

Southern Illinois University, Surplus Gallery, Faculty Exhibition-
October 13-19 2017

Curated by Shelly Cournoyer.

“The Toolness of things”

I was invited by Southern Illinois University and the Surplus Gallery to take part in their annual Faculty show. I was working at SIU Carbondale as a caretaker, professor and AIR for their Metals department as a Faculty exchange with Professor Rick Smith. It was a great way to test out the beginning of this my most recent body of work.

The department SIU Metals have focus on forged steel therefore I based my work on a published discussion in the form of abstracts I created with Damian Skinner as attached below. My focus was the tool as a vehicle for traditional craft and by removing the function of the tool I was able to look at the pieces as raw form with connotations to the tool. In this I was looking for the recognizable in tools, wooden handles, tool like steel forms without referring to a specific tool. To recognize but not being able to place my tools in a specific context makes them into some kind of strange artefacts or symbols for the toolness of things. At the opening, I experimented with the traditional “Do not touch” rule that most museums and gallery’s apply and printed my own “Please handle the art” signs. When the public finally dared to use my pieces, it created a beautiful interactive level to the work in stark contrast to the “Do not touch” pieces included in the show.

15 Ways of Thinking About a Blacksmith

Tobias Birgersson and Damian Skinner

Tobias: Is an idea or concept or intention important as a starting point when working with arts and crafts, or when mining their material and tradition? I think not.

Damian: What is your intention? Everyone should be forced to ask themselves this question, especially people who are going to make giant metal objects that the rest of us have to deal with.

Tobias: Art and craft start with tradition and material. They can be mined by the contemporary maker to answer why, what, how and for whom.

Damian: Public art of the kind made by many craftspeople is not a genre in itself. It is actually part of contemporary art, so what it really needs is a great artist.

Tobias: A lot of truly great things have been made by truly oblivious makers. Does that make them less great? And many horrible failures have come from very aware and smart makers. Does that make them less bad?

Damian: Where does process begin and end? What if we expand it beyond the actions of the studio to include what you read, or watch on Netflix, or the ways in which you choose to live

in the world?

Tobias: How makers deal with process is up to them, as long as they do it. If all of the experimentation goes on in the realm of ideas, it is very probable that when the concept finally enters the material world it will be seriously flawed.

Damian: Techniques emerges at specific times and in specific cultural contexts, to answer or address specific cultural, political and social questions. In that sense they have urgency and purpose. But once that moment ends, you are left with empty technique.

Tobias: How can there be anything without the experimental part of the creative process?

Damian: The stereotyped image of the blacksmith: muscles, leather, tools; sweat glistening in the fiery glow of the forge. It is both absolutely brilliant and totally hilarious, an opportunity and a trap.

Tobias. How to deal with the pure joy of making? Is it ever possible or okay that this might be enough for the maker, and the viewer is left to fill the object with content and context? Or would this just end up being a case of pareidolia, the mind perceiving a pattern where it doesn't exist?

Damian: Craft mastery is neither good art nor good contemporary craft. It's just craft mastery. It will appeal to a subculture, to other craft geeks, but that's the extent of its power.

Tobias: Material and craft used to be so important to me and to my identity. Now I tend to see the material and level of craft mastery as different colours in my box of crayons. It is both completely unimportant and so important at the same time.

Damian: Art doesn't start with the material but finds the material it needs for the idea. Craft, including blacksmithing, is too much in love with materials and tradition.

Tobias: Art, and probably especially craft, have a narcissistic core, but loving what you do can be a powerful driving force. On the other hand, if you lack the ability to take a step back and reflect on what you have done, then you are in trouble.

Tobias Birgeresson is a maker and lecturer at HDK – Academy of Design and Crafts. Damian Skinner is an art historian from Aotearoa, New Zealand. They talk frequently about craft.