

INTRODUCTION: METALCRAFT
Western Gallery, January 12-March 7, 1998

While adhering to the formal aspects of objectmaking, the best artists have always valued concept and vision along with material, labor and craft. During the late sixties and early seventies, artists began to strengthen anew those inquiries which investigate and interpret other nonart experiences. Today, in a society oriented to the processing of information, artists have few barriers to the past and present survey of artistic and human experiences across cultures. The best works proclaim a relationship to this larger cultural context.

In contemporary art, context is crucial not only in the understanding of the layered meanings of individual works but also to the framing of propositions: for example, the integration of the arts of metalwork. Some have already discarded the problem after seeing successful groupings of both decorative objects, sculpture and painting in exhibitions focusing on a central theme or period. Some see no difference between the critical analyses and articles on methods of working in Sculpture Magazine or American Craft, while others carefully choose the placement of their work in magazines and exhibitions.

There should be no surprise, then, that the exhibition METALCRAFT sets up certain expectations about shaping things out of metal. At the simplest level, it might be an exhibition of clever artists who engage in skillful planning in a specific medium. However, these ten Northwest artists unlatch the modernist dictum about respect for the inherent nature of a specific material and appropriateness of innovative form in relation to metallic substance. Furthermore, they move around treasured categories, open up modes of presentation, subvert our beloved machine age aesthetics, and reveal the complexities of contemporary life.

Throughout the early decades of the modernist era there were more innovative developments than the rule of truth to materials. One was the opening of solid mass through linear constructions. A second was the assemblage of materials heretofore unsculptural and/or a construction of radically diverse materials. Several artists today, such as Cris Bruch, Claudia Fitch, and Gail Simpson do not deny the fluidity of metal in space. The open metal lines of Simpson's and Fitch's sculptures also bear the marks of the welding process itself. But the drama of Simpson's works actually lies in the choice of placement on and off the pedestal and in the varying ways the metal demarcates illusionistic shapes which evoke telling postures. As Bruch draws, he literally and ironically breaks down repetitive processes, such as his shopping cart's accumulated parts on the floor. In his cityscape, an undercurrent of humor pervades his airy drawing consisting of steel bands from commercial packing. Vicki Scuri extends the scale of metal drawings in her architectural rendering, Dreamy Draw. The projection on the gallery wall refers to the real bridge in Arizona; the title of both versions of the drawing/bridge point to the meshing of private life

and public utility.

In METALCRAFT remnants of industrial products share space with refined objects. While several artists use general forms from a decorative category, such as jewelry, clothes, objects for the table, garden art, and architecture, they infuse these furnishings with types of narration. For example, precious metals have long been associated with jewelry. In her work Kiff Slemmons shifts the goal of jewelry making from the setting of gems in precious metals to the telling of brilliant narratives. Integral to her jewelry are a wide range of historical and personal references, symbols of the idea of the rule, and even, for instance, the "metal" of commercial printing. While her jewelry adorns the body, it is sculpture to wear and to handle, often contextualized by Rod Slemmons' photographs. In fact, Pamela Gazale's finely crafted sculptures are often based on the shapes of clothes. In Remede Contre la Nostalgie she commingles the process of encrustation with the dress form/hourglass figure to comment on our attitudes about passage and preservation. While Simpson creates disembodied sculptures referring to the social construction of the body and its identity, Fitch brings together a psychological theater of eccentric silhouettes among a scenographic montage of landscape and architecture.

Sheila Klein's work here is a conflation of drawing in metal, accentuated body parts, and utilitarian design. In her metal eyelashes, either as racks or benches, Klein reinterprets the glamour of the machine age. Similar to Klein, Peter Reiquam and Kurt Kiefer are interested in the overlap of art and functional design. However, they undermine the streamlined aesthetics of the machine age. Between the representational image of his motorcycle and the utility of his rocket lamp, Reiquam slyly confuses the viewer with different degrees of reality and about the necessary degrees of technology. Even surpassing high technology, Kiefer has created a series of sculptures which are rainmaking devices as well as "Tools for Creating Weather in the Kitchen." Kiefer's work combines decorative tableware with a hint of Duchamp's "engineered products" as well as Northwest ingenuity. Similar to Bruch, Ingrid Lahti focuses on our post-industrial age; she calls attention to our present operative mode of recycling both manufactured parts and nature itself. In her large scale installations she crafts together an odd mixture of industrial and natural products such as galvanized aluminum studs and river rock.

In her selection of artists Carole Fuller, dba FUEL Gallery, has given us elegance and wit, hard work and intelligence. In the catalogue essay, the poet and critic Robert Mittenenthal has provided a different perspective on METALCRAFT and has elucidated what he sees in each artist's work. Each of the artists has generously agreed to also make a statement about his/her work. The Western Gallery is pleased to organize this exhibition and to share these artists' works with other regional institutions.

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