

Endangered Crafts

Opening Night Speech - Craft, 26 April, 2012

Grace Cochrane, Senior curator from the Powerhouse Museum Sydney.



Ecology – that’s a word we usually associate with the well-being of an environment, specifically a natural environment. We tend to think of ecologies as things that are precious, worth defending, and worth nurturing because we know that their well-being and continuation is to our benefit and, in a world worrying about the effects of climate change, worth nurturing to the benefit of the future of the planet.

But we also extend the meaning of ecology to the well-being of any kind of environment where the parts are mutually dependent, and exist to mutual benefit. So in talking about an arts ecology, we understand it to mean the infrastructure made up of makers, writers, dealers, galleries, museums, co-operatives, suppliers, funding bodies, related industries and education institutions. A healthy arts ecology needs them all.

It also needs a healthy economy, and what makes a healthy economy is a matter of debate. Is the link between ecology and economy always a good one? Or can there be elements of destruction as well as benefit, in favour of special interests – large or small?

And where does someone like Jasmine Targett, who started as a painter, and then moved towards working with glass in her honours year and is now completing her PhD, find her place in the art world talking about ecologies – in particular crumbling ecologies?

This isn’t the first work she has made along these lines. Last year she showed works on the theme of Life Support Systems, in an exhibition called Making Sense. Here, she used dichroic glass originally developed for NASA space suit helmets to examine what was described as alarming data about environmental issues to do with ozone layers, atmospheric conditions and greenhouse gases. These were then shown in Taipei in February. Professor John Gregory, in his essay Making Sense: from the Sublime to the Meticulous, discussed how these pieces presented ‘complex, disturbing data in lucid, evocative, even surprisingly beautiful form.’

But what have geraniums got to do with this? These ordinary, common pot-plants; this familiar, domestic tough and hardy perennial? It turns out, in terms of ecologies, that while in some places of the world particular geranium species are endangered, in others, including some parts of Australia, it runs rampant though indigenous plant habitats and is in the Alert List for Environmental Weeds! Is it plant or weed? Is it friend or foe? How do we place value on it? Is it old-fashioned and out of date in the garden popularity stakes? Or is it still keenly sought-after? What is its place in our environmental ecology?

Here, in Crumbling Ecology, the geranium is recreated as a mass on the floor, of beautiful porcelain shells cast from the originals, which have been sacrificed in the process of making. Do we walk around them, or trample on them? Do we covet them or destroy them? What does that say about us, either way?

At the same time, cuttings that weren't used after the leaves were detached, appear here in Beauty of weeds, as new plants, propagated in Jasmine's garden. The unusually bright red of the flowers is significant: this strain was developed by a local nursery and is noticeable in many gardens in her suburb. But however 'new' these plants might be, they are now planted in bell-jar containers whose usual purpose is to cover precious museum objects and relics. Blown by Jasmine, with colleagues Laurel, Tegan and Kirstin, these jars nurture something new, while being embedded in well-worn work benches which have been discarded from her university's defunct ceramics studio. This whole project, in fact, was made on these benches.

And the wall-mounted Weather barometer – this is a real measure for the rate of decline for certain species according to a scientific scale from those of Least Concern, at one end, to Extinct, at the other. Where does the geranium feature here?

This is all very interesting and insightful. But it is not the only story here, of either ecology or economy. In fact, as you have no doubt realised already, the entire exhibition is a metaphor for the Crumbling Ecology of professional crafts education courses in Victoria – and indeed, in many other places. Particular reference has been made to the closure, or threat of closure, in many institutions, of full specialist courses in the crafts. At Monash University for example, ceramics and textiles have closed, while glass and jewellery (along with other art media areas) are offered within broad undergraduate BFA or BVA courses, with the opportunity of some specialisation there, as well as, in Jasmine's case, in later postgraduate study.

There is such shared concern for the further decline in serious education of skill, knowledge and history of these fields of work, and its effect on the future, that Jasmine's search for others to attend workshops and make geranium leaves to demonstrate their concern about this direction in education, met with an extraordinary response. Around 100 teachers, students and others who were enthusiastic about the opportunity to comment in this way, from Victoria and other states, have contributed to this installation over many months; many of them returning to make pieces and to talk about issues. Meanwhile, important parts of the ecology in the form of sponsors such as the City of Melbourne through an Arts Projects grant, Clayworks (through contributing porcelain clay) and Northcote Pottery (through contributing kiln-firing facilities) have supported the project and the exhibition.

Are the crafts endangered? Is the ecology of the crafts under threat? Is the education ecology diminished? What are the factors – economic, social and cultural – that contribute to a changing ecology in this field? Is it just to do with government funding systems of universities? Is it to do with the marketplace? Is it to do with our perceptions of vocational and personal aspirations, and the choices students make? And, moreover, how much can we influence the ecology in which all these issues exist, if we care about them?

Returning to the question of metaphor, and considering the educational questions in relation to each of these works, we could again ask of:

-Crumbling ecology: Do we trample on it and crush it, or carefully walk around it, or preserve important parts of it, as with these leaves?

-Weather barometer: The crafts are identified here as 'critically endangered'. How do we measure the rate of change, and how do we place a value on it? What do we do then?

-Beauty of weeds: Can we grow something new in the crafts from the experiences of the past? How? Whatever will that be?

And will we still have the traditional skills to put together with new technologies to express ideas about a future, of crafts practice within art, design and industry, that might be based on the best of the past and present? In short, how do we maintain an exciting and sustainable crafts education ecology?

This work is provocative, topical and inspirational – congratulations to you Jasmine, and to all the people who have worked with you on this project.