

# LANGUAGE OF CRAFT

April 4 to July 4, 2015

FEATURE GALLERY,  
ALBERTA CRAFT COUNCIL, EDMONTON, AB

REVIEWED BY VIRGINIA STEPHEN

OCCASIONS SUCH AS the Canadian Crafts Federation designation of this as Craft Year 2015 are not only times for celebrations, festivals and exhibitions aimed at promoting craft as a key player in Canadian Culture, they also present a space for personal and collective reflection on our practices and influences. *Language of Craft* is a Craft Year 2015 open call project of the Alberta Craft Council and its intent is to do just that. The call for entries sought combined submissions of works and artist-contributed writing. It posed some enticing questions:

"Is 'craft' a dreaded five letter word? Or is it a positive time-honoured description of the creativity, skill and dedication required to make marvelous objects? ... How do you describe or write about your work? Is your work influenced by William Morris, punk rock lyrics, feminist theory or Zen meditation? ... Do you have urgent opinions about the literature and language of craft? Or would you simply like to write about what 'craft' means to you?"

With the work of 27 artists from across Western Canada and their 27 written pieces that ranged in length from a couple of paragraphs to a page or more, there was a lot to absorb in this exhibition. The selection team's challenge was to make choices from the entries which included both strong work and interesting writing. Because artists chose to write about a wide range of topics and their work was not addressing any particular issue or theme and did not need to be new work, the exhibition was seemingly unfocused. But there was some wonderful work and thoughtful reflection. A large number tackled the 'art/craft' debate, and others explored the history of 'craft' as a word and as a practice, including the influence of artists, scientists, writers, nature, science, material, and peers. Work ranged from millinery to jewellery to purses, quilts, a shawl, ceramic sculpture and functional pieces, wood, and mixed media pieces. It is impossible to look at each entrant so three have been chosen as exemplars.

Bart Simpson provides what could be the signature piece for the exhibition. His 3 ceramic 'tile' wall pieces, *art and craft 1, 2, and 3* were created especially for this show and extend his reflection that "Simply put, there is art in craft, and craft in art." In recent work he has been exploring the written ceramic word as a form of visual art. The work demonstrated how closely the language of art and the language of craft co-exist and how it shifts when function is the primary motivation or the purpose is communication.

Sonja Neven's exquisite *Silver Lining* drew together found materials such as detail pieces from an old chair, fine metals and stones and found pieces of jewellery into an object that "is my representation of a most beautiful process in nature that reminds us that at the root: all is one, and salvation lies in the change and return of things". By using found pieces Neven worked with materials already loaded with meaning and moved them forward into a new context, a new conversation. Tucked behind the agate in the piece, was a scroll with a quote from Antoine de Lavoisier that she used in the written piece, "Nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything is transformed." This really is the essence common to whatever we might call art or craft.

Two new pieces by Larissa Blokhuis demonstrated that both construction and concept are important to her. In her writing she indicates that melding the craft and art and not putting more value on either element is important to her. Her comments talked about influences from the earth sciences to the music of Memphis Minnie. Blokhuis also talked about how makers have their own motivations and interpretations of their work but also that whoever sees it also has interpretations based on their own experience. *Terrene* and *Surfacing* were primarily flameworked glass and slab constructed ceramic, as well as some hand sculpted wool and epoxy. They were "imaginings of what the world will look like when it becomes as hot as in the past." The ceramic bases of the pieces are glazed in a finish that is at once both velvety and stone-like. The contrast of this materiality with that of the delicate glass flames emerging from the base makes a strong statement.

An exhibition of this type is probably one of the most challenging to pull off. For an organizer, curator and/or installation designer the questions become: how is the context for the exhibition framed so that the visitor can understand the intent of the collection of work and writing; how much text is appropriate for in-exhibition labels; how can labels be designed and placed so that they are readable by most people; how are text and objects balanced so that each are honoured; how best would the text be made available? This is an exhibition begging for a catalogue. The texts of the thought pieces are for the most part several paragraphs long and would be better accessed, read and considered in a print or even e-book publication rather than on the small type object labels that are placed at awkward heights and often ill lit. While I was in the exhibition space none of the other visitors read the texts and I could not read most of them and that was unfortunate. ■