

The Unmistakable Touch of the Hand

CONCEPTUALIST TRENDS PREVAIL, BUT FOR SOME CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS, PRIDE IN CRAFTSMANSHIP ENDURES. BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ



Prehistoric hunters' cave paintings. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. Picasso's found-object sculptures. The complex drawings on paper that

self-taught Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930) produced in the isolation of a psychiatric hospital. These and countless other examples of the creations we call “art” are indelibly marked by their makers' magical transformations of their raw materials—stone, pigment, scrap metal, pencil and paper—into enduring expressions of the

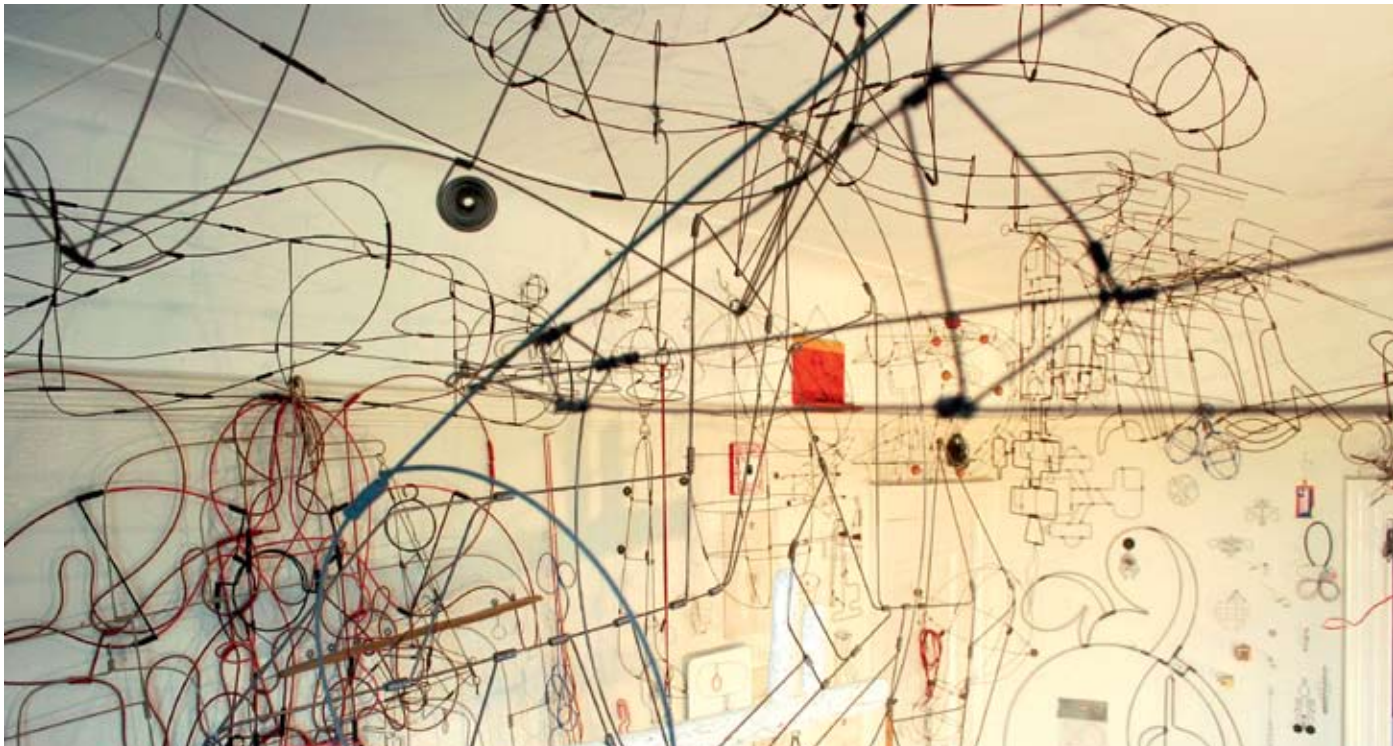
human spirit that interpret the world or make the imaginary tangible. A vital aspect of the best works of art has always been their craftsmanship: how capably artists handled their materials and the techniques they used to transform them into images or objects of beauty and delight.

All that changed nearly a century ago when Marcel Duchamp displayed an industrially manufactured urinal, a metal bottle-drying rack and a snow shovel, which he dubbed “readymades,” as works of art. His bold gesture declared that these objects were works of art because he, the artist, said so. It also called attention to the decision-making role viewers played in determining what was or was not “art.”

Raising the value of ideas in art at the expense of concerns about technical skill or even authorship, Duchamp's thinking gave birth to the idea-driven, conceptualist mode of art-making that is still going strong today. Combine it, in the United States, at least, with the strict division academics and art-market pros have long maintained between “fine art” and “craft,” and for artists whose technical proficiency is a key part of what they make, earning critical recognition within the art world's limited aesthetic parameters becomes a real challenge.

Is there—or should there be—a place for the unabashed display and guilt-free savoring of fine craftsmanship in contemporary art? Brooklyn-based Rodger Stevens, an artist who uses wire to “draw” in three dimensions, making abstract and semi-abstract pieces with all the whimsy of Alexander Calder's most memorable sculptures, says, “For me, the magic in a work of art comes from the fact that one person, like an alchemist, with his own hands and mind, creates something out of nothing.” Stevens often makes sculptures that are narrative or interpretive. They refer, that is, to subjects in the real world. “I love Richard Serra's arrangements of massive sheets of steel, even though he doesn't make them himself; they're fabricated,” Stevens notes. “But it definitely raises my estimation of a work when I know it was made by hand.”

The silent beauty of ritual objects comes to life in Donna Sharrett's “Faded Memory” (detail), 2003, mixed media.



Sculptures made of wire and assorted found materials adorn the studio of Rodger Stevens.



For Donna Sharrett, whose mixed-media works combine lace-like stitching, dried flower petals, encaustic and complex patterns reminiscent of medieval churches' stained-glass windows, craftsmanship is a "deliberate, thoughtful, knowledgeable use of technique" that does not necessarily refer to what is handmade. She notes, for instance, that new-media artists using sophisticated computer programs can also bring a sense of craftsmanship to their work. (Her own artwork seeks elegant, eloquent forms in which to memorialize deceased loved ones, but without any hint of morbidity.)

Sharrett explains that the ritualistic, meditative aspects of her labor-intensive handiwork are deeply satisfying. On the one hand, she believes craftsmanship need not call attention to itself. "An artist's technique should be seamless in a viewer's initial comprehension of a work," she says. On the other hand, "poor craftsmanship usually overshadows all other aspects of a work."

"Poetics of the Handmade," an exhibition presented by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles this past spring

and summer, focused on the labor-intensive, craft-oriented creations of several contemporary Latin-American artists. Alma Ruiz, the MOCA curator who organized it, notes that in many Latin-American cultures, excellent craftsmanship has long been a well-integrated characteristic of fine art. For the show, though, she purposely eschewed art forms whose materials were more conventionally associated with craft (such as ceramics made of clay). Instead, Ruiz examined the varieties of craftsmanship certain artists are bringing to industrially made materials.

Among her discoveries: Chilean artist Magdalena Atria's monumental "Smiling Desperately I" (2004), a giant, seemingly ever-expanding ball made of toothpicks and paste; Mexican artist Eduardo Abaroa's "Silly Labyrinth" (2001), a randomly shaped jumble of plastic drinking straws; and the Guatemalan Darío Escobar's everyday, "secular" objects, like skateboards and baseball bats, that he makes "sacred" by covering them in richly embossed sheets of metal. His technique evokes the over-the-top decorative-art styles of the 17th-century Spanish-baroque era in his homeland.

"These artists are proud of the quality of their craftsmanship," Ruiz says. "In their work, there is also a concern with creating something that is beautiful." Ruiz knows that highlighting that aspect of this art may be seen as a daring move. That's because, in addition to demoting the inherent value of the handmade, today's prevailing post-modernist critical thinking, which asserts that the meaning or value of anything depends on the shifting contexts in which it is perceived, considers "beauty" a mere "construction." It argues that social, cultural, economic and other factors determine what is "beautiful" at any given time. Nothing is fixed or constant. Thus, craftsmanship's value is disputable, too.

However, for David Revere McFadden, chief curator at the Museum of Arts & Design (formerly the American Craft Museum) in New York, craftsmanship is an enduring quality that does help shape the best artistic works. It is, he says, "an attitude toward one's creative work" that affects an artist's "engagement" with his or her materials. McFadden points out that craftsmanship "is ultimately about the ability to effect this transformation" of raw materials "with the goal of communicating visual, social, cultural, political, spiritual or emotional meaning."


Postmodernist and conceptualist attitudes and trends may still dominate the art establishment, but the sun has not set on the value and pleasure—to artist and viewer alike—that good craftsmanship in art can bring. From his vantage point as someone who sees hundreds of artists' new and recent creations each year, McFadden observes, "I think the tendency to privilege concept over execution is history. Artists are once again making things—and the making is once again a part of the meaning of things. This is why traditional handicraft practices—knitting, embroidery, joinery, glassblowing, weaving—are once again central to the practices of making contemporary art."

Thus, in the best works of "fine art" or "craft," craftsmanship, which might also be described as the recognizable touch of the artist's hand, may not be something incidental, but perhaps it may be more of



Dario Escobar, "Composition of Bats," 2002, embossed silver on wood.

an essential, even defining quality. Stevens says he sees his students at New York's Parsons School of Design, where he teaches a course in design-and-materials fundamentals for illustrators, come to this realization on their own. "It's exciting to watch, since they all do so much of their work on computers," he says. "They start getting their hands dirty and seeing how

well they can make something with their own hands—and they love it." 

New York correspondent Edward M. Gomez is writing a book of essays on outside-the-mainstream and "post-postmodernist" art. He is a co-author of THE ART OF ADOLF WÖLFELI: ST. ADOLF—GIANT—CREATION.