

"TRUTH  
AND  
CONSEQUENCES"

# DOMESTIC

**Like pre raphaelite Brotherhood**

by Charlotte Cosson & Emmanuelle Luciani

## CERAMICS AND TAPESTRY: APPEARANCE IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

Prehistory witnessed the appearance of weaving and pottery. A tale on the origins of tapestry tells of how the hunter-gatherers of the Paleolithic were supposedly inspired by birds' nests to braid hangings from found materials to warm the walls of their caves. The architect and critic Gottfried Semper simultaneously dates the appearance of knots and of architecture. Hypotheses or theories, these tales nonetheless allow the affirmation that the braiding of wool and the molding of clay cannot be separated from the domestic sphere in which they were invented.

## AN ART OF HUMAN SCALE

Individually – in the likes of those numerous *cultural creatives* who unconsciously transform society –<sup>1</sup> Caroline Achaintre, Victoria Colemegna, Liz Craft, Dewar & Gicquel, Andrew Humke, Bella Hunt & DDC, Giorgio Morandi, Robert Rush, Tiziana la Melia, We Are The Painters and Betty Woodman; each connect with this traditional History of domesticity. These artists produce works whose very nature causes them to blend into the interiors that welcome them. Far from an apology of the machine, or even from a certain gigantism typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and of post-duchampian sculptures, these works are placed at the scale of Man. Opposite the trend initiated by Adolf Loos<sup>2</sup> and theorized by Clement Greenberg<sup>3</sup>, these works consciously assume their strong links to decorative and minor arts. For some of their creators, such as Betty Woodman, Liz Craft and Caroline Achaintre, this quality makes them works that make a commitment to minorities. Betty Woodman (born in 1930) was, with her ceramics often associated with oil paintings, one of the pillars of "Pattern and Decoration". This movement born on the American West Coast chose tapestry as its medium of choice, which, besides bearing abstract motifs before the advent of abstraction in Modernism, was the sole prerogative of women and non-Western civilizations. "Pattern and Decoration" cultivated privileged ties to folk art and kitsch, as evidenced by the works collected in DOMESTIC, of which the ramifications in the vernacular and the rustic are difficult to deny.

## ARTISANSHIP & VERNACULAR

DOMESTIC in no way presents any works that flirt with design; and in no way wishes a leveling of art and industrial furniture. On the contrary, the ceramics, tables or tapestries exhibited here were produced by the artists themselves.<sup>4</sup> Dewar & Gicquel built their own wood oven to bake their pieces, Robert Rush travelled to the oldest pottery of the South – RAVEL – to perfect his art by learning ancestral techniques at our residency program, Caroline Achaintre wove her canvas-tapestries by foregoing the use of a loom, Bella Hunt & DDC added natural pigments to an experimental mixture of lime to create *a fresco* works in the Provencal countryside. These artists thus refer to the artisanal. By using techniques thousands of years old while championing the handmade, they tie themselves into

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<sup>1</sup> Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*, New York, Harmony Books, 2000

<sup>2</sup> Loos, Adolf, *Ornement et Crime*, 1909

<sup>3</sup> Greenberg, Clement, « Avant-Garde and Kitsch », *Partisan Review*, 1939

<sup>4</sup> Most of the works in DOMESTIC were produced for the show, often with us in SOUTH STUDIO, a production studio located in the South of France.

a global history of humanity that predates the technological race. By showing the marks of production, vulgarized during the 1960's while referencing the classical Renaissance, which masked labor by erasing brush strokes, they oppose the "death of the author"<sup>5</sup>. The artists shown here, however, do not assume the role of demiurge that might be associated with the "touch". They refer to the Middle Ages and Antiquity, times when artists were often not credited for their work and Minerva was both goddess of the arts and patron of the artisans. The attitude of these artists towards the materials offered by the earth, the know-how of the artisans and environmentally respectful modes of production is full of humility.

## HUMILITY

In Japan, Yanagi Sōetsu theorized this humble attitude close to artisanship in the 1920's. The instigator of the Mingei movement is part of a different history than that of porcelain. Sōetsu prefers creations that are more spontaneous, riskier and rougher. These are produced in the few country ovens loyal to the tradition of a lore imported from Korea more than three centuries before during the "war of the ceramics". However, this philosophy born in the Land of the rising Sun was unconsciously developing the thought of an often forgotten line of artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that started with the Troubadours and the Nazarenes, flourished with the Pre-Raphaelites and which was crowned by the Nabis and Arts & Craft movements. In Germany, Italy, England and France, these artists opposed the progress of post-revolutionary History through works that were spiritual, often Christian and inspired by the frescoes of the Italian Primitives; in a nutshell, against the grain. Soft colors, low-angled lights and ancestral ideals inhabit their canvases, tapestries, stained glass and everyday objects.

## MEDIEVAL & QUEST FOR A PARADISE LOST

These artists refer to the Middle Ages, a time, which, according to them, reflects moral and spiritual values superior to those of industrialized society and that definitely took hold in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For the Troubadours, the Nazarenes and the Pre-Raphaelites – amongst whom William Morris initiated his movement between *arts* and *crafts* – the Medieval represents a paradise lost in a society where the machine replaces and alienates Man. Referring to the Italian Primitives amounts to a refusal of a centered, single point of view linked to mathematical perspective and corresponding to the individualism of the Modern era. Artisanship thus becomes the remedy to the sclerosis of knowledge and morals. Like proponents of the Symbolist movement dominating the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these artists object a categorical refusal of their progress-hungry times, of uniformization, of egocentrism and of accumulation.<sup>6</sup> The Medieval and regional particularisms express, from this moment, the values of authenticity and sincerity they longed for.

## MACHINE vs AUTOMISATION

The opponents of such movements, turned towards the past, would underline that the search for a lost paradise was only but a chimera. They would also recall the technical quality of ceramic and tapestry; the adequate mix of clay, the skillfully calculated drying time, the construction of an oven and extremely precise baking process on the one hand, the setting up of a loom, sometimes an extremely complex device, on the other hand. The works of Dewar & Gicquel in which objects of the day-to-day accumulate emphasize the fact that pottery allowed for the induction of the serial – and thus fostered the division of tasks typical of capitalism – as artisans could then indefinitely reproduce the same shapes.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore the

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<sup>5</sup> Barthes, Roland, « The Death of the Author », Aspen Magazine, n° 5/6, 1967

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that in Japan, art and more particularly the tea ceremony – a form of artistic entertainment where ceramic is queen – is considered as an evasion from time and the banality of the everyday.

<sup>7</sup> This is the fundamental difference between art and artisanship ; where the artisan must perfectly repeat an inherited form, the artist is always practising experimentation in order to transcend it.

automation of the machine, by replacing the fusion of the artisan with their loom, instead of the machine itself, which represents the essential issue of the industrial era for artists and artisans opposing human alienation.

## EXTRACTING ONESELF FROM THE CAPITALS

By associating themselves with traditional artisanship, contemporary artists seem to avoid the pitfall of automation as that of the apology of a world without machines. Tools are of course always necessary to production. This observation is of self-evident simplicity, as if originating from rustic lore. These values seem to be embedded in the humble still lifes of Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964). They could even be the missing link, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between the creations of the Pre-Raphaelites and contemporary practices utilizing secular mediums such as ceramic, bronze or tapestry.<sup>8</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites referenced the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento when the rustic mass of figures such as those of Giotto or Piero della Francesca bathed in a light of divine softness. A similar light illuminates the canvases of Morandi, who lived as a hermit in the Italian countryside. Allow us to affirm that such traits – simplicity, rusticity, soft and low-angled clarity – may be recognized, in the History of Art, within the practices developed outside of financial capitals<sup>9</sup>, which have always enjoyed a strong connection to the South of Europe and the Mediterranean North-West in particular.

## FRATERNITIES

A fringe of contemporary art – by utilizing these secular practices, all the while turned towards the Middle Ages and replaying the codes (colors, communities...) of 19<sup>th</sup> century *reactionaries* – is renewing with this lineage of artists and thinkers who never accepted their contemporaneity and the race of blind progress. In their wake, they look to primary motifs and techniques – and thus to the very roots of humanity. Andrew Humke paints primitive shapes, originating in a rudimentary architecture. His works call for one to reflect on an atomist world constructed according to a common denominator. This monist thought always seems to reappear in philosophy at times of a fear of the extinction of societies and, therefore, of withdrawal. But how is one to comprehend that this humanist philosophy would be associated with withdrawal?

Fraternities always appear in art during such key times. Like the Nazarenes or the Pre-Raphaelites, Bella Hunt & DDC produce in the countryside surrounded by other artists, Victoria Colmegna mimics the furniture of a sorority next to where she lives, We Are The Painters erases the patronym of each individual behind a generic identity, Robert Rush transformed a London home into an artists' residency where he lives together with other ceramists and their animals... These collectives each renew with traditions with the purpose of contemplating a new future; their communities, far from being exclusive, aim at including more and more members. Thus, this generation born in a crisis – but wishing to transcend it through a movement one might venture to qualify as oracular/vernacular – proposes not to follow the Western individuality born in the Renaissance, but rather to recall Medieval momentum. Was it not during this time that masterpieces – named cathedrals – were built communally, without authorship, by Men who had little chances of witnessing such an *opus* completed? Notwithstanding that era's issues, let us praise, like the artists exhibited in this show, the beauty of this moment of social coalition for the purpose of a common future.

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<sup>8</sup> Let us not forget the artists of the *Arte Povera* movement who created madonnas, gisants and crucifixes in the 1980's.

<sup>9</sup> Or by artists who developed an idealized notion of peasantry from these same capitals.