The Craftsman and the Artist

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RE: CRAFT AND ART

While reconciling my history of growing up in a farming community where art is based in traditional craft and making work in the context of being an art student at a liberal arts college, I have become very interested in the question: where is the line between art and craft? And: Who is the craftsman and who is she to the artist? Starting with these questions, I chose to analyze the concepts of craft, craftsmanship, and the craftsman and the discourse around them. To do this I have embodied the role of the craftsman by building an 11’6” cedar strip canoe. Once I began the building process, my thesis quickly started to focus on elements that I did not anticipate. Especially after the election, I began to think less about my original questions and more about the importance of working with my hands, the social elements of craft, and the connection I felt to my physical vs. intellectual work.

In the process of planning my project, I was heavily influenced by the stories of Dick Proenneke¹ and Chris McCandless². I connect to each of their drive for self-reliance and freedom as well as connection to the wilderness. Their quixotic narratives have driven the spirit of endurance and commitment within my work. It was these inspirations that helped me decide to build a canoe, rather than a wood sculpture or piece of furniture-- since it is an object of transportation and exploration. Not only is it a vehicle but it’s also a portal to the wilderness. Throughout my working process I have also continuously looked at the work of current furniture makers, woodworkers, craftspeople, and other boat builders. I find that Instagram has played an instrumental role in my exposure to the craft community’s work.

¹ Dick Proenneke was a self-educated naturalist who lived by himself for almost 30 years in the woods of Alaska. ² Chris McCandless was a hiker and nomad who left his life to travel. He is the subject of the book Into the Wild.
Figure 1: Home
The root of my interest in craft comes from my experience of growing up on a farm in rural northern Michigan. This provided me with an interesting relationship to art. I was constantly building and making as a child, but it wasn’t until my sophomore year of high school that I had access to art education, which meant I had very little formalized definition or constraints to what art is up to that point. Most of the things my siblings and I made as children were objects that were meant to be functional, even if it was a fictional or hypothetical function.

The art that I was surrounded by in my community was based out of skill and technique: quilting, needlework, and woodworking for the most part. Even painting and drawing had a strong focus on technique and quality rather than concept. As a community and as consumers, we valued the evidence of labor, care, and skill in work. This wasn’t something that I had ever reflected upon until I began making in an “art” context while also becoming familiar with the world of the white cube\(^3\) and the culture of the contemporary art world.

Not long after my first exposure to this world, I became very critical, skeptical, and even cynical. To put something (an object, experience, etc.) into an art context and create a narrative around it using the vocabulary of the art world was not enough for me to call it art or assign value to it. Many of my early thoughts on this matter originated out of feeling very frustrated seeing classmates complete projects last minute—just hours before a critique—and then receiving very high praise for them. Why did I not find this work to be legitimate or as valuable as others deemed it to be? I realized that I perceived this hasty work to me missing investment, loyalty, consideration, and labor, and therefore I identified that these are attributions that I value the most.

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These are also the attributions of good craftsmanship. My interest in craftsmanship stems from its relationship to an ineffable quality that can be universally appreciated regardless of an individual's cultural, educational, social, vocational, or economic background. Good craftsmanship possesses characteristics that are identifiable without additional contextual knowledge. To me craftsmanship can be present in all elements of life. It is a consideration and intentionality of one’s actions. The thoughtfulness and care that is evident in good craftsmanship is beautiful and valuable in itself.

I have found myself drawn more to craft due to its accessibility. I would argue that the understanding and appreciation of good craftsmanship is more objective and universal than that of art. Richard Sennett writes in his book *The Craftsman*. “Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake.” Let’s say, for instance, I make a very well crafted box. Everything about the box is intentional and considered. If I show this box to 100 different people, without any context, and ask, “Is this a good box?” I argue that they would know and would be able to identify the strong elements of craftsmanship in the box. Whereas, if I show 100 people an abstract painting and ask “Is this good art?” will they be able to answer or even feel confident in knowing without already being aware of the context, vocabulary, and cultural agreement of what art is?

Once I was finding myself more interested to what might be considered craft rather than art, I began to seriously think more about the relationship between the two. This feels like a particularly relevant consideration since I am an “art student” who is currently working in the context of contemporary art. “Is what I am making art?” At this point, I’m not sure if I have been asked this by others or only by myself, however, I believe this is an unproductive question.

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Although it was a temptation of mine at first to try to answer this, I have decided that any actions made in attempt of justification would be artificial. As I have continued to think about this question I have realized that it reduces to language and perceived meaning. To one, this canoe can be a boat: an 11’6” vessel made from strips of red cedar. To another, this can be a performance piece exploring the archetype of the craftsman/pioneer from the context of being a young lesbian at a historically women’s college. To another, this can be a social practice piece about the connections made through craft and labor. All of these perspectives are here, and have been the whole time.

II. PROCESS

The foundation of my thesis came out of the urge to work--physically and tangibly. Unsure about what to make or how to make it, I started with a box. This was the entry point into the world of fine woodworking for me. I had previously carved a dug out canoe from the trunk of a white pine tree. While this project also dealt with wood, it was a very different and less refined process. From here I continued to contemplate what I wanted to make and why I would make it. I have always been drawn to objects of transportation, as they are a means of self-reliance and freedom. And with my history with boats, I settled on building a canoe. When planning the canoe, I knew that I wanted to build an object that I could easily handle independently. I settled on the Wee Lassie, a design that originated in the Adirondack region of New York in the late 1800’s by canoe builder J. Henry Rushton. It spans 11’6” long and weighs around 25 pounds. Through the building process I have realized that there is a strong relationship between the canoe and the body due to the size and shape. I find that this strengthens the narratives around individuality and the connection between self and exploration of the physical world.
To begin the building process I constructed a strongback for my canoe to be built on. The strongback is a stand for the forms (also referred to as stations) to be attached to. Although this may appear to just be a work surface, it is essential that it is level and square, as any mistake here will transfer into the boat.

Once fabricating the strongback, I cut out and mounted the forms to it, effectively creating a skeleton for the cedar strips to wrap around. Before preparing the strips, I used the technique of cold molding to create inner stems on the bow and stern. This means that I bent and layered thin strips over the end forms to create a stem that is about an inch thick. The stem is what the strips are glued to at each end of the boat. Once the form was completely ready for the hull to be built around it, I bought several 8-foot clear\textsuperscript{5} red cedar planks. Using the table saw, I ripped the boards into \textfrac{1}{4}” strips. Being the first time I ever preformed a rip cut on the table saw, this was a significant step in the process for me. Once I had individual strips, I routed a bead and cove onto each strip. After this I was ready to go! Using a scarf joint I created strips to be about 12’ long in order for them to fit from bow to stern.

Not long after placing the first few strips, I went back to Michigan for winter break. It was only after a few days at home that I was ready to get back to work. The first strip was attached at the sheer line, and the rest worked upwards towards the center of the boat. The boat is build upside down and from the outside. Once arriving back at Wellesley, I continued to lay more strips. It was very rewarding and awe inspiring to witness the cedar bend into the complex curves over the stations. It was when the strips were about \textfrac{3}{4} up the side of the forms, I realized for the first time that this structure was a boat. In March, I glued in the last strip.

\textsuperscript{5} This refers to the quality of the wood. Clear wood is wood with straight grain and few or no knots in it.
Figure 2: Drawing forms from plans

Figure 3: The strips
Figure 4: Inner Stem being molded to form

Figure 5: Strips with fresh scarf joints
Figure 6: The first strips attached to the forms

Figure 7: Detail of trips curving over form
At this point the hull was completely constructed. I began the fairing process using 80-grit sandpaper on a random orbital sander. I was struck by how the boat transformed from many strips into one continuous form. At this point it was time to lay the fiberglass and epoxy. I did a significant amount of research into the best products to use--eventually opting for West System’s 105 resin and 207 hardener. When combined, the two react and harden into a solid state. In order to have adequate ventilation, I moved the canoe from my studio in Beebe Hall to the Pendleton West sculpture studio. Once in place, I patched any small holes or cracks on the outer hull with a mixture of epoxy and sawdust, and I shaped/refined the bow and stern, knowing that after the fiberglass and epoxy were applied, there would be little room to make changes to the form. Once I decided it was adequate, I rolled out the fiberglass cloth, using a brush to remove even the smallest of wrinkles.

On a Saturday morning, along with Andrew Kemp’s generous help, I applied the first coat of epoxy. Throughout the day, I applied 3 more layers of epoxy with at least 3 hours of drying time in between. It was important to lay the subsequent coats of epoxy while the previous layer was still tacky in order for a chemical bond between the layers to take place. After letting the epoxy fully cure, I was able to lift the canoe off the stations for the first time. To actually see the boat as a vessel, rather than just inferring it, was a remarkable moment. It looked much larger than I previously have thought it to be. This was the second time I realized I was actually building a boat.
Figure 8: Fully constructed hull

Figure 9: The canoe in transit to PNW

Figure 10: Fiberglass cloth settling on outer hull
Figure 11: Rolling epoxy over fiberglass

Figure 12: Hull right-side up for the first time
Now that the outer hull was sealed, I was finally able to work on the inner hull. Using a Polar Spring sparkling water bottle wrapped in sandpaper, I sanded the inner curves of the canoe. Compared to the outside, this was more challenging, but the cylindrical shape of the water bottle aided with this. I repeated the gap filling process once I finished the sanding and found that there were significantly more gaps than there were on the outside. Again, on a Saturday morning I laid down the fiberglass fabric and worked vigorously to remove all of the wrinkles. I had to improvise several techniques, including making small incisions or removing triangular sections of fabric to prevent bunching. I found the process of applying the epoxy on the inside to be harder, since in many areas I was working against gravity.

At this point the boat was fully sealed and water tight. I began to work on the trim elements, which include the gunwales, seat, and a thwart. I chose to make all of these elements from Mahogany because of its strength and rich color that contrasts well with the color of the cedar. For the seat, I watched several YouTube videos on the subject of seat caning and purchased caning strips from Amazon. I was happily surprised that after just a few hours I had weaved myself a seat. For the thwart, I attached a pencil to a piece of string that I taped to the table, therefore acting as a compass to trace an arc onto the plank of mahogany. I then used the band saw and belt sander to hone this form.

With the trim finished, the only processes left was the sanding and varnishing of the hull. When the epoxy cured, it was left with minor imperfections that I removed with several passes of the sander. The varnish adds UV protection and a consistent gloss finish to the surface.

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6 The thwart is a crossbar that adds vital support to the hull.
Figure 13: Drafting thwart onto mahogany

Figure 14: Gluing spacers onto inner gunwales
Figure 15: Ripping the gunnels—my most impressive cut on the table saw
III. REFLECTION

I started this thesis with a range of conceptual questions that had less to do with my personal experience and more to do with broader ideas. As I worked through the fall semester I continued to develop these questions and expand on my potential answers. That was until November 9th. The day I awoke to the news of the election of Donald Trump. From that point on I went through a range of emotions: sadness, anger, fear, motivation, ambivalence, and void. The issues and tragedies of the world became overwhelming present in my mind, and the topic of my thesis became increasingly less important. Does it even matter?

What has not wavered throughout the progression of these past few months has been my interest in and commitment to the labor and craft in building the canoe. This, I believe, shows for the importance and power of handwork and physical labor. This work has been a continuous outlet for me, as well as something that I can control completely. Outside of these aspects, the process has also been one of few things to bring me confidence and validation. To learn new skills, make something “right”, and create something beautiful has had many positive effects on me. Unfortunately, it has probably not made the world a better place—although, maybe it has.

Another element of this project that I did not foresee, but has been another one of the most rewarding and joyful parts of building the canoe has been the connections I have made with others. More specifically, I am thinking of men above the age of 30. The process and object both serve as a bridge between myself and many others who I most likely would not have crossed paths with otherwise. Through learning to build canoe, I have also learned unspoken rules of a community/culture that I was not a part of before. I transgressed from the sphere and identity of college art student and began to exist within the world and identity of craftsman and
woodworker. A process that has been validated the conversations, head nods, looks of approval and attention from those who I would not have received it from in the past. The construction around Pendleton West has brought in many contractors and tradesmen through the space. With the boat by my side, I have been afforded many conversations that have often started with a variation of “So this is your boat, eh?” In many ways I could use the vocabulary of relational aesthetics or social practice to talk about this phenomenon, especially since this project is more about the process than the product. This realization is what brought me to my ideas about how the difference between art and craft is language, particularly in my case where both are clearly present simultaneously. The variable factor is whom I am talking to.
Figure 15: The Maiden voyage on Lake Waban. Photo taken by A. Kemp.

Figure 16: Installation
Figure 17: Final installation. Photo taken by Samara Pearlstein.
Bibliography
