

Pieces made for life in the slow lane

Make It Slow

Woodend Gallery, Scarborough YO11
15 November 2013 – 31 January 2014

Reviewed by Helen Cobby

Suspended bead-embroidered forms, willow sculptures, porcelain pieces and clusters of ceramic vessels are creatively displayed at Woodend Gallery, the first venue to host this touring exhibition (developed by Chrysalis Arts). On display are new eclectic works by some of the UK's top makers, among them Chris Keenan, Lizzie Farey and Aimee Betts.

Despite the apparently leisurely connotations of the word slow, *Make It Slow* is an ambitious attempt to introduce new audiences to contemporary art with unusual and progressive crafts. Curator Grace Whowell hopes it will 'highlight the processes of how the artists engage with their crafts in the modern world'. In such a context, slow represents a state of mind, a counterbalance to a contemporary culture dictated by speed, machines and low-quality materialism. 'Slow' is about being mindful of what you do and why. It's a philosophy the exhibition conveys, too, as long as you take the time to appreciate the intricate, unassuming details, unhurriedly working things out. It delights the viewer by making demands.

Different ideas of slow are explored by each artist, although all use familiar materials, drawing upon such traditional techniques as sewing or weaving. If this brings renewed vigour to contemporary crafts, it's because the focus is on the sustainability of the making processes, rather than the originality of the content. There are no illusions or shortcuts, but honest hand-made histories. This is clearly conveyed in Fenella Elms's hand-crafted porcelain wall sculptures and three-dimensional vessels, which layer countless, small individual discs to produce vast scale-like surfaces and undulating visceral forms. Precise pastel-coloured patterning emphasises line, with tone and texture adding tangible intrigue to the painstaking beauty of her work.

Aesthetically inviting in their delicate simplicity, Aimee Betts's embroidered panels, *White Work*, visualise harmonious relations between traditional and modern sewing techniques. Each panel is made using a different method relying on



White Flow (detail),
Fenella Elms

machine or hand-embroidery, casting the relationship between maker and technology in a thoughtful light. Betts's work certainly encourages us to acknowledge the various routes of craft's evolution, and how it has become increasingly flexible in its approaches.

The most striking theme in the show is repetition, in both process and artistic results. As Whowell stresses, it is inherent within craft, and is about 'connecting with processes and getting them right'. Consider Lizzie Farey, whose repetitive practice while making her willow sculptures elaborates on meditation. The sculptures are built on strict grid-like structures, from which different types of willow are painstakingly twisted into kinetic, circular shapes, suggestive emotional spaces both infinite and enclosed. This duality continues: many of her sculptures have either the qualities of pathos or of mirth, as the close proximity of *Mad Hair Bowl* and *When I Think of You* emphasises. The use of sustainable materials – Farey grows and harvests them herself – adds to the integrity: she is plainly a craftswoman immersed in her materials and conscious of her responsibilities as a maker.

With Chris Keenan's serial ceramic

pots and cups, familiar, domestic forms are repeated with delicate outlines, suggesting a constant curiosity for perfect formal refinements as well as interest in and admiration for the everyday. In *un-hinged and a-bashed*, this is playfully explored, with black and white coloured glazing alternately used inside and outside the vessels, creating something like an optical illusion based upon replication with differences. Keenan seems to have an inherent understanding of what we use and why: these are functional objects of conceptual stance, bringing a permanence and resonance to contemporary ceramics.

The curatorial decision to intersperse works by different artists with one another throughout allows for stimulating juxtapositions of techniques, uncovering unusual relations between practices as well as a rich, vibrant variety of colours and textures. The integrity and diversity on show is a joyful achievement, as well as a challenge: how should we relate to contemporary craft and consumer culture? (*'Make it Slow'* tours Yorkshire and Lancaster until October 2014. For details, see *Crafts Guide*.) Helen Cobby is an MA Art History Student at UCL and a freelance writer