

Freestyle

Art gallery of South Australia

I find it very interesting that ***Freestyle*** is one of two exhibitions focusing on the relationship between Australian design, craft and manufacturing that opened in Sydney in early 2007.

Freestyle: New Australian Design for Living was developed by Object Galleries in partnership with the Melbourne Museum, and focuses on objects made for the body and the home through diverse design and manufacturing practices.

Smart Works: Design and the Handmade developed by Grace Cochrane for the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney addresses the influence of the handmade on the design and manufacture of objects in Australia. Both exhibitions included public programs designed to engage international and national audiences in appreciating the current strength of Australian designed and handmade objects. Smart Works held an international symposium in conjunction with the exhibition opening. Object partnered with the University of NSW, with innovation funding from the federal government, to work with a group of grade 6 children to consider issues about sustainability through engaging with the ***Freestyle*** exhibition.ⁱ

This conjunction of exhibitions with public programs and educational events all focused on the importance of Australian designed and made objects to our society made me wonder why this has happened now, in 2007, as in fact the Dunstan government in the early 1970s had a similar vision for South Australia that envisaged good design as integral to the quality of life. Don Dunstan wanted to promote South Australia as *a place where the quality of life was good and the products distinctive*.ⁱⁱ

The ***JamFactory*** a Dunstan initiative, was created to develop a craft based industry in South Australia that would develop links with local manufacturers to improve the quality of locally made products that were rarely designed in South Australia (most of our good design was imported) and create a market for well designed and well made, distinctive South Australian products. Dunstan believed that training should be offered in tandem with production so the Jam Factory was set up to provide both: training and craft based production. Over the last 37 years the Jam has maintained this focus on training and production, but with a growing emphasis on the role of design in crafts practice. But Dunstan's vision that this would revolutionise local manufacturing by lifting the quality of design of locally made goods didn't eventuate then, and its taken three decades for this vision to be realised, perhaps in ways that couldn't be imagined in the 70s.

The 4 essays in the ***Freestyle*** catalogue by Brain Parkes, Paul McGillick, Robyn Healy and Grace Cochrane go some way to explaining why this is happening now in the 21st c, due to changes in the context for craft and design practice over the last 40 years. I'd like to briefly refer to three important factors.

Education

As Dunstan realised professional education is crucial aspect of building quality in craft and design practices, not just in technical skill but in design and conceptual depth. During the last decades of the 20c craft training moved from the guilds back into higher education making it possible for craft practitioners to study their discipline from diploma level to PhD. Those practitioners who undertake research degrees like Kirsten Coehlo, Damon Moon, Leslie Mathews and Gerry Wedd at the SASA, build a community of practice that involves deep reflection on how their work contributes to knowledge. Those who teach in higher education communicate this knowledge to the next generation.

Organisations

The practitioner organisations, the guilds, the former craft councils and Craft Australia have played a crucial role in creating a supportive context for practitioners. These organisations are increasingly sophisticated working in partnership with government, national and international organisations to support practitioners, create new markets and consider new ways of thinking about the role of objects in our lives. As the boundaries between the disciplines of art, craft and design have become more fluid (not without controversy) many of these organisations have expanded their brief to include a focus on design or the social value of craft.

Form in WA, and **Object** in NSW, changed their names as they became increasingly engaged with the role of design and manufacturing in the creation of objects. **Craftsouth** through the **Designing Minds** exhibition and most recently the **Applied Ideas** initiative has taken up the Dunstan baton to link local practitioners with manufacturers to increase the sustainability of designer makers and the viability of local manufacturers threatened by cheap imports from the Asia. **Craft Victoria**, through the South Project is looking at craft practices in the southern hemisphere, often in third world countries, to consider what can we learn from them, and how might we support them to maintain their traditional practices and develop global markets for their products

Digital revolution

Perhaps the most profound change in our lives over the last thirty years has been the digital revolution. Just as the industrial revolution took work out of the home, the digital revolution is taking work back into the homeⁱⁱⁱ with good and bad consequences. Digital networks have revolutionised communication; it's now possible to live in Australia and have work manufactured and marketed overseas. Digital technologies have revolutionised production; creating an interface between design and production that enables precision and small batch production, opening up new ways for designers and manufacturers to work together. These factors and many others that I don't have time to mention, have created a context where there are diverse opportunities for designers, makers, and manufacturers to work together and access global as well as local markets.

The **Freestyle** exhibition notes this diversity by grouping the 40 exhibitors into 5 loose categories.

- Skilled craftspeople who create handmade, one off or limited edition objects. (Gray St Workshop)
- Designer makers who create objects through sustainable in house production (F!nk and Co and Tiwi Arts)
- The designer/project manager who partners with manufacturers (industrial or craft based in Aust and overseas) to create and market objects (Khai Liew)
- Designers whose products are manufactured and marketed by others (Alexander Lotersztain)
- Those designer makers who have become international brands (Akira Isogawa)

This diversity of designing and making practices is matched by a diversity of cultural influences as the practitioners in the exhibition include Indigenous Australian groups and those whose families came to Australia through post-war immigration. The quality and vitality of the Australian designed objects in this exhibition is due to a complex range of factors that has enabled productive partnerships to be developed between designers makers and manufacturers while building their skill, confidence and professionalism. This exhibition demonstrates the prescience of Dunstan's vision back in the 70's where he imagined a world where distinctive, locally designed and beautifully made objects were valued and regarded as integral to the quality of life.

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ⁱ Amodeo, L. 'Good Idea ideas@object' Object Issue 53, August –Nov, 2007

ⁱⁱ Cochrane, G. 'The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History' UniNSW Press, Sydney, 1992, p282

ⁱⁱⁱ Pocock, B. unpublished keynote address on current research at the *Centre for Life and Work*, Division of Education, Arts and Social Science 2007 Research Forum, Magill campus UniSA Aug 11, 2007.