



'Kraft': Making, Austerity and Sleight of Hand

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M. Laird, 2009, 'Embellishment I', gilded leather, dried fig, gold, shell and glass on cotton velvet, private collection, Sydney.



M. Laird, 2009, 'Embellishment II', gilded leather, feather, dried fig, gold and lace on cotton velvet, private collection, Sydney.



M. Laird, 2009, 'Embellishment III', gilded leather, feather, dried fig, gold and lace on cotton velvet, private collection, Sydney.



Paper

The textile artefacts created on cotton-velvet panels posed for this paper are hand-crafted graphic emblems imbued with Victorian sensibilities; samplers as unique narratives of cloth. Created within a framework of austerity they reflect the unique and particular synergies provided by the use of found elements, and reinforce the significance of designing with elements already invested with emotive memory. Criterion for the selection of materials was based on principles of extreme economy; their humble materiality making these textile artefacts unique. The samplers are abstract assemblages of the found; feather and filigree, recycled cloth, reclaimed silver and metals, and gemstones, all of which were procured with little or no cost to the maker; austerity driving design process and craft. The artisan's hand may be witnessed through the samplers, as knowledge, skill and experience is drawn into a material narrative of the fabric's life. Former senior curator at the Powerhouse Museum Sydney Australia, Dr. Grace Cochrane looks to 'kraft' as "power, strength and force, and even magic". This paper alludes to such 'kraft', where textile artefacts 'Embellishments I - III' are forged by hand, then read as material culture; Making, Austerity and the Sleight of Hand. Like Michael Taussig, "mine is an old fashioned interest in magic" (1993, p. 251).

Using austerity as a framework for selection, where the component elements are serendipitously procured, the artisan-craftsman utilises other determining factors when composing the designs. Sensate qualities such as texture, touch, tone and surface embrace the aesthetics of decay. Each element is pressed by the 'conjuror's' hand onto its velvet background with consideration to composition and colour whilst reframing historical design-styles from the Victorian period (1837 – 1901). In these pieces, each component element is considered of equal value, irrespective of their value as a commodity, precious for their own particular qualities. Lorraine Daston historian of art and science states; "Materiality stakes its claims, at least two levels in the 'stuff' of and gestures by which the work is made, and in the material objects depicted or invented therein" (2004, p. 17). These textile artefacts are not the outcome of mass produced components placed in the regularity of familiar composition or by their association with fetish, cost or status, but are made according to the sensual qualities of each element; softness or resilience, tone or colour, their yielding nature or stasis. The found metal decorations, links from reused chain



and gemstones harvested from old jewellery boxes imply durability. Placed alongside materials wrought from nature, seed pods, crushed figs, shells, or sticks which are frail, and will ultimately fail, they reflect difference; permanence and the ephemeral rendering each a greater significance by their proximity as they lie on cloth.

The textile artefacts draw on 'economic botany', which is the use of plants, seeds, nuts and flowers as economically and culturally valuable materials (Kew Economic Botany Collection 2009). The Georgian Romanticist fascination with nature is described by cultural theorist Celeste Olalquiaga; "Natural matter such as flowers, insects, shells, made relics out of things whose value emanated from their intrinsic relationship with life" (1999, p. 52). This small series of textile artefacts, 'Embellishments I - III' reconfigures these naturally occurring materials with other found objects; austerity celebrated through the careful selection and crafting of materials devoid of cost to the craftsman.

A fragile pink shell found on a deserted beach of northern New South Wales draws on the 'bourgeoisie' Victorian desire to collect *naturalia*, where states Celeste Olalquiaga; "Shells were favoured over medals in a symptomatic takeover" (1999, p. 235). A ripened fig with twisted stem provides the setting for a gem, where gold or silver filigree may have been a more traditional housing. Whilst the natural artefact's physical aura may be diminished with removal from its natural environment, its reverence as a design element increases as cultural collateral, as the artisan crafts new artefacts. French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard lauds natural materials claiming, "wood draws its substance from the earth, it lives and breathes, and 'labours'...Time is embedded in its very fibres" (2006, p. 40). Feathers - shining and delicate - feature as a doubled black surface in the textile artefacts. The use of feathers as part of the funeral ritual is well documented during the Victorian period (Taylor, 1983, p. 26). Item 15, from the inventory of goods supplied to Jedediah Strutt for his wife's funeral in 1774 states, "Plumes of the Best Black Ostrich Feathers for the Hearse & 4 Horses" (p. 29). The use of feather, shell, timber, and 'economic botany', serve to reinforce the Victorian characteristics significant to the samplers.

New relationships between the collector, the collected and the designer-craftsman are brought to bear through these textile artefacts. The emotive contexts associated with the reuse of elements which have an intrinsic personal



value, compounds the meaning of the newly produced artefact; significance doubled. Elisabeth Wilson notes that articles such as dress “acquire quasi-magical properties... [which] take on symbolic significance” (2004, pp. 378-379). Lace and leather, heirlooms from my own family in Scotland in the mid-1850s, are here recast through these contemporary textile samplers. Their link to the personal provides gravitas to the textile surface. Leather book spines have been cut with lace placed sympathetically into their gilded and embossed patterns. Positioned with crushed fig seeds and golden bees, the designs reflect the figurative symbols used on Victorian book covers. Placed on their gentle velvet foundation, the textile artefacts presented become vignettes designed with a narrative approach to reading surface, through texture and ornament, memory and austerity.

‘Embellishments I - III’ are the outcome of an austerity-driven approach to ‘kraft’ and design process where the textile artefacts are crafted from materials whose humble origin permeates their make; where the tensions and synergies between the found and reused elements prompt original outcomes. Wrought from aging leather cases and velvet jewellery boxes, or found in natural environments, the objects are crafted into new entities, and ‘read’ as textile narratives. They personify the synergies created when assortments of objects, the broken and discarded, or personal ornaments of an austere collector are recontextualised. Historical memory is evoked through Victorian stylisation, and principles of ‘economic botany’. From the ‘advantaged’ viewpoint of the designer-craftsman, these new textile entities have further significance using materials with their own unique emotive memory. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur claims that memory “is tied to an ambition...that of being faithful to the past” (2006, p. 21). This is true of ‘Embellishments I - III’ in their stylistic connection with Victoriana and their link to memory. These textile panels are designed as graphic emblems, samplers graced with imitative magic through the use of materials and their personalised craftsmanship framed through austerity; Making, Austerity and Sleight of Hand.



Reference List

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From making a coin disappear to finding someone's card in a deck, all you need is some sleight of hand. Steps. Method 1. Place the coin between your thumb and first two fingers. You want to be holding the coin on the ridged sides. Make sure your entire hand is slightly tilted towards you. Spectators should be able to see the face of the coin easily, but turning your hand to you will make the trick easier. Use a larger coin, especially if you are a beginner. A quarter or half dollar works well. You can hold the coin in whichever hand feels more comfortable. For the purpose of explaining the trick, the coin will be in the left hand. 2. Bring your right hand into position. Take your right hand and reach in as if you Sleight Of Hand (Dex; Trained Only; Armor Check Penalty). You can cut or lift a purse and hide it on your person, palm an unattended object, hide a light weapon in your clothing, or perform some feat of legerdemain with an object no larger than a hat or a loaf of bread. Check: A DC 10 Sleight of Hand check lets you palm a coin-sized, unattended object. Performing a minor feat of legerdemain, such as making a coin disappear, also has a DC of 10 unless an observer is determined to note where the item went. When you use this skill under close observation, your skill check is opposed by the observ