekends were spent travelling to rabbit shows all over the country. She described her mother's laborious task of skinning, jointing, and cooking those animals culled from the breeding process due to imperfections, or when the growing population threatened to overrun the cages. Katharina's story was rich and graphic in its description of her childhood vision of dead rabbits hanging from the apple tree with sticky pools of blood on the grass below, row upon row of stretched skins drying in the attic, rabbit hats worn in winter, and gifts of stuffed rabbit toys at Christmas made from the reconstituted carcasses of previously living creatures.

The content of Katharina's story was so vivid and fantastical that I found myself at a complete loss to tie it into any kind of standard essay about her work. In a most unusual act for a writer accustomed to well-chosen quotes and solid contextual analysis, I pieced together a kind

of poem. I later felt a sense of guilt about what I had done because I had failed to offer any kind of commentary about the artist's work. I hadn't located Katharina's practice within the wider context of textile art or soft sculpture and I felt that I had somehow crossed a line between critical and creative writing that I was entirely unprepared for.

Had I not received Katharina's gift in the post a couple of months after her exhibition I would more than likely have consigned this experience to a small glitch in my working life, like an embarrassing moment that gradually fades from memory. But for the past 18 months these four objects have been a reminder of what I should have written about Katharina's art. The baby's bottle, the flask, the mop, and the dustpan are flesh-pink emblems of my writer's guilt.

I was recently reading a catalogue on the work of American artist Mike Kelley. Kelley's art installations from the early 1990s incorporated handmade stuffed toys found in second-hand stores as a way of sending up the excessive commodification of the art world. Initially Kelley felt that these toys, which were invested with all the 'love hours' of the maker and were created as gifts, somehow operated outside the capitalist system of exchange. What he soon realised, however, is that in the case of the handmade gift, the commodity is the emotion attached to the object, rather than the object itself.

What's being bought and sold is emotion. I did a piece called *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*. I said if these toys took six hundred hours to make then that's six hundred hours of love; and if I gave this to you, you owe me six hundred hours of love; and that's a lot. And it adds up because if you can't pay it back right away it keeps accumulating...That's more love than you can ever pay back...I wasn't even thinking about the objects as objects, I was thinking about them as just hours-of-attention.<sup>1</sup>

I have grappled with Mike Kelley's idea about the hidden burden of the gift and the endless feeling of 'still-owing' that attends it because of its mysterious worth. Katharina's gift became a guilt object in my mind because of the perceived shortfall on my part for the words that had prompted it. The gift brought about an awareness that the words I write are a commodity and like an object given, they too are capable of generating a feeling of indebtedness.

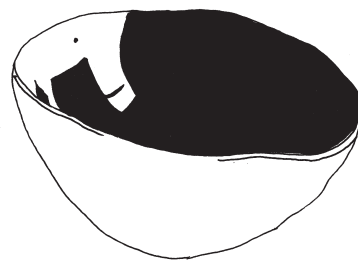
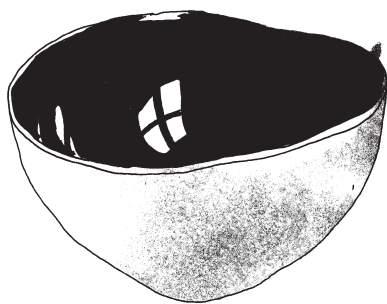
This led me to reflect upon the artists I had met and written about in recent years. I recalled the pleasure of each visit to artists's homes and studios and the variety of conversations I have had about their work. More than this, I recalled the sense of enrichment I have felt at the end of each encounter and the privilege of learning about so many different kinds of creativity.

The realisation dawned that the gift is not the object given or the words written but the exchange itself between artist and writer. I am glad to be able to display Katharina's gift in the *Talking About* exhibition. The four objects are no longer an emblem of my writer's guilt. They are a reminder of the incredible gift that it is to meet and talk to artists and to gain an insight into the creative process. That gift is priceless. END <

< FOOTNOTES > 1 'Mike Kelly – Interview with John Miller', in William S. Bartman and Miyoshi Barosh (eds.), *Mike Kelley*. New York: Art Resources Transfer, 1992, p.18.

# ON TWO OF GWYN'S BOWLS.

MOYRA ELLIOT



Gwyn Hansen Pigott  
Two Bowls  
Porcelain  
1996 and 2004  
Private collection

Minimalism is the new black, again. Not coined as an art term until the mid-1960s, it has nevertheless been a focus revisited many times during the twentieth century. Early on, Brancusi commented that 'simplicity is not an end in art, but we arrive at simplicity in spite of ourselves as we approach the real sense of things'<sup>1</sup>, and Picasso claimed that 'art is the elimination of the unnecessary.'<sup>2</sup> Mid-century, and 'less is more'<sup>3</sup> became an architectural catch-cry while later, Minimalism regenerated as a search for new form in sculpture that eliminated representation, the pedestal and often even the artist's touch. Despite the intent of minimalist artists to infiltrate the urban environment, the public often found such works inaccessible. Yet the late 1980s saw another return of the geometric and machined look of Minimalism in the work of young sculptors rejecting the high-pitched emotionalism of Neo-Expressionism. Fifteen years later, and the minimalist influence ripples on.

Its contemporary ubiquity still applies to some art and much in design but can stretch further to encompass even real estate advertisements. This resurgence of interest in the minimal is paralleled by a trend towards refinement and simplicity in ceramics that manifests as a re-investment in the practice of the wheel-thrown vessel. Minimalist influence can be readily observed in repetitive and sleek variations of a simple form, grouped and arranged for viewing as a mass rather than through the slightness of a single unit. Such a strategy can increase apparent significance while firmly maintaining links with traditions of clay. It also offers a reach towards consideration as sculpture. Yet the decorative elements prevail, as they should, as the intent is to supply a constituent for an interior rather than transgress space.

It is the rare vessel that swiftly and effortlessly made, understated and unadorned, can stand agreeably without support, particularly if such vessels are small bowls and the intent is functional. I consider that these do. Their unpretentious functionalism unified with their innate beauty offer me more pleasure than most other things in my possession. Octavio Paz, in *Use and Contemplation* wrote, 'A glass jug, a wicker basket, a coarse muslin huipul, a wooden serving dish: beautiful objects, not despite their

usefulness but because of it. Their beauty is simply an inherent part of them, like the perfume and colour of flowers. It is inseparable from their function; they are beautiful things because they are useful things . . .'<sup>4</sup> So it is with these bowls.

They sit high on my kitchen shelves – higher than the maker intended but up where I don't take them nonchalantly. I see them many times daily, and appreciate the soft tautness of the belly curve, knowing they are too elevated for full appreciation yet aware that when I want them they can be swiftly taken down. Deliberately they are where I have to choose to bring them into use. Lowered a little and I could just see inside as intended, and enjoy the contrast of lightly undulating ovals of differing colour or brighter whiteness. But lower, they are too easily, carelessly accessible.

Two quiet bowls, small and modestly austere of form. The internal foot hollowed underneath, each base is simply a lightening of weight where the thickness left by the throwing process is edited, permitting none of the drama of the elevation of a foot-ring; yet finished reflectively, allowing just sufficient extra weight for stability, but no bravura swirl from a turning tool signifying process and material (and often – maleness). Both bowls display a controlled generosity in the rise from the base with a sure swell

that just drifts off the thinned curve of lip, which avoids that Kiwi marker of a defined, stable rim.

Not a pair but related nevertheless, those ovalled rims disclose their familiarity. One oval bowl might be the result of an unintentional pressure during the making that, although corrected, rebounded under the stresses of the kiln; but two ovalled bowls betrays deliberation, the same hand and intention. It is a considered act to squeeze and thus undulate the rim, mindful of the ensuing problems when turning the foot. Nevertheless, it is chosen.

Quiet, but not silent. Not silent at all. The two bowls murmur fluently of their passage through fire – on one, an ash patina toasting one side with an oxidation blast indicated in a crazed moon; the other reveals the palest mutton-fat turquoise that intensifies slightly where the glaze flow gathers a little at the base – testament to a dirty flame-induced trace of iron. Both bowls reveal a languid line, a subtle softening persuaded by the effects of a lengthy firing on French porcelain. They speak softly, also, of their lineage. There is a powerful heritage in reduction-fired porcelain covered with ethereal blue-green celadon that forcefully frames any reading of the work. That legacy declares itself with confidence in the traces of generations of such bowls. They

might be for imperial fingertips or a peasant's breakfast rice, even warm wine. The maker acknowledges the heritage with a quality of understated restraint that nevertheless pays homage to earlier utilitarian forms. In the past, such pots would have been made by a local potter using local materials. Pots now travel far, disseminating their strange mixture of signs, miles from where the clay was mined. Since the first porcelain made its way out of China, handmade pots have carried with them portents and echoes of other lives.

The value that handmade pots bring to our lives has changed from one of necessity, when the town potter was as essential as the farrier or the baker, and the potter's output included puncheons and pipkins. Pots such as these two are evidently individually made but without any overtones of nostalgic romanticism or chunkiness. Today, the handmade domestic pot represents an investment in individualism, an aesthetic that pulls against the former hegemony of rural English production ware or the current, designer-style rule of six white everything as clean, standardised, background blandness. Instead, we use such pots for their distinctive contribution, by way of haptic and visual stimulus, to contemporary approaches in the sharing of food.

Effortless and sure and present, these useful objects signify much more than their function might suggest. Implicit is that these simple bowls are the product of meaningful work; the outcome of a series of decisions bound by the functional form and limits of the clay. Implicit too, is that those decisions came from conclusions arrived at many times previously. Refinement such as this, pared to a state where nothing more can be taken away, does not occur early on in a maker's career and enables us to pause and remember that some things are worth striving for – worth doing over and over again, until they become



themselves. A younger maker can impart other qualities in work, but not this assurance and conviction united with such simplicity. Learning skills, translating them into objects of beauty and utility focuses the mind, but only over time. Repetition in the studio and rhythms of work

form a solid background to the uncertainty of the finished piece. The artist learns patience, to relax and respect the natural cadences, and to work with the material rather than try to subdue it. The materials reward not with obedience, but with a slow revelation of potential. And

gradually the maker understands.

The craft knowledge evident here bears witness to the point where thought and action of the maker have unified. These are meaningful objects through meaningful work. Skilled potters have worked in the same way for millennia and know

that their goal is not reached by chasing fashion, but is itself fashioned over time. And its rewards last similarly.

The culmination is such as these – tangible, useable, simply beautiful pots: pots that salt my life. END <

< FOOTNOTES > 1 A. Elsen, *Origins of Modern Sculpture*. New York, Braziller, 1974, p.77. > 2 R. Penrose and J. Golding, *Pablo Picasso: 1881–1973*. Herts: Wordsworth, 1998, p.193. > 3 Statement by Mies van der Rohe, German architect, furniture designer and teacher. Quoted in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1991, p.168. > 4 Octavio Paz, 'Use and Contemplation' in *In Praise of Hands*. New York, World Crafts Council, 1991, p.6.

# HEI TIKI.



Rangi Kipa  
Three Hei tiki  
Resin  
2003  
Ellis Whanau Collections

NGARINO ELLIS

I'm always being asked who made my blue hei tiki. In our whanau we have three of them, all in different colours. Unlike other families though, ours are not hundreds of years old and made from pounamu but are formed from corian and plastic cordage. Their colours, red, green and blue, resonate against the carved paddle made by Rangi Hetet on which they hang. My mother bought the first at a gallery in Christchurch whilst we took time out from the Pacific Arts Association conference last year. We argued over what colour was best, agreeing that the green corian was just too alluring to return to its case. My sister and I then asked for one for Christmas. Being twins (although not identical) we were always colour-coded and so Hana chose the red and I the blue. We wear these hei tiki with pride, as examples of how vibrant Māori art is, and how our customary adornment forms are constantly changing and shifting.

Māori have always delighted in decorating their bodies. This was serious work and could include up to three layers. First, moko would be etched onto the skin, cut deep to emphasize the lines and curves. On top of this, a range of pigments, colours as diverse as purple, yellow, blue and red would be daubed all over the body. The final touch would be added with the placement of particular taonga, treasures, in the hair, around the neck, through the ear, and wound around the wrists and ankles. The final product was designed to make a strong statement about the identity and mana of the wearer.

Over 1200 years Māori styles of personal adornment have adapted with the changes in our culture. The early forms strongly paralleled those in the Pacific, such as kaoma, breastplates, and rei niho, whale's teeth pendants, and with the discovery of pounamu came a range of innovative designs, including the hei matau and the hei tiki. It is the latter which has become possibly one of the most potent symbols of Māori culture. There were two types: the earlier type is fairly rare, being more delicate and including details such as ears, elbows and knees. A later type is the style that dominates most contemporary examples; it is

characterized by a heavier styling with larger facial features and a body which is more vertical. Within these styles there are tribal versions, closely related to wood-carving figures; in those from Taranaki, for instance, the peaked forehead reminiscent of their maunga (mountain) is almost always included.

This tribal variation is pertinent to the work of one of its members, Rangi Kipa of Taranaki, Te Atiawa Nui Tonu, and Ngati Maniapoto. A qualified carver, Kipa has used his training to fashion exquisite taonga puoro such as koauau and putorino and equally delicate items of personal adornment. His work challenges stereotypes about Māori art as he investigates old forms using new materials. In her catalogue essay to the exhibition *Mata: Maori Adornment* (2001), Deidre Brown categorises Māori jewellery into three phases based on the types of material used. Her third phase is characterized by the introduction of 'Pākehā goods' and the 'adoption of Western Techniques, materials and education.' And it is these 'Pākehā goods' which Kipa enjoys playing with and has become known for.

For this exhibition, I chose our three hei tiki which were made by Kipa from corian®. This is

more commonly associated with kitchen benches and sinks glorified in the latest home decorating magazines (see [www.corian.com](http://www.corian.com)). For Kipa, using corian® offers him a chance to not only move into a new direction and investigate the properties of a different medium, but also provides a cheaper alternative to more traditional media, particularly paraoa and pounamu.

On another deeper level, it also can be understood in terms of a critique of the misappropriation of aspects of Māori culture. With hei tiki, there are several examples, but for the purposes of Kipa's corian works we immediately think of plastic hei tiki, particularly those associated with Air New Zealand who, for some years gave them away to passengers arriving in this country as mementos of Aotearoa.

Kaore a te rakau whakaaro,  
Kei te tohunga te whakaaro.  
The insight is not in the wood (or pounamu or paraoa), it is in the artist.

This whakatauki is particularly appropriate to the philosophy behind some of Kipa's work. He consciously reinvigorates customary techniques and skills, some of which have not been passed on down the generations due to colonization. He talks about them: 'These processes effectively are an inheritance of over a thousand years of occupation and the unbroken transfer of the mauri, they are doorways to walk with our tupuna of the past.'<sup>1</sup> Another Māori artist who also investigates how Western materials can be used to make statements about Māori resources is Michael Parekowhai. His work *Everyone will live quietly – Micah 4.4* (1990) uses formica® chosen for its resemblance to pounamu and also for its play on the words Micah 4.4. Such playfulness with materials keeps us engaged as a viewing public and prompts us to go past the aesthetic to find deeper readings of the works.

Ahakoia he iti, he pounamu.  
Although it is small, it is greenstone.  
Even the smallest things have value.

It is these materials which often provide the dividing line between whether something is deemed to be an art object or a craft item. The Arts Board committee of Creative New Zealand includes the category of 'craft/object' within their funding regime. This includes, '(but is not confined to) pottery/ceramics, jewellery, cast or blown glass, weaving/textiles and furniture design.'<sup>2</sup> This separation of art and craft seems for the purposes of this funding body to be based on materials. It is worth noting here that Rangi Kipa has just been awarded the Molly Morpeth Canada Award recognizing artistic excellence for

his hei tiki **Hay Tiki!** Since its inception in 1999, this is the first time that a non-ceramist has won the award.

Within Māori culture there was no distinction, at least in terms of the language, between objects which would be deemed craft as opposed to art. Our nearest terms used to describe such items would be *toi* or *taonga*, or even *whakairo*. All have their particular nuances in terms of how they were used: for example, a *whare whakairo* might be translated by some as ‘carved house’ and others as ‘decorated house’.

The concept of Māori art has been transformed since the **Te Maori** exhibition (1986). Here the curating team was quite overt about the identity of art – quite simply it was anything that was carved. This ranged from weapons to breastplates to gigantic *waharoa*, gateways. Some questioned the way in which women’s work, the weaving, the **craft**, remained in the storerooms, too ‘fragile’ to travel. Was gender politics at play here? Perhaps. But for the purposes of this essay it is significant that items of personal adornment, tiny amulets made of *paraoa* and large heavy hei tiki carved from *pounamu*, possibly carved by women, also **were** included within the definition of art.

The hei tiki form has become one of the most potent symbols of Māori culture. Its allure has not been missed by non-Māori artists keen to ‘appreciate’ Māori art by including its form in

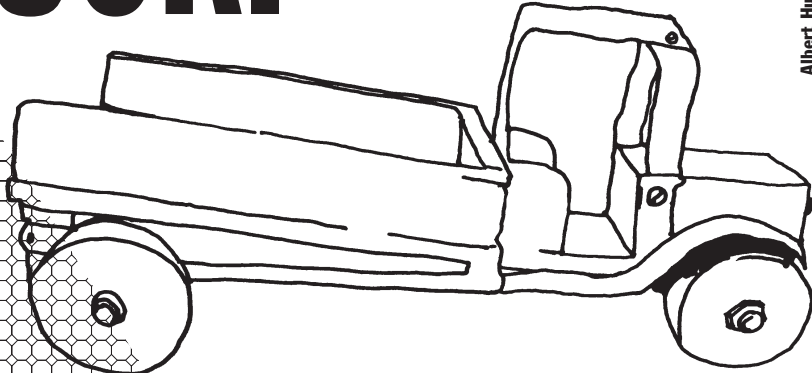
their work. This can range from jewellery – Warwick Freeman’s **Tiki Face** (1992) made from jasper, greenstone, gold and silver – to painting – Dick Frizzell’s bizarre transmutations of the form in his **Tiki** series of 1992. These works relate to the form of the hei tiki as it is often said that the tiki figure is the source for the hei tiki type. Some may question why Māori are so concerned about people from outside our culture using motifs and symbols from ours. For Freeman and Frizzell, their use was prompted by discussion in the art world about appropriation centred on Gordon Walters and Theo Schoon and others – to which Māori artists were also responding, such as Michael Parekowhai’s **Kiss The Baby Goodbye** (1994)<sup>3</sup>. Through colonization, certain aspects of Māori art and culture have been eroded and debased; this has led Māori to become very protective over what remains. This includes important symbols, such as the hei tiki. Perhaps an analogy could be drawn to the sensitivities surrounding the use of the New Zealand flag. When it is trampled on or debased in any way there is often uproar.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous people should not need to still justify why they have access to their own cultural images, and those who are ‘outside’ the culture do not. Is it not enough that they are part of our cultural heritage, an integral aspect of who we are as a people and our ties with our *whakapapa* and *whenua*? Kati!

Contemporary Māori artists continue to use hei tiki as a platform to discuss pertinent issues facing Māori culture today. Kai Tahu photographer Fiona Pardington has, since 2001, been researching hei tiki – none of which, to my knowledge, have been displayed before – from her tribal area of Kai Tahu, and re-presenting them in photographic form in order to examine the politics of museum collection and display. Bob Jahnke of Ngati Porou used a range of hei tiki forms in his recent work **Top Forged Artefacts** (2001) as a political statement about the commodification of Māori art and its impact upon one cultural form in particular. Meanwhile, fellow Ngati Porou artist Robyn Kahukiwa recently included plastic hei tiki in her series **He Maori Ahau** (2002) as a symbol of Māori identity. This re-presentation demonstrates the significance of such *taonga* *tuku iho* for Māori today and displays their function as portals to the past.

Hei tiki remain unique markers of Māori identity wherever they are used and worn. Their presence today is not limited to craft and souvenir shops but by being utilized by contemporary Māori artists takes on a new level of appreciation, as an art form whose meaning changes according to its use, forever retaining its significance as a potent symbol of what being Māori is today. **END <**

< FOOTNOTES > 1 See [http://www.maoriart.org.nz/profiles/rangi\\_kipa](http://www.maoriart.org.nz/profiles/rangi_kipa). (12 October 2004) > 2 See the Creative New Zealand Funding Application Form; italics are my emphasis. > 3 Shane Cotton’s painting **Sold** (1994) ‘replied’ to Frizzell’s work **Grocer with Moko** (1992) which many Māori found particularly offensive due to the use of *moko* on a man associated with food. > 4 I’m thinking here of Diane Prince’s installation **Flagging the Future** (1995) which was exhibited in the exhibition marking the opening of the New Gallery in Auckland, **Korirangi. New Māori Art**, in 1995. Prince used the New Zealand flag to discuss issues of colonization and invited people to walk on it. Following protests from various groups, most vocally the Returned Servicemen’s Association, the flag was eventually removed.

EVERYTRUCK.



Albert Hughes  
Toy Truck  
Found timber and metal  
1966  
Private Collection

To begin with, there’s no attempt at verisimilitude, those tiny details beloved of the model enthusiast. As for the workmanship – well, the dumptray is skewed, the wheels mismatched, the cab buckled and bandaged. Rough enough.

Yet there’s charm in this home-made-ness. Look at the rakish tilt to the back of the truck, the swagger of the emblazoned dumptray rising proud of the rear wheels. Why bother with a steering wheel, foot pedals, gear shift, when the truck has to be pushed? The wheels turn, the tray tips, and there’s even a bit of steering. Reduced to its rough-and-ready essentials, this is Everytruck.

Handle it and you want to fix it, tighten the cup-hook towbar, adjust the rear hinge, tap in the protruding lead head – and there’s another clue to the nature of its attractiveness: you can see exactly how it’s been made, and what it’s been made of. You could even make one yourself.

First the body (old fruit crate), then the blocks and bonnet (off-cuts), the dumptray (more fruit crate, hinge), and the sheet-metal cab, snipped and bent to shape. An old paint-can handle, perhaps, bent into the lever which tips up the dumptray, hammered down with a couple of staples. Cut the wheels out on the bandsaw, whack them in with a lead

LOUIS LE VAILLANT  
in conversation with  
RIGEL SORZANO

Even if you’ve never had the remotest interest in trucks, it’s hard not to be beguiled by this old homemade toy. Perhaps it’s something to do with scale, a fascination with the life-size made miniature? Possibly; but this is no tidy, precise replica, carefully recreated from **Practical Hobbies**, it’s another type of object entirely.

page > 08



head each, and you've got axle-and-hubcap in one. Snip, bend and nail in the mudguards, bang in a couple of buttons for headlights, a quick dab of paint as you go along, and finally a bit of sign-writing on the sides. Couldn't be easier.

Actually, it could be easier. You could pop down to the Red Shed and spend a few dollars on something plastic, metallic, mass-produced. But that's today.

In the 1950s, even as New Zealand was about to enter a period of sustained prosperity, the privations of the wartime years remained. Import restrictions, and the economic realities of distance and population, imposed additional limits on the availability of goods. Together these were overlaid on the pre-existing culture of economy, self-sufficiency and necessity-driven inventiveness now mythologised as 'Kiwi ingenuity'. One result was that:

*In back sheds and basements, fathers and grandfathers fitted out an alternative miniature world ... Recipients of this ['grandad' or 'codger'] art generally needed to take the rough with the smooth. Hand-built construction could involve a few rugged finishes ...*<sup>1</sup>

In New Zealand – as elsewhere – the motivations of folk art originated in necessity, subsequently embracing creativity for its own sake, as recreation, or self-expression. While this type of art involves traditions of object-making, it is far from static. The handmade tradition lingered – this truck, for example, was made in 1966 – but ultimately, necessities having changed, our expectations followed.

We no longer have to live as we did in the 1950s; therefore we don't. However eager we may be to claim an essential affinity for the make-do and do-it-yourself, we don't continue to demonstrate it in our day-to-day lives. Knocking together an Everytruck is as unlikely a mission for today's average New Zealander as ordering an espresso would have been back then. No need, no opportunity – and no desire, for in our hearts we suspect that Everytruck doesn't cut it as a toy any more.

We've moved on, that's not in dispute. Where we're going is perhaps a more interesting question.

To Marti Friedlander, New Zealand in the late 1950s 'was a culture resistant to change and to people who were different.'<sup>2</sup> Peter Wells describes the role of artists and designers then:

*That they could have influenced our society for the better was a laughable thought ... Artists – designers – were simply irrelevant. Their reality was negated by the fact that they catered for rich people. This marked artists out as different from ordinary, that is, real people. They lacked some essential authenticity – the authenticity of popular culture you might say: they were unredeemed by popular acceptance.*<sup>3</sup>

Some fifty years later, art and design have become mainstream. We have the Pathways to Arts and Cultural Employment programme, and the Design Taskforce. Craft, however, has continued to be a subject of debate, uncertain of its interaction with art and design, and concerned for its future.

*If anyone is having trouble with the difference between what art is and what craft is – that is it. One has a concept, the other is just application of skill.*<sup>4</sup>

*Contemporary craft ... puts making in dialogue with the concept.*<sup>5</sup>

*...the need currently is not to ask if this is art, or craft, or design, but to develop a critical sensibility to a wide range of practices...*<sup>6</sup>

*...some boundaries have gone, but the dissolution has been very much a one-way process in which fine artists have picked and chosen elements of design or craft practice and incorporated them into their one-off art works.*<sup>7</sup>

*We have recently seen the word 'craft' disappearing from official titles ... Let not the current mania for design make us lose touch with the real world of craft.*<sup>8</sup>

Intrinsic to the egalitarianism which Marti Friedlander loved<sup>9</sup> was our well-recognised readiness to 'have a go', with a commensurate willingness to let others also have a go. Sadly, this – along with a lack of competition from overseas – could be blamed for a tendency to mediocrity. Corporate culture altered significantly in the 1990s, the insulating cocoon was removed, and New Zealand developed a credibility crisis, all of which curtailed both inclination and opportunity for that fearless assault on different experiences.

Creatively, this is good and bad news. It's certainly right that we need to pursue internationally professional standards, that '[i]nstead of boasting how many hats each of us wears, we need to relinquish tasks to those better skilled to do them ... and foster a collective will to go that bit further.'<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it's important that professionalism doesn't become elitism, engendering a new cycle of fear and mediocrity, albeit one with an international flavour.

Surely we want a culture in which creativity is endemic? As Douglas Lilburn said, 'No cream ... without plenty of milk.'<sup>11</sup> People should feel that it's okay to 'have a go' at the difficult or impossible, and despite Simon Fraser's dismay at the Te Papa label on John Britten's bike, isn't that what it's also saying?<sup>12</sup> The challenge is to accept the possibility of failure, without lowering the standards of success.

But we also need to accept that success is relative, and that not everyone wants or needs to achieve the same thing.

*There's an idea that the only thing in the arts is masterpieces ... Very little of it is ... the fabric of a culture is to do with lots of people making lots of things ...*<sup>13</sup>

Everytruck was made simply because small boys enjoy playing with trucks, but its appeal to adults is undeniable.<sup>14</sup> It's always possible, of course, to extrapolate idiom and metaphor, to read content into materials, construction, choices of colour and lettering, to deconstruct in order to reassemble as something else – in short, to paraphrase Marti Friedlander, you can write a lot of crap for its own sake, but in the end it's our response to the object which counts.<sup>15</sup>

Someone might be attracted by Everytruck's individuality, quirky touches like the hand-lettering on the pink sides of the dumptray; or charmed, as was the stall-owner who found it recently, by its rough-and-ready, slightly shonky appearance.<sup>16</sup> They could be impelled by nostalgia for a lost childhood toy – even trying, perhaps, to recreate a lost childhood. Or they might, as I do, collect examples of New Zealand folk art.

Our museums, on the whole, do not collect such objects. There are good reasons for this, but also lost opportunities. Objects like this truck form part of the ongoing social narrative which, given time and mass, becomes culture. They occupy their place in that narrative without self-consciousness, but with an understanding that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. So we could argue that it won't matter if, when the dots in our social history are joined, Everytruck's particular story is missing. We'll still know, as we already do, about codger art and grandad art and the other forms of folk art that fill the alphabet.<sup>17</sup>

What we won't remember, though, is the power such 'handmade, homemade and humble' objects have to reveal to us our own participation in the shared narrative, our attachment and belonging to the culture in which we live.<sup>18</sup> They prompt us to seek out stories, and draw stories out of us in return. Not simply stories about using the object, but about our lives as they were when such objects were made; about the way they persist, somehow, in the way we live now. END <

<sup>1</sup> Richard, Wolfe *All Our Own Work: New Zealand's Folk Art*. Auckland: Viking, Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 1997, pp.36-38. > <sup>2</sup> David Cohen, 'Marti Friedlander: In my experience', *New Zealand Listener*, 2 October 2004, p.14. > <sup>3</sup> Peter Wells, 'That Definite Chill: The fifties revisited', *New Zealand Home & Building Souvenir Edition: The 1950's Show*, November 1992, p.93. > <sup>4</sup> Warwick Freeman, quoted in James Mack, 'Warwick Freeman – maker of things', *New Zealand Crafts*, Autumn 1985, p.10. > <sup>5</sup> Kevin Murray, 'The essential role of craft in culture', *Craft Victoria Discussion Paper*, 10 March 2003, <http://www.craftvic.asn.au/papers/riggresponse.htm> (28 September 2004). > <sup>6</sup> Sue Gardiner, 'When you open the third drawer down...', *Art News*, Autumn 2004, p.60. > <sup>7</sup> Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins, 'Watch this space', *New Zealand Listener*, 7 August 2004, <http://www.listener.co.nz/printable,2375.sm>, (28 September 2004). > <sup>8</sup> Murray, *ibid.* > <sup>9</sup> Friedlander, *ibid.* > <sup>10</sup> Kirsty Robertson, 'Making a case for the professional', *Urbis* 17, Spring 2002, p.8. > <sup>11</sup> Douglas Lilburn, *A Search For Tradition: A Talk Given at the First Cambridge Summer School of Music, January 1946*. Wellington: Alexander Turnbull Library Endowment Trust & The New Zealand Composers Foundation, 1984, p.11. > <sup>12</sup> 'There under 'What is so special about it?' ... I read, 'Built on the cheap by an amateur' ... Is this really the popular perception of what is important in design in New Zealand? What it's saying is: New Zealand – a nation of amateurs doing things on the cheap.' Fraser, Simon, 'Missing links', *Urbis* 17, Spring 2002, p.199. See also Pamela Stirling, 'Designing winners', *New Zealand Listener*, 7 September 2003, p.22. > <sup>13</sup> Michael Craig-Martin, quoted in James Meek, 'Art into ashes', *The Guardian Weekly*, 1 October 2004, p.18. > <sup>14</sup> In conversation with Maurice Handisides, Auckland, 30 September 2004. > <sup>15</sup> Friedlander, *ibid.* > <sup>16</sup> In conversation with Jo Goffe, Auckland, 27 September 2004. > <sup>17</sup> For a list of descriptors, see Richard Wolfe, p.7. > <sup>18</sup> Wolfe, p.10.

# CRAFTING IDENTITIES.



Chris Charteris  
'Pono' from Toki Series  
Basalt  
2003  
Courtesy of FHE Galleries

SEAN MALLON

There is something about an adze that brings out the Cro-Magnon in people. The combination of materials and form recalls another age of mechanical production. At once the tool in the hand of every prehistoric, national geographic man, adzes are also a significant sign of sophistication, a marker in the long history of human mastery over materials and technology.

Adzes are a class of object readily associated with Pacific peoples. They are used to build canoes, sculpt wood, and as presentation and exchange pieces. Historically, the blades have been made from stone and shell and for some Māori, pounamu was especially prized. Today adze blades are also fashioned from chisels or pieces of pipe or steel. Outside their utilitarian contexts, adzes of various forms and origins are fetishised by fossickers, archaeologists, and collectors. However, they are not merely artefacts of old technology or past life ways. Adzes remain practical for many people in the semi-subsistence economies of the Pacific, as well as having significance for contemporary artists and craftspeople.

Adzes are increasingly used for purposes other than working wood. For example, at the opening of the Fale Pasifika, Pacific house, at the University of Auckland in 2004, two adzes were presented in recognition of relationships and historical connections between Māori and Pacific peoples. Earlier in the same year, sculptor Chris Charteris had a sell-out show called *Toki* that featured adze blade forms as display pieces.<sup>1</sup>

This toki by Charteris is an interpretation that circulates in a system of gallery/dealer/art-craft consumers. It is not a functional tool, but is the outcome of a crafting process. In this article I focus on the making of adzes or toki in various forms, but I want to look past the object itself to draw attention to a somewhat obscured narrative of craft making. While the step by step method of making toki is interesting, let me concentrate on abstract elements of the process, and some concepts that are perhaps broadly relevant to people interested in craft.

As a curator at Te Papa, my research interests lie in the history and cultures of Pacific peoples. It is an exciting time to be working in this field. A Pacific consciousness is everywhere at the moment. However, despite the very obvious Pacific presence in the arts there is still some scope to develop a deeper familiarity, one that allows us to see other co-existing and very active 'art worlds'. There are contexts of production and paths of circulation for objects at the very fringes of the mainstream. These contexts are not benign. They are important sites of contestation, where identities, relationships, meanings and much more are negotiated.

I still remember the 1996 headline 'Comfort of Cooks Craft not art' in the *Sunday Star-Times* commenting on the incongruous place of Cook island tivaevae, quilts, in the Auckland City gallery. While written in circumstances that have changed, the elitist attitudes behind this headline persist. It speaks to the difficult negotiation of the blurred boundaries between art and craft, but also betrays a superficial understanding of New Zealand's multicultural creative environment. While the imagery of the Pacific is everywhere, there is still a sense that this familiarity is but a veneer over a more complex and well-established cultural milieu. Pacific art is at its most marketable and has wide appeal commercially. However, its 'otherness' is still reflected in the marginalisation of its significant narratives of production.

The art of Pacific painters, sculptors and designers that circulates through mainstream networks is deservedly celebrated. In the course of my work I have enjoyed the opportunity to research, curate and write about the art, the personalities and the issues relevant to these forms of cultural production. However, a few years ago I had the smallest glimpse of another 'art world', one with as much activity but less public and less celebrated. The museum was offered a set of toki by two Tokelauan men and their grandfather – a recognised expert craftsman named Fuli Fati. All three of the men lived in New Zealand although Fuli Fati has passed away.<sup>2</sup> The toki they made comprised of metal chisel blades lashed with specially plaited coconut fibre to wooden handles. The construction of the adzes and the sourcing of materials was fascinating but it was the reasons behind making

the toki that I draw attention to here.

Toki are primarily a woodworking tool but they are also a medium through which the politics of relationships, knowledge transfer and cultural identity can be negotiated. This case of toki making is an example of how objects can be appreciated as both cultural product and a social process through which makers are able to produce aesthetic values, ideological perspectives and identities.<sup>3</sup>

Interviewing the makers of the toki, it transpired that their toki were made not just to fashion wood, but to construct relationships between themselves and their grandfather. Making toki was a process that facilitated the exchange of knowledge between the expert and the apprentices. The manufacturing process allowed for conversation and interaction, as well as access to information about history, values and cultural practice in Tokelau usually restricted to older generations. Through their craft, the toki makers bridged a generation gap between themselves and the expert. The process both enhanced and reproduced long established cultural roles, which reflected the distinct social environment and dynamics of the Tokelau community in New Zealand.

My experience with the Tokelauan toki makers has given me a new perspective on craft making in other Pacific communities, and among Māori.<sup>4</sup> Take, for example, contemporary stone and pounamu toki made by Māori craftspeople. If the sole purpose of making a toki is to eventually use it to shape timber, then in the present day there are less arduous and time consuming methods of acquiring a suitable adze or tool. So what lies behind the motivation to make toki from stone or pounamu and engage in such a labour intensive and difficult task?

Certainly part of the attraction lies in working with the materials that people from the past – in this case toki making ancestors – would have worked with. The process of working with stone, wood and fibre, and understanding their qualities offers social and cultural benefits. Knowledge of, and mastery over, these materials not only brings the past and a more 'authentic' way of life closer to the present for the craftsperson, but it 'authenticates' the craft person. Making and knowing the technology related to toki has the potential to enhance the maker's social status, affirming a range of social and cultural identities. In some cases, contemporary artists have developed a high level of skill in working with these materials or making specific types of tools. In time, and through their skills, individuals have become representative of a 'traditional' skill set – masters of the tools and manufacturing processes in their own right.

In this way, the process of toki making can be understood as one of cultural recovery. Craft makers can create a tangible link to the past and are able to rediscover or lay claim to a cultural or ethnic identity through the process of making 'the thing' – in this case toki. The materials and manufacturing process become symbolic of an idealised past, a way of life distant geographically or, in the case of Māori, often considered lost as part of the processes of colonisation. Toki, like other cultural productions, can be used in '...the mediation of ruptures of time and history – to heal disruptions in cultural knowledge, historical memory, and identity between generations...' <sup>5</sup>



We can consider this idea when we think of quilting, the making of furniture, adornments and ceramics. It is important to read the object, but also to investigate its history of production and recognise that the manufacturing process can have significant social and cultural value, intrinsic to as well as beyond the manual processes.

The toki maker's sense of their own ethnic identity does not precede their practice. It is through what they do that they create themselves. This is not to privilege toki making as the only

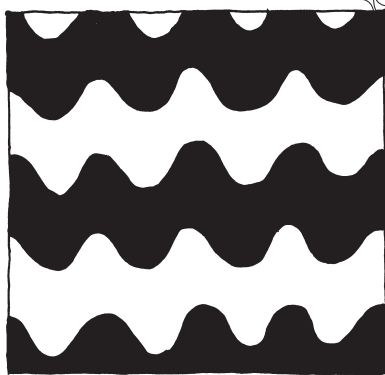
process through which identity and other cultural meanings can be constructed, but rather to see it as one example of a process (and a context) that is less familiar. As objects, toki give visibility to the relationships, identities and knowledge exchanges that flow through them.

Toki are also an example of a group of objects outside the more public and accessible visual and textual forms. Their ancientness and association with past peoples and lifestyles conceals their contemporary relevance. The manufacture of toki

allows me to draw attention to alternative venues and processes through which cultural values and ethnic identities can be expressed. Part of the significance of this particular craft making process is in seeing that the debates around gender, ethnic, class, national and other identities are not only embedded in the very public expressions of art, literature and performance. They are also found in art forms, objects and creative processes not so prominently encountered in the public and mainstream art world's gaze. END <

1 Toki is a Polynesian term for adze. > 2 S. Mallon, K. Kupa and J. Kirifi, 'Toki Niu Hila: Making Tokelauan adzes and Identity in New Zealand', *Tuhinga: Records of the Museum of New Zealand* 14, 2003, pp.11-12. > 3 Maureen Mahon, 'The Visible Evidence of Cultural Producers', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29, 2000, pp.467-468. > 4 For insight into contemporary Māori toki making and its significance see Anaru Rondon in conversation with Awhina Tamarapa, in Huhana Smith (ed.), *Taiawhio. Conversations with Contemporary Maori Artists*. Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2002, pp.154-165. > 5 Faye Ginsburg, 'Indigenous Media: Faustian Contract or Global Village?', *Cultural Anthropology: Journal for the Society of Cultural Anthropology*, v.6, n.1, 1991, p.104.

# LOKKI.



Maija Isola  
'Lokki' Print for Marimekko  
Cotton  
Designed 1961  
Courtesy of Piece Ltd

ANNA MILES

To someone with an inordinate love of curtains, Maija Isola's **Lokki** is the pattern of the near perfect curtain. Imagine the pleasure of compressing these corrugations each morning and stretching them out each evening. Each pull, like Isola's pattern, pleasingly transforms the simplest decorative form, the stripe.

Released by Marimekko in 1961, **Lokki** belongs at an opposite end of the modernist trajectory to the metal lamps and teapots handmade at the Bauhaus to look as if made by machine. Isola's design displays its handmade character freely, yet as an object produced on another modernist cusp it has its affinities with these prototypes of the 1920s.

This crisp relic of 1960s Finland (unfortunately named after a seagull) has a paradoxical character. Only the cut paper stencil that forms the prototype or 'repeat' is actually handmade. At that moment when the squeegee sends ink through the screen, the repeat is repeated and **Lokki** is handmade no longer. For a short time the pattern was hand printed, but most of the extant

kilometres are machine manufactured. From an aesthetic point of view the method of production makes little discernible difference. The handmade character of the loping line transfers to the textile surface with remarkable effectiveness.

Designing **Lokki** was an exercise in reduction. Isola discarded the photographic method utilised in her **Luonto** (nature) series of the late 1950s – a channelling of the spirit of early practitioners of the photogram that features lacy silhouettes of pressed plants like cow parsley reproduced at the scale of totara. Instead, she returned to the most fundamental screen print technology, the cut paper stencil. Taking a variation on the stripe or Sienese

wave as her subject, she expended nothing more than enlargement and a single colour in her essay on the undulating gesture.

The character of Isola's cut is what makes it. Her scissor marks traverse the gap between restless and boring. An effortless grasp of form gives the pattern bounce, yet **Lokki**'s hourglass rhythms are not difficult to live with. The interplay of concave and convex encourages daydreaming. By making imprecision a virtue you might think her line has its origins in Victorian England. The understanding of the handmade mark as unique and expressive dates to critics such as Ruskin, inflamed by the perceived dehumanising impact of industrialisation.

Somehow **Lokki**'s expressive vocabulary reconciles a subsequent craft revival (of post-war rather than the nineteenth century) and 1960s psychedelia. These wasp waist-ish curves reach back to the old fashioned glamour of New Look Dior while anticipating the allure of pared-back minimalism. **Lokki**'s greatest mystery however is its construction. Even tracing over Isola's design it is difficult to pick up the beginning and end of her pattern. This is partly because, contrary to the idea that the handmade is unique, **Lokki**'s repeat is actually a repetition.

Only a sophisticated eye immersed in the technologies it works with could have seen and seized intrinsic qualities such as flatness, scale and repetition in this way. Isola's work makes her feel for the textile surface look intuitive. A ravishing pink and yellow variation on **Lokki** reveals her experience and knowledge of materials. The overlapping pink and yellow produces a vibrant orange lip. Her enthusiasm for the print medium includes interest in effects often dismissed as defects. In **Putkinotko**, the well known cow parsley design, visual interest comes from an approach that is close to mis-registration.

**Lokki** could be the textile demonstration of the Strunk and White maxim, 'Favour the plain over the fancy', except that it isn't. The handmade character of this design is decorative in the grand manner. Isola's drawing with scissors sets off a play of symmetry and asymmetry of the kind that has informed great gardens and fascinated designers of every civilisation. Yet it is difficult to imagine this design springing from any place other than 1960s Scandinavia. The closest twentieth century parallel are Popova and Stepanova's striking Russian Constructivist dress fabrics of the 1920s. Of these, Lesley Jackson has written, 'The chopping up and reassembling of geometric motifs presages the visual tricks of Op Art forty years later.'<sup>1</sup> Yet these revolutionary designs, such as Stepanova's pattern based on a propeller, are grounded in an enthusiasm for the machine age and geometric order that is unrelated to **Lokki**'s organic imprecision.

It is tempting to associate Isola with the optimism of these artists who saw a new decorative vocabulary in terms of radical social change. However, Marimekko's agenda was limited to transforming the bourgeois domestic sphere. While the audacious scale of **Lokki** connects it to the Russian patterns, its main effect is lightness. Like the regular repeat of Isola's irregular repeat, **Lokki**'s largeness is fun.

Isola was a painter educated as a weaver. She studied at the Institute of Industrial Arts in Helsinki from 1946 to 1949, a period in which students specialised in woven rather than printed textiles. She regarded her primary interest as art. Her education probably differed little from that of women students at the Bauhaus a generation earlier. While the Weimar school was founded on the principle that no distinction should be made between fine arts and practical crafts, in practice this rarely meant admitting women

students to areas other than the weaving workshop.

I have seen only a fraction of the 533 designs Isola produced for Marimekko over the course of her 38 year career, yet I wonder if **Lokki** is unusually absorbent.<sup>2</sup> Its method of invention can be related to Matisse’s cut outs of the 1950s while recollecting ephemeral decorative forms like bunting, streamers and simple paper cut scallops attached to shelves, walls and wooden beams. Isola is on record as interested in American abstraction. Presumably she would have been aware of the work of artists such as Robert Motherwell and Barnett Newman. On the other hand, her **Ornamentti** series of 1959 is based on traditional Slovakian embroidery and lace. The one colour on white scheme she favours has connections with the ticking stripes, simple woven runners and Delft tiled

stoves found in Scandinavian homes like that of Swedish Arts and Crafts artist, Carl Larsen.

It is unlikely that the German folk tradition of Scherenschnitte or ‘scissor cutting’ would have escaped Isola’s attention. Dating from fourth or fifth century China, Scherenschnitte came to prominence during the romantic national phase of the late nineteenth century associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement. This homely combination of doily and silhouette was brought to America by immigrants from Southern Germany and Switzerland, and is well known in Pennsylvania. The Pittsburgh-raised screen printer, Andy Warhol, was probably familiar with Wycinanki, a Polish variation on this type of cut paper decoration.

Isola’s pattern might be taken as a modernist example par excellence; exemplifying truth to materials, craft

as a laboratory for design, and reductive abstraction. A contrary argument would make more of the design’s joke-like playful elements. A punning sensibility is apparent in its details. The wave, a basic type repetition, is repeated. The under-and-over mimics the rhythm of the warp and weft of weaving. The repeat is in itself a repeat, and an irregular one at that. The scale play and striations reference Pop and Op. **Lokki**’s reflexive qualities also remind me of a 1920s silk, delicately hand printed with tyre tread patterns as if it had been run over.

How being handmade has informed **Lokki**’s design values is an eye-opening subject. Its spontaneity conveys a swerve away from modernism more felt than reasoned. Still, the design remains modern enough not to have lost the whiff of instruction. If **Lokki** is exemplary of

anything, it is the way that making leads thinking. Isola’s engagement with the messiness of materiality prompted unexpected thoughts and unpredictable results and shines out of this pattern.

Without fuss or drama **Lokki** demonstrates the meeting of art, craft and design. Tracing the backstory of Isola’s pattern to the Bauhaus is easy. More fun is to trace it further via folksy scissor cutting to the nineteenth century design reformers who argued over ornamentation. What is paradoxical about **Lokki** is its beauty. Isola’s mark has the rare grace of something that is neither overly expressive or mechanical; something not quite Ruskin and not quite Warhol. Playfully blown up larger than life, her stripe is a trip around that urge at the base of modernism: decoration. **END <**

<sup>1</sup> Lesley Jackson, **Twentieth Century Pattern Design: Textile and Wallpaper Pioneers**. London: Mitchell Beazley, 2002, p.56. > <sup>2</sup> Lesley Jackson, ‘Textile Patterns in an International Context: Precursors, Contemporaries and Successors’ in Marianne Aav, **Marimekko: Fabric, Fashion Architecture**. New York: The Bard Graduate Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture & Yale University Press, 2003, p.52.

# IN DE NAGANG VAN EISE EISINGA: THE WOOLCOMBER AND THE TELESCOPE MAKER.



A.A.M.Bos  
Primary Mirror for a 12 Inch Cassegrain Telescope  
Plate Glass  
1995 to 1998  
Private Collection

THE ARTIST in conversation with  
CUSHLA PAREKOWHAL.

This object is the primary mirror of a 12 inch Classical Cassegrain telescope and is the first mirror I ever made. Although there is much more to a telescope than the mirror, ordinarily it is the making of the mirror that is talked about when telescope making is being discussed.

The mirror is the optical component of a telescope that collects the light and focuses it into an image. The surface area of the mirror is important because the bigger this is the more light it will collect and the brighter the image becomes. In a Cassegrain telescope the optical system consists of two components: first the big primary mirror, and then the smaller secondary mirror. The secondary mirror is convex in shape, and placed opposite the concave primary mirror it is able to amplify the image by a factor of 2.5. This is a very efficient way of making a long focal length telescope able to sit in a very short tube.

I’m not really an optician or a telescope maker. I’ve only made telescopes because often it is the only way that I can access an instrument that will do the astronomical job I want it to do. I have never been in a position to be able to buy a large research grade telescope off the shelf. If I wanted a quality instrument the only way someone like me was going to get it was to make it myself.

The mirror itself is interesting in a number of ways. First my mirror for the size of telescope that it is used in is way too thin. Second my mirror is made of plate glass and not of pyrex which is the preferred material. Pyrex is much more stable than plate glass and doesn’t change shape with fluctuations in temperature. Pyrex will hold the shape you want much more closely which is terribly important when you are making a precisely polished surface.

I had to use plate glass for my mirror because I wanted a bigger telescope that would be able to measure fainter stars but I didn’t have the



financial resources to purchase a ready made optical system. Lack of money also made me a bit more cautious, so rather than buy a very expensive piece of pyrex when I wasn't entirely sure that I could pull off the job of making my own mirror, I decided to go for the no frills but functional material and used plate glass instead.

I knew I couldn't just rock off to Auckland Glass and take a sheet of plate home from the shop, sourcing materials wasn't going to be as easy as that. However I had heard stories about this guy called Graeme Williams who was a prolific telescope maker. Graeme lived in Henderson and was a leatherworker who processed hides for a living. That was his day job but what he was really passionate about was making mirrors for telescopes. I hoped that Graeme would be able to help me not only with the process of making the mirror but also with the problem of finding the glass to make the mirror with.

One Saturday afternoon I went over to Graeme's workshop at the back of his leatherworking factory so while he was pounding skins out the front he was also grinding glass on the side. We got out the thickest piece of plate glass that we could find. It was only 25 mm thick and was given to Graeme by a glass dealer called Pilkington who was getting rid of stock because plate is no longer being used in construction. In the old days when mirror makers needed glass a readily available material was salvaged ship port holes. The glass that came out of port holes was about 30-40mm thick but this source has dried up too because modern ships aren't built the same way they used to be either.

To make a mirror what you basically need are two pieces of glass that you can rub together. The bottom piece is called the tool and the top the mirror. An abrasive such as grinding powder is put between the pieces of glass and these are rubbed together, eventually transforming the top piece of glass or mirror into a concave shape and the bottom piece or tool into a convex shape.

For a workbench with a nice sturdy surface to grind mirrors on most telescope makers use a 44 gallon drum filled up and weighted down with something heavy like concrete or water. The glass disc that is to become the tool is then mounted on this workbench with a few sheets of old newspaper underneath to prevent the material from sucking down when water is applied. The glass is not clamped at all but held in place by a couple of wooden blocks to stop it from moving around. Coarse grinding powder, usually an 80 grit carborundum, is then sprinkled over the surface of the material with water and the disc that is become mirror put on top. This glass is pushed back and forth by hand against the disc that is underneath. Eventually the edges of the glass wear down so that the bottom disc turns in and becomes convex while the top disc grinds out to become concave like the shape of a dog bowl.

However to rough or hog out the mirror evenly you must avoid working the material in one place only. You have to make a couple of sweeps rubbing in one direction changing your position slightly to make some more rubs in another. Then its just 'a step to the right and a jump to the left' turning the mirror a little as you go and rubbing all the time. Like the dance, you keep on moving around the drum in a set direction. It may be to the left or to the right, whatever is more comfortable for you, but the movement must always be in rhythm. In

the end it is the smoothness of this action that ensures the convex quality that the mirror will develop.

Hogging out the mirror continues moving progressively through finer and finer grinding powders until the surface is completely smooth and brought to the focal length required. At each change of grinding powder the process gets more and more difficult because if the mirror is scratched in any way you have to go back a couple of grades of grit to grind the mark out. This slow methodical rubbing is repeated and repeated until you get to what is called the fine grind where virtually no material is removed from the surface and the mirror has become a smooth milky looking object ready to polish.

Although it took us only about an hour to grind through the plate glass with the cookie cutter Graeme and I had a problem. Where the usual mirror making process requires two discs of glass of the same diameter to make one mirror there was only enough good plate to cut out two blanks, one to make a mirror for me and the other to make a mirror for Graeme.

As there was insufficient material to make a tool we had to innovate on the conventional approach and adopt a different strategy for our mirror making. To make this mirror we used what is called a sub-diameter tool. This reverses the effects of the rubbing process because the glass disc that becomes the mirror is put not on top of but underneath the tool. This means that the tool can then be of a much smaller diameter than the mirror. This approach is not the favoured method because control is always a problem and it is much harder to make a symmetrical mirror using a sub diameter tool.

Since we had no plate glass left anyway we used a 10 kg cast iron weight lifting weight to do the hogging out. In fact our meatball sub diameter tool proved to be very efficient and successful. Although much of the mass produced optics that are available today have their curves generated by pre formed cast iron tools, none of them are like the one we used which was pinched from the gym.

We started the hogging out and grinding of the mirror in October 1995 and were finished about a month later in November. The hogging out only took a few days and was quite quick but getting a decent fine grind using a sub diameter tool was frustrating and much more time consuming.

Since my mirror had a focal length of F4 it had to be quite deep which meant that a lot of glass has to be removed from the middle of the disc making the centre very thin. So I left the mirror making project for a bit and went back to Graeme's workshop after Christmas to attend to the process of polishing.

Polishing like grinding is a tricky business. After the fine grind is complete pitch is poured over the glass tool turning it in to a polishing lap. Grooves are then cut into the pitch so that the tool looks like a disc with lots of little black squares stuck to it. The mirror is placed on top where the pitch under the weight of the glass will flow and take up the exact shape of the mirror. This we left for about 24 hours, checking every now and then that the pitch has made good contact all round with the glass. When this has happened iron oxide or jewellers rouge is mixed with water in a clean plastic bottle with a few holes pricked in the top. This is then sprinkled over the pitch lap where

little particles of oxide work their way into the surface. Even though it looks like the mirror has received a ghastly coat of red paint, when it is rubbed gently over the lap with the same rhythm as before, rather than grinding at the glass the iron oxide just gently shaves and polishes the surface instead.

This was a very satisfying part of the process because it was the first time I could feel the mirror right under my hand. I still had to work very carefully using just the right amount of pressure and turning the mirror all the time. Suddenly the surface began to lose its opaqueness and started to go clear. This was very exciting. It is only when polishing a mirror that you can see whether or not your patience has been rewarded. During the fine grind I had done regrind after regrind to make absolutely sure that all previous traces of grit had been removed and there were no pits or scratches on the mirror. I just kept on grinding until I was certain the surface was without defect. In the end I got a very good finish quite quickly. Although the performance of the mirror will not be impaired by any scratches it receives during the process of polishing, these marks still make the object look ugly and no mirror maker ever wants that because a good mirror not only has to function efficiently but it has to be beautiful as well.

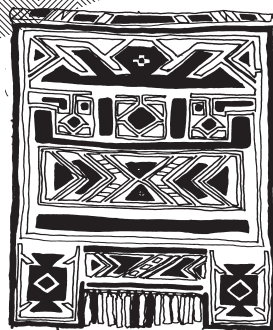
Once the mirror was polished it needed to be figured but at this point Graeme Williams packed up and went back to England with his wife and two new kids. I was sort of left hanging with my primary mirror almost finished but unsure what to do next.

Figuring a mirror is similar to polishing in that the process requires the use of a tool with pitch lap and jewellers rouge. Not knowing really what to do this is where Garry Nankivell came to my rescue. Even if I was able to grind and polish my own mirror on a first go, it is practically impossible to figure it correctly by yourself without ever having done it before. This is because it takes experience and work on number of different mirrors in order to manipulate and understand what is happening to the surface. Figuring requires that the mirror be a little deeper in the middle than it is at the sides. Such deviation might only be a fraction of a millimetre but it has to be a smooth and exact paraboloid right across the diameter of the mirror. As it was the mirror that I had made could not, without figuring, focus light in to a single point which in a telescope is precisely what the instrument has to do.

So I was lucky and had the mirror figured by Garry Nankivell who left his mark on it. This is very cool because Garry was regarded as a master of his craft not only in this country but internationally as well. Sadly Garry died in 2002 and thin as it is my mirror was the only one made of plate glass he ever worked on. Even though I did all the grinding and polishing myself and was able to supply Garry with a perfectly spherical surface with a hole in the middle that was to become the 12 inch mirror of a Classical Cassegrain telescope, at the end of the day this is all I did.

Traditionally a mirror is regarded as being made by the individual who worked on it last. In this sense it is the surface of the mirror and not the mirror itself that becomes the object. It can be said that my mirror is really the work of Garry Nankivell which means that I am not sure whether or not I have made an object at all. END <

# ABOUT AN APRON: INTERPRETING AN NDEBELE LIPHOTHO.



Unknown Maker  
Ndebele Liphotho  
Married Woman's Beaded Apron  
Beadwork on canvas backing  
Circa 1980  
Elizabeth Rankin Collection

ELIZABETH RANKIN

If craft in general has occupied a precarious position on the periphery of discourse on the arts, artefacts made by indigenous peoples have been even further marginalised. Rather than being acknowledged for their autonomous qualities, they were treated – at least in earlier scholarship – as little more than ethnographic evidence in reconstructions of indigenous societies, examples of material culture frozen in some distant anthropological time warp. Yet these objects do not lack a continuing and varied design life. Like their makers, they change across time, both independently and through contact with other cultures. Although they are made in response to generic social needs and we may not know their makers's names, the skill and imagination that goes into their making warrants close visual attention.

Even when such artefacts have more recently been rescued from ethnographic obscurity, however, their reception by the art establishment is ambivalent. It has been questioned whether it is appropriate to call these objects art when they are produced in societies with no concept equivalent to what is thought of as art in western cultures. Ironically, though, a similar hierarchy as that applied to western arts often prevails – artefacts similar to western sculpture have been relatively easily accommodated in the canons of fine art, while the status of those that relate more closely to crafts is less clear, although there seems to be no indigenous differentiation of such categories. So if craft-like objects of material culture do make their way from anthropology to art, it has been more often through the 'back door' of commodification than through the elegant portals of fine art galleries. That is the case with the Ndebele apron on this exhibition, bought at a market stall in Johannesburg in the 1980s – although the marketplace has been changing, as can be seen by entering the virtual portals of the World Wide Web, where Ndebele artefacts are offered for sale at high dollar prices, some aprons already framed to signal their status as fine art.

Aprons were made by Ndebele women in southern Africa as garments which signified their standing in the community, different designs designating whether, for example, they were adolescents or married women. The finely beaded

forms confirm early outside contact, as the glass beads were imported, probably via traders on the east coast. Subtly textured surfaces of tiny beads were closely woven in delicate rows, covering the hide supports making up the aprons. Beading was predominantly white with only occasional tiny motifs in colour appearing against the monochromatic ground. For it was not the decoration but the general shape of the apron that carried its meaning: a fringed flap on the lower border indicates married status in this example, called a liphotho.

It is not known when this form of dress was first used. It seems to have existed in the earlier nineteenth century, but it developed exponentially after the Ndundza group of the Ndebele was defeated by the Boers in the 1883 Mapoch War. Dispossessed and dispersed as indentured labourers for the Boer farmers of the Transvaal, the Ndebele were faced with cultural extinction. It was through their crafts that women found ways to sustain their endangered identity. Although they were scattered across the area, their distinctive dress asserted their cultural affinity, as did the decoration of their homestead walls. Combined with brightly coloured blankets and further beaded paraphernalia, such as neck and leg rings, the aprons which had signified a woman's position within her immediate community took on a wider meaning of identity.

The change to vibrant designs in varying colours was a response to further socio-political changes and

the economic pressures of tourism. The apartheid policies of the Nationalist government, which had come to power in South Africa in 1948, encouraged the differentiation of ethnic groups as a basis of separate development. This worked hand in hand with the exploitation of ethnicity to create tourist attractions. Supplied with polyvinyl commercial paints to decorate tourist villages, such as Kwa-Msiza near Pretoria, Ndebele women responded rapidly to the innovative possibilities of their new medium. They created designs that followed the symmetrical patterns they had customarily used, but replaced the limited range of natural earth pigments on their mud walls with brilliant colours. Colour diversity also facilitated more complex designs, sometimes incorporating new motifs based on growing knowledge of urban life – clocks and lamps, for example, may be understood as painted objects of desire for dwellings denied such modern commodities.

As well as painting the murals, women were hired to appear wearing Ndebele dress to enhance the 'authentic' tourist experience. Tourists provided a supplementary source of income, buying trinkets made by the women and also sometimes persuading them to sell their own beaded garments. In time items of traditional apparel were created specifically for the tourist trade. These gradually changed to match the taste of the clients, for only a few specialist collectors were seeking historical African artefacts, such as the white beaded aprons.

Most tourists wanted the objects for their decorative potential, comparing them perhaps with modern abstract art, and intending to display them on the walls of their homes in much the same way as paintings. They preferred more colourful beadwork with elaborate patterns, and Ndebele women were quick to respond to market demands.

Labouring to produce more items for sale in a bid to improve their meagre circumstances, the women no longer worked with hide, but employed manufactured materials that were easier to prepare, such as canvas. They often treated the backing to make it appear as though the aprons had been worn, suggesting that they were 'genuine' Ndebele artefacts – no doubt another response to tourist expectations. The beads they used were still small, but a little larger than the historical ones, perhaps relating to the availability of supplies, but possibly also to speed up production. The women no longer relied on incidental sales at tourist sites, travelling to towns to sell their wares, both supplying tourist shops and selling works independently at the road side. They were also assisted by philanthropic organisations, such as Operation Hunger, which handled marketing for some nine hundred rural bead workers during the 1980s, deploying urban marketplaces not only in South Africa but abroad.

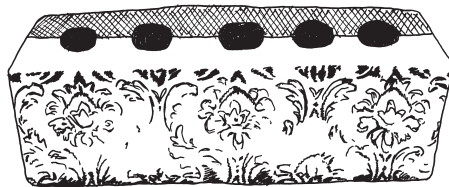
But if there were changes in manufacture and marketing, there were no short cuts in the designs. Demanding beaded patterns were developed, in extended colour ranges, drawing ideas from the decorations that the women had devised in bright acrylic paints for tourist villages and their own homestead walls. This liphotho shows typical characteristics. The horizontal support at the top, traditionally made of rolled hide, has its own covering of beads, but the rest of the apron is made up of a continuous fabric of tightly woven beadwork, outlined in narrow blue and black bands that frame its overall rectangularity, and through which it is stitched onto its stiff backing. The beaded field is separated into quadrilateral forms, lateral oblongs further divided into subsets. Within these, diagonals, chevrons, triangles and diamonds enliven the right-angled geometry, but maintain the mirror-image symmetry. The forms are abstract patterns without representational intention, although in the upper field we can see the vestiges of three suspended lamps, such as might have been painted on Ndebele dwellings.



<p>The design elements are defined by different colours in a harmonious range of vivid greens, deep blues and black with a little dull purple, some areas made up of translucent beads which catch the light. Essential to the design are bright white shapes and lines which articulate the patterns, traces of the original white beadwork, interrupted in places by alternating individual black and white beads. As in most hand-made items, the symmetry is not quite perfect, particularly in oblique forms that require complex stepping of the</p>	<p>beads to achieve diagonal effects. And there is asymmetry in the design of the distinctive loose flap at the bottom of this lipthotho, which covers the upper part of a free-hanging hide fringe beaded in blue and black. An intricate white diagonal traverses the centre of the flap, with purple and blue motifs on one side, green and black on the other. This area also enjoys a varied range of beadwork techniques, banded with a line of open lozenges in green and a fringed border in black and white.</p>	<p>Fine beading is highly skilled work, and so time-consuming that some Ndebele women have made aprons for their own use in manufactured fabrics and braids, reserving beaded items for sale. The mainly white purchasers value the beadwork for its skill and decorative patterns, and no doubt think of it simply as attractive craft work with the exotic overtones of objects made by African people. Yet the aprons are far from repetitive artefacts of a fixed tradition, or mere tourist curios. Through their change and develop-</p>	<p>ment, they are embedded with meanings, even if not in obvious representational ways. Ndebele aprons carry time-honoured messages of individual social standing, which were later adapted to respond to colonial oppression as markers of group identity, and then in turn modified for the tourist market to alleviate economic hardship under apartheid. They are tokens of the resilience of a people, and of the creative agency of Ndebele women. END &lt;</p>
--	---	--	---

# NOTES ON ORNAMENT.

Madeline Childs and Philip Jarvis  
Wallpaper Brick  
Abbottsford Brick  
1997  
Private Collection



GRANT THOMPSON

One of the numerous threads tangling the twentieth century is the conscious attempt to eliminate ornament from the western practice of art and design. The attempt originates in the distrust of artifice and a scorn for a pleasure that has no other purpose than pleasure. Ornament, however, refuses to disappear and fresh efforts to understand its workings and use are emerging in a variety of disciplines. James Trilling, writing toward a definition of modern ornament suggests, 'If you want to know whether a particular feature of an object is ornament, try imagining it away. If the object remains structurally intact and recognizable, and can still perform its function, the feature is decoration, and may well be ornament. If not it is design.'<sup>1</sup>

Trilling's detachability test is also Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) measure of ornament. Writing in the middle of the fifteenth century, Alberti defines ornament as an 'auxiliary light' to beauty. 'Beauty is some inherent property, to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional.'<sup>2</sup> Beauty, in Alberti's understanding, is the overall framework – the essential idea – whereas ornament is the form of individual embellishment applied to a particular frame. Because even nature only rarely produces anything that is entirely complete and perfect in every respect, Alberti suggests that masking the ugly and polishing the attractive are necessary ornamental steps toward the perfection of worldly beauty. Ornament for Alberti has no essential relationship to the thing it adorns and is therefore separable from the thing to which it attaches.

In his parable *The Poor Little Rich Man* (1900), Adolf Loos (1870-1933) parodies the attempt to conform life to an ideal through the application of a particular ornamental style. Loos's Rich Man has money and possessions, a wife who loves him

and a brood of children. There is however one thing his life lacks – Art. To remedy the situation the Rich Man commissions a famous architect to bring Art into his life by decorating his home in the Art Nouveau style. When the task is complete, the Rich Man is overjoyed.

Wherever he cast his glance was Art, Art in each and every thing. He grasped Art when he took hold of a door handle; he sat on Art when he settled into an armchair; he buried his head in Art when, tired, he lay it down on a pillow; he sank his feet into Art when he trod on the carpet. He revelled in Art with an enormous fervour.<sup>3</sup>

Although his home was comfortable, the Rich Man found maintaining the perfection of the interior scheme 'a tax on his brain'. Therefore, after celebrating his birthday and receiving many lavish gifts, the Rich Man invites the architect to advise on the placement of the new possessions. On hearing this request, the architect explodes: 'How do you come to allow yourself to be given gifts! Did I not design everything for you? Did I not consider everything? You don't need anything more. You are complete!'<sup>4</sup> The Rich Man suddenly feels deeply unhappy. 'He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, this is

what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse.'<sup>5</sup> Living the designed life of Loos's parable is living outside your self.

Loos's view of manufactured ornament finds a parallel in the writing of William Morris (1834-1896); Morris's concerns, however, are for the labourer who must produce the objects, rather than the designer who demands them. A constant theme in Morris's writing is the assertion that ornament, or Popular Art, is the art of the people, the art undertaken by the ordinary workman going about his ordinary work, his 'joy in labour'.

The origin of this art was the necessity that the workman felt for variety in his work, and though the beauty produced by this desire was a gift to the world, yet the obtaining variety and pleasure in the work by the workman was a matter of more importance still, for it stamped all labour with the impress of pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

While Alberti finds that nature's creations display a lack that human ornament must fill, Morris writes that, 'Everything made by Nature is adorned by her' and, following nature's example, 'Everything made by man was [previous to industrialisation] adorned by man.'<sup>7</sup> Morris's pre-industrial worker fashions the thing in his hand, 'ornamenting it so naturally and so entirely without conscious effort, that it is often difficult to distinguish where the utilitarian aspect of the work finishes and the ornamental begins.'<sup>8</sup>

Industrialisation however, commodifies Popular Art, reinventing the worker as a source of profit rather than wares, and transforms ornament, once the worker's pleasure, into an added toil requiring the compensation of an added payment. Ornament, once a joy becomes a burden. The shift occurs because industry separates ornament from the lives of those who produce it. Morris compares the desire to produce ornament with the human appetite for eating, suggesting nature herself leads us to both these 'sweeteners of daily toil.' He writes, 'To apply art to useful wares, is not frivolity, but a part of the serious business of life.'<sup>9</sup>

Adolf Loos, for whom the evolution of culture was synonymous with the disappearance of ornament from items of utility, also understood ornament as the pleasure in work. In his essay *Ornament and Crime* (1910) Loos outlines both a public and private approach to ornament. At the level of ideology, Loos, as a modern individual in the world, asserts his preference for plainness in objects of utility; but at the level of sociality, as a man among men, he tolerates ornaments on his body, 'when they constitute the joy of my fellow men. Then they are my joy too.'<sup>10</sup> For Loos, ornament has an essential relationship to a

# TALKING ABOUT ABOUT TALKING

> particular stage in his theory of cultural evolution. Detached from its natural environment, the practice of ornament becomes degenerate. Morris, too, understands ornament as essentially linked to the life of its producers and corrupted when the link is severed. He, however, is a Socialist lecturing to whoever will listen, while Loos is an aristocrat ‘preaching to the aristocrat’. While they are not quite on the same team, they both, I believe, read ornament, not as supplementary in line with Alberti, but as something superfluous.<sup>11</sup>

James Trilling, with whose defining of ornament I began these notes, continues his thoughts by stating that all ornament is decoration, but not all decoration is ornament; the distinction resides in pleasure. ‘Ornament is

decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content.’<sup>12</sup> The pleasure of ornament, rather than being a supplement, an added extra to the thing it ornaments, is for me a superfluous value, a superabundance of the thing itself. Superfluosity is an outpouring; a flow that emanates from a thing, and while it may be possible to remove the superfluous it cannot be added. The ornament Morris’s worker creates is an extravagance that flows from the making of a thing.

As I write, Madeleine Childs and Philip Jarvis’s **Wallpaper Brick** (1997) is in my view. I am trying to decide if, as I thought when I began, that its ornament is superfluous. Childs and Jarvis purchase the bricks in a raw state, apply slip,

press wallpaper into the surface, remove the wallpaper, apply a glaze, and fire. The ornament seems applied but the receptivity of the green clay surface on which brick’s permanence meets with wallpaper’s ephemerality generates a pleasure peculiar to this thing. I think, ‘You have to know bricks to make this.’ My eyes travel the brick’s surface, tracing wallpaper intricacies up and over ridges, circling dimples. This brick’s face takes a long time to see. Is the ornament superfluous? I imagine the brick in a wall and it becomes a brooch but that does not make it ornament in a superfluous sense. For the moment, I decide the ornament overflows the brick, causing it to exceed itself because of the pleasure I derive from its embossed distortions. END <

1 James Trilling, **Ornament: A Modern Perspective**. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2003, p.21. > 2 Leon Battista Alberti, **On the Art of Building in Ten Books**, translated by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The MIT Press, 1988, p.156. > 3 Adolf Loos, ‘The Poor Little Rich Man’ in **Spoken Into the Void: Collected Essays 1897–1900**, translated by Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The MIT Press, 1987, p.125. > 4 Ibid, p.127. > 5 Ibid, p.127. > 6 William Morris, ‘Useful Work Versus Useless Toil’ in **William Morris: Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse, Shorter Poems, Lectures and Essays** edited by G. D. H. Cole. London: Nonesuch Press, 1974, p.617. > 7 Ibid, p.617. > 8 Ibid, p.617. > 9 William Morris, ‘The Arts and Crafts Today’ in Isabelle Frank (ed.), **The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings 1750–1940**. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000, p.63. > 10 Adolf Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’ in Isabelle Frank, p.294. > 11 ‘I am preaching to the aristocrat, I mean the person who stands at the pinnacle of mankind and yet has the deepest understanding for the distress and want of those below.’ Adolf Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’, p.293. > 12 Trilling, p.23.

Published on the occasion of  
**TALKING ABOUT**  
at Objectspace  
November 2004

isbn 0-476-01108-6

curator / editor  
Damian Skinner  
design + illustrations  
www.inhousedesign.co.nz

Objectspace is a dedicated centre for innovative craft and  
design that puts objects into play in the culture.



8 Ponsonby Rd Auckland

T 09 376 6216  
F 09 376 6246

E info@objectspace.org.nz  
P O Box 68-762, Newton, Auckland 1032, New Zealand

Objectspace acknowledges its major supporters  
And the assistance of Piece Ltd with Talking About

