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ART REVIEW

Why Craft Never Was a Four-Letter Word

By ROBERTA SMITH

There are many art worlds out there, but most of us tarry in only a few. And no, I'm not referring to New York's sundry gallery neighborhoods, although Chelsea actually encompasses more art zones than most realize.

For total immersion in one of the less familiar, more intense of these alternative spheres, the Park Avenue Armory is the place to be this weekend. There, in full tilt through Sunday, awaits the 12th annual incarnation of SOFA New York. Its exhibitors come from around the world and this year number 56, a little fewer than previously.

The cute acronym stands for Sculpture, Objects & Functional Art. But the word that dare not speak its name in this equation is Craft. The works on display include glazed ceramic vessels, furniture in polished woods, basketry, hand-blown glass, metalwork and jewelry and other wearables. It's a jungle in there.

One of the most charged and polymorphous five-letter words in aesthetic discourse on a good day, craft has become especially slippery. Until lately the word was a pejorative in the contemporary-art world (and still is in some quarters), a code word for crunchy, multigrain hand-madeness.

In its world, the word craft tends to be cherished with a defensive reverence. It connotes a series of traditions nearly as old as human life, a vocabulary of skills and techniques that can't be faked and the *raison d'être* of a vastly superior aesthetic endeavor, although a little recognition from the larger art world would be nice.

But the ground shifts. Peter Voulkos's improvisational ceramic sculptures of the 1950s bade function adieu and eventually entered the history of Abstract Expressionism. One of his students, Ken Price, is represented by Matthew Marks, where Jasper Johns exhibits. George Ohr's pots, the quilts of Gee's Bend, the Weiner Werkstätte, the textile sculptures of Lenore Tawney are all part of collective art-world knowledge. The craze for all things 1950s didn't hurt.

Today many aspects of craft have been absorbed — minus the reverence — by contemporary art, now considered in its postmedium phase. Embroidery, quilting, woodworking and glass blowing as art no longer surprise. A penchant for glazed and unglazed clay is especially evident of late, thanks to artists like Arlene Shechet, Lynda Benglis, Beverly Semmes, Nicole Cherubini, Jessica Jackson Hutchins and Sterling Ruby, who tend to push beyond traditional techniques in ways that might even take Voulkos aback.

Except for Voulkos, you'll find none of these artists at SOFA, probably by mutual consent. Here the art-craft divide seems as firm as ever and thus especially interesting to contemplate.

If you mostly frequent art-world fairs, buckle up. You won't be ticking off blue-chip or

hot new names along these aisles, nor snoozing through stretches of bland derivatives. Nothing is neutral here, especially for first-timers. It's either love or hate, and if it isn't mostly hate, have your eyes, or mind, examined. But visual harassment can be stimulating. What good is taste if it doesn't betray you? Hate can turn to love with just one close look, or maybe a few.

Harassments and betrayals abound at SOFA. The F for functional notwithstanding, far too much here seems generated by the conviction that an object made to serve no purpose whatever is automatically art. Too often the result is just really, really bad, whatever you call it: schlocky, oblivious of history, full of empty technique.

Art doesn't have to do anything except convince you that it is art. Some works that succeed are historical, like the quiet but assertive and functional vessels of Lucy Rie (1902-95), one of the founders of modern British ceramics. Her influence is reflected at the stand of Clare Beck and Adrian Sassoon, in the glowing yellow porcelain tea set by Rupert Spira and the Morandi-like arrangements of Julian Stair. Kate Malone mines several degrees of exaggeration with large-scale vases and pitchers further bulked up to resemble pine cones or snail colonies.

Technical feats are not by definition empty. Proof positive is the Heller Gallery's dazzling display of new work by Lino Tagliapietra. At 75, he is still extending the rich decorative-glass tradition of Venice (Murano, actually), even though he does most of his work in the United States. With their sinuous, exaggerated vase shapes and suspensions of bright patterns and shapes, they constitute their own category of Op Art.

Also at Heller, the work of Tobias Mohl, a Danish glassmaker, impresses sotto voce with small bowls crisscrossed with infinitesimal threads of color. They seem like Werkstatt updates.

At Thomas R. Riley, a less sustained splash is made by Davide Salvatore, a Murano glassmaker whose elaborate, nonfunctioning string instruments use the millefiore cane technique and echo the eccentric furniture designs of Carlo Bugatti from 100 years ago. The constantly shifting patterns sometimes have the intricacy of Missoni fabrics, but too many of them look cold and mechanical up close. Across the aisle at Zimmer, the more conventional Murano vases of Afro Celotto provide relief with soft splashes of color.

Bravura woodworking holds sway at Leo Kaplan in a jewelry box by Jay Stanger; its surface is a rainbow patchwork of aniline-dyed inlaid veneers, its scale that of a small wardrobe. Stand mates here include two exuberantly sarcastic pieces of furniture by Tommy Simpson, who has quite a bit in common with the California artist-jokester William T. Wiley.

The Moderne stand provides some of the history of studio furniture with tables, seating and cabinets by George Nakashima, Wharton Esherick and Wendell Castle, as well as new works by David Ebony and a relatively restrained Nakashima-like table by the irrepressible Mr. Simpson.

There is also a contingent of Voukos pots and sculptures, but the star here — and perhaps in the show over all — is a small early vase from the 1940s by Rudolf Staffel, whose flaring shape and deftly pinched rim bring to mind both Ohr and Rie.

At Donna Schneier, further ceramics history is provided by two recently rediscovered

Pop-related cups from 1965 by Robert Arneson, along with outstanding works by Adrian Saxe, Beatrice Wood and Viola Frey. What appears to be a teapot actually qualifies as a basket. It was made by Jan Hopkins from sharkskin and looks more intriguing before learning this, or touching it.

What else? I recommend much of the jewelry at Jeweler's Werk from Washington and much of the abstract bamboo basket-derived works at Tai. At D.&M. Fine Arts, the miniaturized, modernized version of Southwest Indian pots by Marvin Blackmore, Kevin Naranjo and Wallace Nez may be the heirloom baby vegetables of ceramics. They boggle the eye. At Mobilia, the sake cups of Dorothy Feibleman do something similar in ethereal fusions that resemble glass, shells and flower petals but are actually laminated porcelain.

Want to get away from it all without actually leaving the building? Visit the stand of Geoffrey Orley and Bahram Shabahang, hung and stacked with Persian carpets designed by Mr. Shabahang and made in Iran. He came to the United States 33 years ago, earned a degree in architecture and then started dealing in antique carpets with Mr. Orley until great ones became hard to find. His designs echo aspects of traditional Persian patterns, natural forms (close-ups of butterfly wings) and Art Deco abstraction, but they are made according to centuries-old techniques. They convince.

SOFA New York remains through Sunday at the Park Avenue Armory, near 66th Street; (800) 563-7632 or sofaexpo.com.