

Thickening the Edge: Contemporary Holloware in an Age of Pluralism

Lisa Gralnick

Throughout history, the vessel has remained a potent and viable metaphor. At its most basic, it is a form that both occupies space and contains it, a dialogue that occurs somewhere between the lower base and the upper rim, a vectorial indicator that digs deep roots into the earth and moves upward into spatial accessibility. The force and velocity with which that movement occurs depends on the very specific relationship among the occupied space, contained space, and the opening through which its constrained energy escapes. Thus, a vessel with a swollen belly and a narrow neck transmits a very different message than a wide-open one that does not return inward after reaching its maximum diameter. It is a form ripe with possibility, and as one that closely refers to our physical bodies, it has, in poetry and in art, become a symbol of our humanity.

It is impossible to talk about holloware of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries without saying something about the Industrial Revolution, which provided mass-produced consumer goods, and the development of photography, to which we owe the utter bombardment of our societal landscape with images. The advent of digital technology has allowed both immediate access to images through the Internet and the emergence of a new class of objects produced with computer-assisted design technologies that create quick and subtle variations in product design. Hand-crafted functional objects can no longer be experienced on their own terms, and any interaction with a crafted vessel must be seen in light of the mass-produced norm from which it deviates, as Bernard Cache points out in *Earth Moves*, his brilliant analysis of the architectural image:

Functionalism presupposes a certain kind of structuralism. For objects exist only inasmuch as there exists a sort of contract about their use or production. In the days of craftsmanship, the traditional object was overlain with a whole set of customs and usages that were the true source of objectivity, even if some objects only had the

status of tertiary images: frame objects, fetishes or symbols. These images did not exist in virtue of the contract; they were the very representation of it. In fact, an entire side of traditional culture only served as a reminder of the contract that was at the origin of the object.¹

Cache's point cannot be overlooked when discussing contemporary holloware. It should also be taken into account when artists speak of "giving pleasure of use" or "beauty of function," as they often do in their statements in this *Exhibition in Print*. These statements betray the reactionary nature of many of the works being exhibited, which are not premised on the same structural contract of those produced prior to the Industrial Revolution, but rather on a contract that includes image and its accompanying history—one that completely exorcises the Bauhaus and the early modernist agenda. Such third-generation objects hold on dearly to the notion of functionalism for a kind of cultural "legality" while snubbing prudence, economy, and the purity of formalism in favor of image, decoration, and personal expression.

During the last two decades, the central debate within craft criticism has been whether craft should return to its utilitarian and domestic roots and stop trying to be "art," or whether it has reached a point where it is dealing with the same issues as the fine arts minus recognition from the art-world establishment. Arguments against craft as art have centered on early, uninspired examples of modernist sculpture by craft practitioners.² Both the traditionalists and the reactionaries have pointed to the intimate physical bond between man and his craft.³ Finally, there are those who do not accept this duality, insisting on a correlation in both theory and process among concurrent works in crafts, fine arts, and music.⁴ All of these approaches fall short of explaining the vast diversity of objects being produced under the umbrella of crafts.

Mine is a theory that attempts to heal the rift of duality and express the relationship of craft and art as one that is in keeping with the generally pluralistic nature of our times, and one that does not hold the mercurial state of contemporary fine arts as a standard by which craft objects should be evaluated. The histories of art and craft are contingent but parallel and were born of a common source. They affected one another and occasionally merged, and are responsible, in varying degrees, for the success of the best work in both arenas. It is true that for some time craft has become a dirty word in fine arts circles, and, almost in retaliation, there have been rumblings that art should become a dirty word in the language of crafts. It has been suggested that we call ourselves metalsmiths or jewelers, rather than insisting that we are artists, since we cling to rigid parameters set by the history of our craft, and that requires its execution with a technical virtuosity honoring its tradition, referencing its functional roots and depending on physicality.

The history of art has always included works in craft media and it always will. The degree to which the craft objects produced at any given time conform to the theoretical agenda of the fine arts world is by no means the criteria with which these objects should be examined or

codified. If one wants to examine the current state of craft objects in the postmodern age, one must first attempt to understand modernism as a period in which craft underwent its own development. We can define modernism as "the term that has been used to describe the art and culture of the past hundred years,"⁵ or as "an independent cultural age comparable to Greco Roman Antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the Modern Age. A look at this chronology shows that these epochs successively diminish in length. Modernism, whose beginning [can be] date[d] around 1870, seems to be drawing to a close and is unlikely to survive into the twenty-first century."⁶ It is interesting that craft practitioners and theorists choose to define modernism in terms of the emergence of the theory of autonomy of the art object that, in my opinion, caused the fine arts to become a contingent art form, separating them from a history that very much included crafts. What is clear is that the Industrial Revolution coincided with and facilitated this split and that crafts entered into a period of modernist design that was very much distinguishable from modernism as it relates to the fine arts. The term "design" is itself a modern one. Rooted in the notion of a plan or preliminary drawing, it has taken on another meaning, which relates to objects produced after the Industrial Revolution in which that plan or model became the end of the creative process, and the making of objects was accomplished by a machine that reproduced it in quantity. From there the term entered into general usage, signifying problem solving at large, which included craft and where function was a necessary concern, even if the object was handmade. In spite of this larger and less specific definition, and to differentiate between the modernist theory of autonomy of the art object and the separate issues related to craft during the same era, I will use the designation "modernist design." The period to which I refer begins with a revolt against Victorian revivalism resulting in the late nineteenth century in a group of movements occurring in rapid succession across Europe and known as Art Nouveau. It included the English Arts and Crafts Movement, pioneered by William Morris, the French Art Nouveau, best exemplified in the works of Galle and Lalique, and the Austrian Wiener Werkstatte, as founded by Josef Hoffman. What these groups had in common was a secularism that broke with the past and a desire to find a unified design language that reacted to industrialization with a fervent belief in the handmade and a general distrust of the tired reworking of past decorative styles. Where the English Arts and Crafts Movement displayed an "enlightened traditionalism that focused on understated and sensible botanical motifs,"⁷ the French Art Nouveau favored lively floral stylization, flowing lines, nubile nymphs, and a detached sensuality. Shortly after, the Wiener Werkstatte introduced crisp angularity and modest geometric simplicity, leading the way into what would later become the bastion of modernist design, the Bauhaus.

The Bauhaus, founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius in Weimar and shut down in 1933 by the Nazis, was the last major movement to affect crafts. Although architecture played the leading role, it was a school that attempted to unify the visual arts under a single umbrella of formalism,

stressing clarity, functionality, and a true fusion of fine art, craft, architecture, and industry. College foundation programs all across America in the postwar period were based on the Bauhaus curriculum, and its influence is still present. It is my contention that modernist design and the Bauhaus are inseparable, but that crafts have slowly distanced themselves from the Bauhaus influence, as manifested by the production of craft objects that are only tangentially functional. It may be true that early attempts by craftsman to make sculpture were less than successful. However, craft has now undergone a long and gradual evolution in which functionality has slowly diminished, and if these works appear awkward in their relationship between content and a barely functioning functionality, we finally have enough distance to appreciate that discomfort as an innate quality of transition. By holding on to its utilitarian format, craft has bought itself some time to develop a new language for the postmodern age. As the fine arts world moves away from materialism, I believe craft will be the sole inheritor of the material arts. Some may want craft to return to its former place within everyday life, but I believe its future lies elsewhere. Although I hope and believe that there will always be functional potters and silversmiths and weavers, American craft has a different mission, unique to its particular time and place, on which it has been preparing to embark. There are signs that it may already have begun.

Although I hope and believe that there will always be functional potters and silversmiths and weavers, American craft has a different mission, unique to its particular time and place, on which it has been preparing to embark.

In an essay titled "Writing About Objects We Don't Understand,"⁸ Jonathan Meuli mentions a model put forth by the feminist theorist Griselda Pollock in her writing about the late nineteenth-century French avant-garde. In Pollock's model, the concept of originality is seen as contextualized, and each artist's work may be examined and understood in a relative light, free of any limitations placed on it by the canon of art history, to which it may or may not be granted entrance, and isolated from the grand theories of its own time, to which it may or may not adhere. She creates a clever triad of terms—*reference*, *deference*, and *difference*—that allow for a closed system in which to discuss objects whose classification in the larger historical system or analysis by prevalent theories may be neither appropriate nor effective. Since it is a model designed to discuss works that were out of the mainstream during a pivotal transition that included Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Cubism, and led to what we now see as Modern Art, it works equally well as an analytical tool for objects still very much in theoretical limbo.

Before applying this model, we must first attempt to establish the current climate in which works in craft media are being produced. The vast majority of works submitted and selected for this *Exhibition in Print* came from academically trained metalsmiths who are, in many cases, now doing the training at those same institutions. Since there is no other system in place to train metalsmiths and ensure the same level of proficiency (such as that of master-apprentice), it is safe to say then that the academic standard

represents the prevailing milieu from which works of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have emerged. Noting that most of these programs were founded by first- or second-generation modernists, including Alma Eikerman, Jack Prip, Kurt Matzdorf, Richard Thomas, and Hans Christensen, we can acknowledge the ever-present, though no longer prevailing, influence of modernist design. Artistic intent has replaced the formalist agenda, and a move away from function toward the autonomous art object has certainly occurred. New materials have begun to replace the old standbys, and the craftsman's way of working has been applied to materials formerly the domain of fine artists and industry. It is not uncommon today to find a metalsmith working in plastics, aluminum, flowers, paint, cut-up money, stone, cement, found objects, or photographs. These materials are manipulated by the craft-trained practitioner with the same precision and care devoted to traditional crafts materials, and the completed objects, which do not necessarily refer to craft history, nevertheless contain that history in the quality of the execution. While it is purported that American metals programs have become training grounds for sculptors, I do not see that this is the case. What I see is a rather confused and ambiguous field striving to move forward while holding on to that part of its past that is essential and irreplaceable. Such is the explanation for the diversity of approaches in this issue, and for the overcautious and

sometimes reactionary musings of those who fear crafts will become second-rate art. However, it is as counterproductive to examine these works outside the context of crafts evolution as it is to insist that craft remain craft. Craft is not listening, and it has undergone its own transformation quite apart from what painting and sculpture are up to. A closed and relative system of inquiry, in the manner of that put forth by Pollock, can perhaps best shed light on this odd assortment of art objects called contemporary holloware.

The most traditionally based works in the exhibition belong to James Curtis, the silversmith of Williamsburg, who is producing expert near-reproductions of early American holloware, and Valentin Yotkov, who creates raised, chased, and repousséd holloware in copper based on historical Bulgarian design motifs. For both of these practitioners, superb craft and total functionality are the guiding principles, and they faithfully honor the history of their craft. Their anachronistic works must be viewed in light of Bernard Cache's point about the handmade object in the postindustrial age, and as something other than contextual appropriation or mere museum-shop-style reproduction, which would not account for the exceptional integrity displayed in their execution. They can only be seen as *referring* to the current state of metalsmithing in a reactionary way, and as simply refusing to *defer* to the standards set by the academic community, which requires originality, intent, and some semblance of autonomy. They can be seen as authentic copies of the type that Borges

refers to in his brilliant short story "Louis Menard: Author of Don Quixote."⁹ In the story, the writer attempts to relive the life of Don Quixote in the late twentieth century and then rewrite the classic in his own words. In a typically clever Borgesian twist of irony, the new work and the original are presented side by side, so that the reader can examine their differences, which the writer asserts are vast. The two texts are identical, even though the climates in which they were produced were quite *different*. The new version assumes a second-generation status, and, in doing so, modifies the original and sheds light on the history to which that original belongs. In the case of the James Curtis works, it is our own history as American silversmiths that we are forced to confront, a history that included modest variations on English presentation silver of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One is understandably compelled to wonder whether this process of re-evaluation could not be accomplished simply by viewing the originals in museums. To this question I can only answer yes, it is so for the viewer; not so, on the other hand, for the maker. Perhaps it is the function of the reactionary spirit to achieve no more or less than the profound slowing down of the tides of progress, and for this we, as metalsmiths trying desperately not to lose touch with the craft that is masterfully exemplified by Curtis and Yotkov, should be grateful.

Early modernist design roots can be seen in most of the works in *Exhibition in Print* and, not surprisingly, are most apparent among the invited artists who represent an earlier generation of American smiths. However, since this issue is limited to living artists, many of the pioneers are not represented. Nonetheless, it is quite easy to see those roots in the functional holloware of Kurt Matzdorf, Fred Fenster, Chunggi Choo, Richard Mafong, Lois Etherington Betteridge, Bernard Bernstein, and John Marshall, as well as in Jack da Silva's elegantly sensual silver vessels, Charles Crowley's stunning retro teapots, and Billie Jean Theide's starkly architectural and foreboding vessels, which subtly and cleverly allude to the death of modernist design. One cannot but appreciate the modesty and altruism inherent in these objects that are designed to serve and embellish a lifestyle of peace and an ordered, dignified domesticity. Seen today, many of these works appear reactionary in their own right, refusing to *defer* to the tendency toward overconceptualization that has permeated the crafts, and remaining unerringly faithful to a craft agenda that values use and ceremony. In the case of Matzdorf, Bernstein, Mafong, and Fenster, liturgical and commemorative works have become part of their oeuvre, and one can see the influences of the postwar awakening to humanitarianism and individualism that came as a reaction against the painful legacy of Suprematism and the unified world order that had gone awry. In Kurt Matzdorf's recent *Hanukkah Lamp*, for example, quintessentially modernist in its streamlined form, economical spirit, and absolute functionality, the form is embellished with expertly modeled two-sided figures representing the history of Jewish martyrdom. The figures are rendered with a modest lack of sentimentality. This is a strength that has always belonged to Matzdorf's style, and he is able, as a result, to imbue his works with a sense of healing and reconciliation that is characteristic of

the best of the postwar modernists. In a slightly earlier work by Fred Fenster, the pewter *Star Kiddush Cup*, modernist design is coupled with the beginnings of an organic accessibility that renders the work devoid of the cool machine-age precision that often characterized modernism. I have always found this work to be luscious and startlingly elegant in its *reference* to a modified and more sensual geometry that typified the design of the 1950s through the early 1980s—a peerless example of a new type of liturgical object, one that sees religious ceremony as a fully integrated and private spiritual experience that became part of the new spirit of tolerance that dominated the mid- and late twentieth century.

The transition from modernism to postmodernism in crafts has been occasioned by an eclectic reworking of the decorative styles of the past without fully relinquishing the deeply ingrained formalist ideology. The resultant hybrids constitute a third of the works selected for this issue and are arguably the richest visually. We see in them the reappearance of highly textured, patterned, decorated surfaces, intensely colored enamels and paints, forms embellished with gemstones, mixed metals, and an overall sensibility that values beauty as "pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing."¹⁰ In this group I include Harlan Butt, Linda Darty, Sarah Perkins, Robert Stone, Susan Elizabeth Wood, June Schwarcz, Patricia Nelson, Albion Smith, Helen Shirk, Linda Threadgill, John Michael Route, Komelia Hongja Okim, and Catherine Grisez. There is surprising coherency in the parameters to which these diverse works adhere. In all cases, the artists have chosen the vessel format for works that are barely, ceremonially functional. These are decorative objects in the best sense of that word, capable of adorning and enhancing our daily lives, but certainly not intended for everyday use. For crafts, these works are evidence of the break with modernist design, and usher in the age of postmodernism with a lively pilfering of the past. They are not devoid of content; in most it figures prominently, such as in Okim's blend of modernist essentialism with the narrative form so indicative of Korean metalsmithing. But in all cases, content is subverted by a form that is intended to be seductive and appealing. A number of these artists, such as Shirk, Threadgill, Nelson, Okim, and even Schwarcz, have deep modernist roots that can be seen in earlier works, but the featured pieces exhibit a venture into a new arena of unrestrained stylistic flourish.

Patricia Nelson, whose work has always demonstrated *fin de siècle* eclecticism, here exhibits a work that is rich in *references* yet refreshingly original. In her lidded copper vessel *Kantharos Ammonoidea*, Nelson acknowledges her source, the two-handled Hellenic *kantharos* drinking vessel of the fifth century B.C.E., and then exaggerates its basic awkward functionality in an almost baroque form that is merely open wirework. In the lid, she sets an ammonite, or fossilized prehistoric creature, and adds elegantly Art Nouveau-inspired handles carved of butternut. From the ammonite she takes her decorative motif, the spiral, and history repeats itself before your very eyes. What the viewer is left with is an object that *defers* to the entire history of design but *refers* directly only to itself. It's a

brilliant trick—revivalism meets formalism—and it's a wonderful example of the type of object that postmodernism allows.

Equally rich in cross-pollination are the magnificent enameled vessels of Harlan Butt, who owes his largest debt to the mannered naturalism of Art Nouveau, complete with flowing stylized snakes, toads, dragonflies, flowers, and foliage, but who also uses forms from Chinese enameled vases and patterns that resemble those of the Arts and Crafts style. These incense burners are almost irresistibly seductive in their lush colors and velvety surfaces, even to the most hardened modernist (or postmodernist). They are tight, formal, and controlled, executed with a technical perfection worthy of Fabergé, and decorated with what could be called a reserved aristocratic tastefulness.

Helen Shirk's fully realized and expertly manipulated vessels and platters, replete with naturalistic and colorful graphic images in a crackle-glaze technique, *reference* graphics of the 1950s and 1960s. These works occasionally cross boundaries into the Surrealist style of the almost airbrushed look that we associate with Dali, Tanguy, and Magritte. As with Shirk's earlier works, there is a dry and aloof sophistication to her imagery—she remains one of the extraordinary stylists working in the field today. Richard Stone's sensual raised silver vessels with Damascus steel supports merge the arts of the silver and blacksmith with a profound Art Nouveau *reference* that expresses the innate fluidity of his materials. In fact, these works

This overview of the holloware *Exhibition in Print* can serve as a microcosm for the changing craft agenda. The diversity of approaches suggests a field that is healthily pluralistic and unashamedly searching for an identity.

reference earlier examples from the turn of the century in which glass was blown into a decorative metal armature and allowed to bulge out from the sides. Catherine Grisez's sensual monumental chased vessel forms are more form than function, closed hollow constructions engaging in inner-outer dialogues that surely reference works of the late antiquity. In most cases, the works of these craftspeople *refer* to both modernism and the history of the decorative arts, *defer* to important precedents, and *differ* significantly from them as they try to balance the often combative ménage à trois of formalism, content, and function.

Narrative work in American crafts became an important method of escaping the reins of modernism. It still *referred* to modernism only because the lessons of formalism could not be unlearned, but it chose instead to *defer* to the precedents of folk and outsider art at the same time that it took valuable cues from twentieth-century figurative sculpture. However, it *differed* drastically from both in that it attempted to bring specific personal thematic material into the crafts arena, which had very much been dominated by society's need for cultural homogeneity. I define narrative works quite broadly as those in which the artist's own voice can be heard clearly and without subterfuge, utilizing recognizable images that have direct corollaries in the real world of experience. There is certainly a history of narrative work in precious metals, from "The Court at Delhi on the Birthday of the Great Mogul Aureng-Zeb" of the infamous Dinglinger Brothers, done in the early

eighteenth century for the king of Saxony, to the tour de force miniatures of Fabergé. This new work however, has clearly distanced itself from the often trite opulence of these relics of imperialism and chosen a more modest, socially aware agenda that is in keeping with the postmodernist trend.

Narrative work plays a significant role in contemporary holloware, and among its practitioners I place that of Marilyn da Silva, Robin Kraft, Richard Mawdsley, Daniel Wroblewski, Suzanne Pugh, Robly Glover, and Andrew McDonald. Particularly disturbing are the works of Wroblewski. They call into question the uneasy marriage of the craft-decorative arts agenda to personal narrative. As his artist's statement indicates, these ornate vessels allude to his past career as a police diver, using titles such as *B/M/13* (Black, male, 13 years old?) and point to the anonymity of the recovered victims. The bases of the works contain a symbol that resembles a tooth, a reference to the methods by which these victims are identified. The unsettling and socially charged thematic material, however, is in stark contrast to these precious, meticulously executed and polished chalices, a dangerous methodology that has often plagued narrative work and results in discord between subject matter and form. Choosing a powerful and meaningful theme and then relying on the beauty and preciousness of a well-executed craft object to elevate that theme is not enough. The form must act as a transparency through which the narrative can unfold, allowing content

to make a convincing argument.

In the best of the narrative pieces, the form presented can engage the viewer in content without the aid of an artist's statement, and in this group I place da Silva, Kraft, and Mawdsley. Mawdsley has long been the ultimate practitioner of a miniaturistic style and here he doesn't disappoint—his work is awe-inspiring in its detail and complexity. Da Silva's lyrical and sensitive work, not really holloware yet still more craft than contemporary sculpture, sets up a tableau in which the viewer is invited to participate. It is undeniably captivating in its carefully chosen and beautifully rendered symbolic imagery. Kraft, on the other hand, creates a narrative within the vessel format, choosing postindustrial motifs, such as coffee mugs or metal silos that she uses in repetition. These are charming works rich in decorative textural effects that make late modernist *reference* (it is a sign of the times that we are now sentimentalizing industrialization). Their allure lies in their familiarity and lightheartedness.

In the history of Western art, many artists have looked to Asian art for inspiration. In an age of pluralism, there has been renewed interest in the blending of Eastern and Western thought. Bernard Cache offers interesting observations on the fundamental differences between the two:

The first architectural gesture is acted upon the earth: it is our grave or our foundation. A plane against a surface of variable curvature, the first frame is an excavation. But perhaps this is just the

bedrock of Western thought. We put substance first: the hard, the full. Eastern thought puts the void first, and therefore the first frame is not an excavation but its negative: a screen. Unlike our Western architecture whose first frame confronts the earth, Japanese architecture raises its screens to the wind, the light, and the rain. Partitions and parasols rather than excavations: screens emphasize the void.¹¹

Two artists, Tom Odell and Dennis Nahabetian, seem to emphasize the void in their work, and both acknowledge the influence of Oriental art in their artist's statements. I could also have included both Chunggi Choo and Komelia Okim in this category, because their work certainly exhibits the influence of Korean metalsmithing and the elegant, ethereal forms that one associates with the arts of Japan, China, and Korea. However, Choo and Okim retain ties to modernism, which makes their work eclectic, whereas Nahabetian and Odell seem to work philosophically outside of mainstream American metals. The latter makes quiet and modest Kensui bowls that are often raised from Japanese alloys or utilize the Japanese *mokume-gane* process. The works convey a profound sense of the Buddhist belief in the tautology of wholeness and nothingness; the subtle details of surface are integrated with the form, which is always open and does not constrain. Equally effective yet quite different are Nahabetian's works, which employ a textile process to create rigid, colored screenlike forms that are visually light as air and rhythmic in their tightly controlled yet fluid structure. They neither occupy space nor contain it but instead allude to a temporality that is breathtaking in its fragility.

The final group of works I will discuss are the most diverse and defy ready classification. These are the craft objects of a pluralistic and postmodern age. They make no pretense to utility, and allude to history as a point of *reference* and not as a validation. In this group I include the works of Cappy Counard Wolf, Felicia Szorad, Evan Larson, Leonard Urso, Miel Paredes, and Myra Mimplitsch-Gray. Urso and Paredes have created works that are patently sculptural in the traditional sense, and one cannot but mention the legacy of expertly crafted sculpture that includes both Cellini and Brancusi. Here one finds *deference* to a tradition that is all but lost in the fine arts arena, a reincarnation of sorts, with the added bonus that the new works are much more about metal and its history than those earlier precedents to which they *refer*. Urso, who left behind a body of work of almost mythic proportion when I was in graduate school at New Paltz more than twenty years ago, is known for spectacular holloware covered with ornate chasing and repoussé, Italianate masterpieces of a Romantic sensibility. For this *EiP* he submitted two bodies of work, drastically different yet oddly persuasive as a pair, both *referencing* two differing traditions in metal—figurative sculpture and functional crafts—and both suggesting a spirit torn by a desire to move forward without abandoning tradition. The work of Miel Paredes is curious and undeniably quixotic. She creates odd, disturbing animalistic forms presented on anonymous plaster busts suggesting helmets or headgear. Her use of the

cow addresses both language and social convention. In her artist's statement, she writes that in Spanish the same word is used for language and tongue, and that cow's tongue is a staple of the Hispanic diet. The works are both grotesque and strangely beautiful in their skillful modeling, and lurid in their expressionistic positioning on the head. The artist refers to phrenology, the now antiquated belief that the shape of the skull indicates certain things about the mind and personality of an individual. One can only assume that these engaging works pose questions relative to her own cultural identity.

The work of Myra Mimplitsch-Gray stands out as a hopeful harbinger of the future of crafts and metalsmithing. In her platters and vessels, she uses the age-old indicator of a hand-raised piece of holloware, the faceted surface, as her point of departure. She reconstructs these surface marks on a magnified scale with fabrication techniques. Mimplitsch-Gray is a master at diversionary tactics; while creating seductive, beautifully made objects that pay almost reverential homage to her craft, she does a subtle yet profound about-face, calling into question the prerequisites and conventions she honors. One can't help but take the bait and, in doing so, recognize the brilliance of her ruse—the viewer is engaged for precisely the reasons that the history of craft and its accompanying dogma has dictated.

This overview of the holloware *Exhibition in Print* can serve as a microcosm for the changing craft agenda. The diversity of approaches suggests a field that is healthily pluralistic and unashamedly searching for an identity. The age of postmodernism and poststructuralism has arrived for the craft practitioner, and there are strong indicators that content will come from the rich history of the field. Craft will remain craft, and some craft will, as always, be art. A sensitivity to materials and a way of working with those materials with respect, control, and the promise of physical seduction will prevail, carrying the torch of the material arts through the twenty-first century. The field has been both overtly critical of itself, in part in reaction to postmodernist theory, and it is time that it starts to evaluate its recent history for what it is, an awkward transition from its functional history to its redefined role as the proponent of materialism.

Lisa Gralnick has been a full-time faculty member and served as head of the Metals program at Parsons School of Design in New York City for the past eleven years. This fall she will assume a new position as assistant professor of art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, teaching alongside Fred Fenster.

NOTES

- 1 Bernhard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, trans. Anne Boyman (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), p. 94.
- 2 Bruce Metcalf, "Replacing the Myth of Modernism," *American Craft*, (February–March 1993), pp. 40–47.
- 3 Bruce Metcalf, "Craft and Art, Culture and Biology," in *The Culture of Craft*, ed. Peter Dormer (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 67–82.
- 4 Bernard Leach, *A Potter's Book* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940).
- 5 Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 11.
- 6 Sandro Bocola, *The Art of Modernism*, trans. Catherine Schelbert and Nicholas Levis (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1999), p. 26.
- 7 Alastair Duncan, *Art Nouveau* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 10.
- 8 Jonathon Meuli, "Writing About Objects We Don't Understand," in Dormer, *The Culture of Craft*, pp. 202–18.
- 9 Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), pp. 45–57.
- 10 George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955).
- 11 Cache, *Earth Moves*, p. 63.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of horizontal segments in shades of yellow and orange, with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Thickening the edge: contemporary holloware in an age of pluralism

SOURCE: Metalsmith 21 no4 2001

WN: 0128801704002

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher: <http://www.craftweb.com/org/snag/snag.shtml>.

Copyright 1982-2002 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.