



Above: jeweller and weaver Esna Su and furniture designer Michael Marriott

# OBJECT LESSON

Ahead of the Crafts Council's new gallery opening, we asked *Alison Britton* to challenge five makers involved in the first exhibition – Michael Brennand-Wood, Michael Marriott, Freddie Robins, Julian Stair and Esna Su – to define craft's role in a fast-changing world. Portraits by *Philip Sayer*

On a cold day in January, *Crafts* magazine and a cohort of leading makers found refuge in the light-filled London studio of the potter Julian Stair for a discussion about the issues fuelling craftspeople today, from gender politics to migration. The link between them? All have work in *Maker's Eye*, the inaugural exhibition at the Crafts Council's new gallery, opening on Pentonville Road in March.

The Crafts Council asked 13 makers to delve into its 1,700-strong collection to select objects for the exhibition, in response to the question: 'What does craft mean to you?' The concept revisits the show of the same name from 1982 – the first at the organisation's former gallery on Waterloo Place – but from a fresh perspective, thanks to the changing pressures encircling the craft world. Each craftsperson has also been asked to propose one work to be added to the collection that reflects their experience of craft. From Will Shannon's *Suitcase Foundry* installation to an Armitage Shanks toilet mould, the results will surprise, challenge and amuse in equal measure.

To bring to life some of the stories embedded in the objects, *Crafts* turned to iconoclastic textile artists Freddie Robins and Michael Brennand-Wood, pioneering furniture designer Michael Marriott and boundary-breaking jeweller and weaver Esna Su, all of whom have selected objects for the exhibition and have work in the collection. We asked the potter Alison Britton, who participated in the 1982 exhibition, to steer the conversation. Julian Stair, whose work *Large Cup with Handle* (2018) was chosen by metalworker Simone ten Hompel for inclusion in the show, was the sixth voice in the conversation, which ranged from what the objects say about craft today, to what the makers' selections reveal about their creative outlooks.

**Alison Britton:** Being one of the selectors for the original *Maker's Eye* made a big impression on me. It has rested with me as a record of the time change between the modernists and the postmodernists. I've referenced it in lectures and made it the focus of an essay in my book, *Seeing Things*. I'd like to hear how you all went about making your selection. Michael, could you begin?

**Michael Brennand-Wood:** I was keen to select people who have developed rich trajectories of personal research, like ceramic sculptor Gillian Lowndes, who explored ethnographic objects, and Lois Walpole, who had a huge influence on urban basketry. I worry that the only research being acknowledged and funded today emanates from universities. I believe good artists put themselves at risk and I'm interested in those who are challenging themselves, their practice and the culture it sits within.

**Britton:** You suggested a work by Rozanne Hawksley should be acquired by the Crafts Council. How does it embody this approach?

**Brennand-Wood:** Hawksley has contributed significantly to the development of interdisciplinary practice within textiles. The piece I proposed, *Caiaphas* [2007-15, made from silk, crab shells, pearl and taxidermy], takes a wreath-like form incorporating a white glove. Rozanne's work is expertly cut, sewn and constructed. Her subject matter is challenging, with a focus on narratives of memory and loss, particularly in relation to the lives of women. She's been left out of craft history because her work makes people uncomfortable. When I looked at the textiles in the collection, I was keen that there should be something edgier. There is a niceness to a lot of it, which is often the case with textiles.



**“The original *Maker's Eye* made an impression on me as a record of the time change between the modernists and the postmodernists”**

ALISON BRITTON

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Above: Rozanne Hawksley, *Caiaphas*, 2007-15.  
Right: Julian Stair, *Cup on Floating Ground 1* and *Large Cup with Handle*, 2018. All objects featured are from the Crafts Council Collection



Above: Will Shannon, *Suitcase Foundry*, 2015, mixed media



**‘I believe good artists put themselves at risk and I’m interested in those who are challenging themselves’**

MICHAEL BRENNAND-WOOD

**Britton:** Freddie, you’ve talked about the notion of material hierarchy in the past. Is this something that affects collections of craft?  
**Freddie Robins:** There are more hard objects in the Crafts Council Collection, and they are more respected than soft materials. It’s partly because textiles have historically been seen as a female discipline, so are perceived as less serious – they are finicky, they move and they’re unpredictable. Perhaps they seem more vulnerable because objects that don’t sit flat against the wall or hold their form are difficult to show. Within the realm of textiles, tapestry is an exception: they might be soft but they seem to hold their place more firmly, so are often better represented.

**Brennand-Wood:** The fact that a lot of tapestry work is an artist’s image rendered in tapestry – not woven by them – gives it another level of value, which explains its greater representation.  
**Britton:** Made by nameless weavers, you mean?

**Brennand-Wood:** Yes. If you turn an artist’s image into a tapestry, it can have more value but it’s not the same the other way around. The art world frequently uses terms like ‘artisan’, meaning it’s made by somebody else. There’s an assumption that making is unimportant. Textiles are fashionable in the fine art world, but I take the view that ‘big dog eats little dog’, so you have to protect your area from being nibbled up.

**Britton:** Freddie, what guided your choice of objects for the exhibition?

**Robins:** I wanted my selection to be personal – rather than political, as you might expect – charting the evolution of my creative thinking through objects that have influenced me, such as *Allsorts* (1977) by Judith Robson, a necklace resembling Liquorice Allsorts sweets made from wooden beads. As a teenager, I made necklaces out of varnished sweets. I was heavily inspired

by this genre of jewellery: how the everyday was transformed into the surreal and subversive. There are objects from my student years by Ann Sutton and Caroline Broadhead, and those that reflect my current position – pieces by Antony Burrill [his A4 handbill, *Our Future is in the Making*, 2014] and Tatty Devine [*I Am Here* necklace, 2015]. These last two works make short, bold statements, illustrating the necessity of hope to the human predicament. They reiterate my belief in the positive, life-affirming act of making.

**Britton:** What about your brave choice of proposing your own work to be acquired?

**Robins:** Given that the craft world is one of the most supportive, friendly creative arenas, I thought I wouldn’t be judged for looking after myself for once – a lot of my life is spent caring for other people, such as through teaching. My choice was *Craft Kills*, the first work I made inspired by the politics of craft and textiles. It’s a self-portrait based on the well-recognised image of Saint Sebastian being martyred. It takes the form of a suspended, knitted body; instead of arrows piercing my skin I have knitting needles. The title recalls the old adage of ‘dying for your art’, but I’m more concerned with the stereotypical image that craft – and in particular knitting – has, of being a passive, benign activity. I am constantly angered by the low regard in which textiles, in particular knitting, are held, due to their association with the domestic and female. I was thinking: how would it be if craft was seen as a dangerous discipline, something we weren’t allowed to practice, something that was banned, something that wasn’t seen as a kind of benign, predominantly domestic activity?

**Britton:** Crochet and weaving are a big part of your work, Esna. Are they still be perceived as gendered skills where you grew up in Turkey?



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**Esna Su:** Definitely. Young girls need to develop them to make a home and the level of their skills is judged to reflect the cleverness of the girl.

**Britton:** Your work has incorporated the notion of a trousseau. Do women still make theirs in Turkey today?

**Su:** Yes. For example, I crocheted pillow edges for mine. Because I have never been married, I asked my mother to give me my trousseau – kept in a beautifully embroidered bundle – much to her dismay. I hung it all around my studio and used pieces of it in my work, such as the crochet bundle in *The Burden II* [exhibited by the Crafts Council at Tresor craft fair, Basel, in 2017], moulded around my cherished objects. It represents the bundle girls used to carry their belongings in during the war and, consequently, the abstraction of migrant people.

**Britton:** You’ve moved from one country to another, making a home in the UK. How has that informed what craft means to you?

**Su:** I am fascinated by how skills from one country are reinterpreted in another as people travel or migrate. In 2010 I came across a film about Japanese metalsmith Hiroshi Suzuki, and the impact of his travels to the UK, and it made a mark on me. I picked out his hammer-raised and chased silver vase *Aqua-Poesy VII* (2002) for the exhibition. Similarly, jeweller and engraver Castro Smith draws on myriad inspirations, from natural history to British mythology, as well as a more abstract, naturalistic style inspired by his training with Japanese metalsmith Kenji Ito. I proposed that one of his hand-engraved rings should be acquired for the show.

**Britton:** Michael, what was the starting point for your selection?

**Michael Marriott:** I wanted to look beyond my own discipline, gathering pieces from different spheres to define a space I would be



Left to right: Judith Robson, *Allsorts*, 1977; Freddie Robins, *Craft Kills*, 2002; Hiroshi Suzuki, *Aqua-Poesy VII*, 2002



**‘How would it be if craft was seen as a dangerous discipline, something we weren’t allowed to practice?’**

FREDDIE ROBINS



Left: Lois Walpole, *Apple Laundry Basket*, 1995. Above: Castro Smith, *Golden Heart Ring*, 2019



**“The use of the word “maker” has become a means of avoidance – we need to re-embrace the less fashionable terms’**

JULIAN STAIR

comfortable in. These include pieces from my contemporaries such as Emma Woffenden [*Swollen*, 1996, a glass bubble extending into a horn] and a group of handmade and found objects (c. 2000) by Elizabeth Callinicos. Inevitably furniture came into it: I included David Collwell’s 1986 stacking chairs. I’ve always admired his approach to furniture: he combines craft concerns with taxing issues of production and repetition, while making functional, affordable pieces with the highest levels of sustainability – a feat not managed since the days of Michael Thonet.

**Britton:** How has the relationship between craft and furniture design shifted over time?  
**Marriott:** Furniture has always had one foot in craft and one in design. Most craft furniture courses have been axed now, due to government cuts, so the furniture being embraced by the craft world typically comes from people who have trained in design. Max Frommheld – whose coat rack I suggested should be acquired – is part of a new generation of furniture designers who are using craft skills. There is a connection between some of the early pieces in the Crafts Council Collection and what he’s doing, embracing a richness of material and technique and making innovative work that is both decorative and functional.

**Britton:** That’s a good moment to consider the importance of reopening the gallery after so many years of the Crafts Council being without a space in London. Visiting it was a huge part of my education and there was a period when nobody would miss the opening of a Crafts Council show.

**Brennand-Wood:** The Waterloo Place gallery, to me, was like a clubhouse. I would go to every exhibition, and I met people who have been important to my career. Ralph Turner [head

of exhibitions at the Crafts Council from 1974–89] gave opportunities to a whole raft of people, including myself. My first exhibition was at the Crafts Council. You really felt like you were part of something.

**Julian Stair:** Being able to have three or four shows a year in one space will mean the Crafts Council can represent the diversity of the sector in a consistent fashion.

**Brennand-Wood:** Crafts, to a degree, have a hidden history. *Maker’s Eye* will enable people to make connections with a wide body of objects and draw their own conclusions. Like all good music playlists, there will be pieces you might know alongside unexpected works you may never have seen before. It’s a chance to join the dots, shuffle the order and make new connections.

**Stair:** It’s interesting that the exhibition uses the word ‘maker’ again. In the catalogue for the first *Maker’s Eye*, terms like ‘craftsperson’ and ‘potter’ were frequently mentioned but they have now fallen by the wayside. We tend to talk in terms of materials and about the ‘maker’ instead of the genre, which in my view is symptomatic of a lack of confidence in the relevance of craft, and its place in the hierarchy of creative practice. The use of the word ‘maker’ has, in a way, become a means of avoidance – I think we need to re-embrace the less fashionable terms.

**Britton:** Personally, I’ve never minded being called a ‘potter’.

**Robins:** Yes. It never bothers me when people say, ‘you’re a knitter’.

● *‘Maker’s Eye’ at Crafts Council Gallery, 28 March – 20 June, Wed-Sat, 11am–5pm. [craftscouncil.org.uk](http://craftscouncil.org.uk). Michael Brennand-Wood, Freddie Robins and Simone ten Hompel discuss their selections at Collect art fair, Friday 28 February, 3pm. [collect2020.org.uk](http://collect2020.org.uk)*



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**“The furniture being embraced by the craft world typically comes from people who have trained in design’**

MICHAEL MARRIOTT



Above: Emma Woffenden, *Swollen*, 1996.  
 Right: Elizabeth Callinicos, *Group of Objects*, c. 2000



Left: David Collwell, *C3 Stacking Chair*, 1986.  
 Right: Max Frommheld, *Coat Rack*, 2017

