

Handmade and homemade

This week, A Handmade Assembly, organized by Struts Gallery & Faucet Media Arts Centre, and the exhibition 'Bona Fide' at Owens Art Gallery transform Sackville into a Mecca of one of contemporary art's hottest trends – the handmade. Story by Mike Landry

Deep within the labyrinthine shelving-lined halls of the New Brunswick Museum Collections Centre in Saint John a white-gloved Peter J. Larocque gingerly unfolds a quilt from a white, acid-free preservation box. Caressing its surface with his hand as though it's Braille, he begins to tell its story.

The group of women in a semi-circle in front of the museum's curator of New Brunswick cultural history and art listens attentively, leaning in for a closer look. They're on a guided tour – A Stitch in Time: The Art and History of Quilts – of the museum's collection.

There is 4-500 quilts in the collection, but just two dozen or so will receive Larocque's detailed analysis. The consistency of stitch width, the assembly, the material, the pattern – it all is woven into an unwritten narrative of the domestic.

Larocque loves the detective nature the history of craft and textile objects entails. They offer another way of accessing the past, an underlying story to the written history hidden in the embellishment and particularities of the everyday vernacular.

Such is the power of the handmade. In an era where so much of our daily interaction is indirect – we text, email and have little relation with the production of most objects – Larocque believes the handmade offers a direct experience.

He feels museums and galleries offer this same directness. It would seem the art world is the perfect home for the handmade.

Of course, it's not that simple – call it the craft conundrum. Although fine artists the world over are working with the handmade and the homemade the relationship between craft and fine art is becoming more vague. Many artists struggle to understand how this work fits in with the more traditional aspects of their studio practice.

And so, Struts Gallery and Faucet Media Arts Centre in Sackville has organized A Handmade Assembly, which runs from Thursday until Sunday, April 3. The event is a venue for artists from the region and across Canada to "share ideas about a common thread, the handmade."

It will feature talks, workshops, roundtable discussions, project launches, open exhibitions as well as the Heart & Pocket Revue – a two-day alternative, independent craft fair.

In conjunction with the assembly, Owens Art Gallery in Sackville is opening the exhibition *Bona Fide: Handmade and Homemade* on Friday. Organized by gallery director/curator Gemey Kelly, the show brings together international artists alongside artists from Sackville and Canada.

Both the assembly and exhibition feature artists working in a variety of mediums from embroidery to posters to film. Their motives for using the handmade – be it conceptual, ethical, political and so on – overlap, vary in degree and outright differ.

Struts was inspired to bring them together after noting the rise of handmade practices in its members and the artists participating in its Open Studio residencies since 1997.

"There seems to be some kind of ethos – I don't want to say aesthetic," John Murchie, coordinator of Struts, says. "It's not as though it's painting, making movies or a consistent aesthetic or something. I don't know what it is exactly. That's why we're trying to bring a mix of people together."

Coordinating the assembly is former gallery assistant, and Mount Allison graduate, Amanda Fauteux. Finishing the second year of a three-year MFA in the fibre department at Concordia University in Montreal, Fauteux is an interdisciplinary artist who has been incorporating the handmade into her practice since graduating with her BFA.

Originally from

Northern Ontario, Fauteux focused on printmaking while in school. But printmaking wasn't something she could do from her little desk in her studio apartment. So she picked up animation and zine-making, and renewed an interest in sewing she thought she had left behind in North Bay.

"It was definitely a way for me to stay involved with my practice in a really active way, and there's just so many ways to share that work."

It was when she started hosting sewing bees and other workshops in Sackville in 2007 that she realized how popular the handmade had become. Being in grad school gave her the opportunity to focus on this trend and organize something.

"Part of the reason for doing what we're doing is to give artists a chance to talk about their practices in a way that's supportive and important, build networks, be taken seriously and learn new things," Fauteux says. "A lot of the artists are even excited about talking about the questions they have about their practice."

"We won't know what's going to happen until it's happening, but a lot of people do seem to have similar questions and things they're passionate or worried about, even though their practices are very diverse. Part of the hope is that there will be some kind of feeling of network that gets fortified through just having a chance to get together and talk."

Not that there isn't a lot of discussion of the handmade happening. Just pick up the most recent art magazine. *Border Crossings* has an essay on the art of Vancouver's Liz Magor, whose work features real-looking sculptures of textiles. *Canadian Art* includes an interview with Victoria-based process-based conceptual artist Luanne Martineau titled *Handmade: Luanne Martineau sets craft on a new trajectory*.

The handmade is in galleries, too. There's *Hover Craft: Navigating the Shorelines of Art and Craft* in Winnipeg and *Crafting Paradox* in St. John's. Last fall, the New Brunswick Museum exhibited Fredericton artist Janice Wright Cheney's *Trespass* – a review can also be found in *Border Crossings* – which incorporated a variety of handmade elements.

Wright Cheney is also one of three Strathbutler Award winners, along with Anna Torma and Nel Oudemans, to be honoured by the Sheila Hugh Mackay Foundation who make use of the handmade.

Aware of what's going on nationally and internationally in regards to the handmade, Sarah Quinton, curatorial director at the Textile Museum of Canada, says the assembly in Sackville is a unique formal opportunity for discussion.

Quinton kicks off the assembly by leading a roundtable discussion. At the museum since 1990, Quinton is formally trained as a weaver – but she's excited that the assembly isn't just about textiles.

"To look at interdisciplinary is a great way to not speak of techniques and particular histories. It gets at more of a zeitgeist," Quinton says.

She can't identify one reason in particular why the handmade is so popular. Whatever the reasons, Quinton says there's an intimacy and materiality to craft that can be used as an expressive and experimental tool in fine art.

"Conceptual practices have really overshadowed material meaning, and yet in this day they're both understood to have equal weight in the reading of an artwork."

As a functional object and material, Quinton says daily life is essential to the understanding of the handmade.

"The handmade is absolutely shining a light on daily life and pulling that into focus and asking us not to overlook these things we probably do take for granted, and

On the cover: Glasgow-based artist Deirdra Nelson's 'Internet Dating Wellie,' boot, gold leaf and wool, is based on patterns associated with fisherman's sweaters and the ups and downs of marriage, divorce, single life and Internet dating.

that has to do a lot with the power of cloth."

But ask her how she differentiates between craft and fine art and Quinton doesn't hide her exasperation. "Do we have to go there?!" she pleads.

It's an old, and for many tired, discussion. Denis Longchamps, curator of *Crafting Paradox* at The Rooms in St. John's, thought we had moved on, but the debate reared its head during the opening of his exhibition. It wasn't the paradox he was speaking to, but one that nonetheless exists.

To address the issue, Longchamps made it the topic of his curator's talk. His argument was that craft can be used for many things – science, fine art, tradition and more – but what's most important is that craftspeople do their work with pride and not envy others.

Longchamps draws on American ceramics historian and writer Garth Clark's idea of art envy among craftspeople.

"His conclusion is if you do craft, be proud of doing craft; and if you do art, be proud of doing art," Longchamps says. "It's quite simple, but I realize by being in the field that there are lots of crafters that are doing great fantastic craft but want to be something they're not in that art envy kind of way."

Although happy to see handmade technique entering museums and galleries, Longchamps is cautious against giving too much importance to craftspeople with art envy. He'd rather those working with the handmade to embrace the grey-zone between fine art and craft. He's seeking submissions

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for a project with The Rooms and the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador called *Boxed In!* for "work of expression, functional or not," that fit in an assigned box and "pushes the limits of your practice within a conceptual approach."

This is what is striking about many of the Sackville-based participants of the assembly and *Bona Fide* – they aren't fighting for the artistic credibility of the handmade. Some, like Leah Garnett, founder of the Sackville Crafters Union and a professor of drawing, open media and contemporary art at Mount Allison, are still learning how to treat the handmade like their traditional practices. She considers her work more in a discourse on drawing than the history of craft and textiles.

Garnett will exhibit embroidered handkerchiefs and pillows as part of *Bona Fide*.

"What I generate through my embroidery is not a whole lot like what I make when I draw or make sculptures. These hankies? I would never make drawings like these," Garnett says. "The pillows are doodles that don't make it into drawings. It's still fairly intuitive at this moment as to what's for embroidery and what's not. I haven't figured it out."

Garnett's childhood was centred in the handmade. Her dad built houses and most everything else, and her mom was a weaver who made her family's clothes. It wasn't an aesthetic choice, though. It was a way of life.

When Garnett first returned to embroidery during grad school she didn't consider it a "critical" activity. It wasn't until she came to Sackville last decade that her idea of the handmade changed through conversations with local artists Adriana Kuiper and Tara K. Wells.

She notes how awed the general person is by the handmade. She relates it to how more and more her sculpture students are ignorant about how things are made.

"Anybody could do (embroidery), and anybody did do it. It was a thing that all women, generally speaking, did. There's nothing that is mysterious about it, but it's become something that is somewhat unusual."

Garnett is curious about this general fascination with labour. It takes her 15-16 hours to make one handkerchief, but no one would spend \$100 on a handkerchief. And neither would she. The excessive time required for the handmade itself is a



A still from Saskatoon-based artist Amalie Atkins' 2010 work

commentary.

"I don't want to have to make everything in this room. I don't even want to have to make my own clothes. It's a luxury for me to be able for me to make these (embroideries)."

British designer Thomas Thwaites' *The Toaster Project* speaks to Garnett's fascination. Inspired by *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* quote, "Left to his own devices he couldn't build a toaster," Thwaites attempted to build a cheap, mass-produced toaster entirely from scratch. That meant making his own steel from iron ore and wire from copper. The finished toaster took months to make, cost thousands of dollars and worked for under a minute.

"So are toasters ridiculous? It depends on the scale at which you look," concludes Thwaites. "(T)he scale of industry involved in making a toaster [etc.] is ridiculous but at the same time the chain of discoveries and small technological developments that occurred along the way make it entirely reasonable."

Thwaites' attempt, with its multitude of necessary cheats and difficulties, shows how modern objects are possible only with a severing of direct relationships. His point is we can't go back.

Gemey Kelly agrees with Thwaites – globalization, with its mass-produced mass-consumerism, is a centralized engagement for many of the artists working with the handmade. Some may be criticizing the state of things, but, unlike the hippie movement, Kelly says there isn't a dropout mentality.

Kelly points to the success of the gallery's Handmade Study Breaks – "informal, drop-in, artist-led workshops for everyone" – and artist Tonia Di Risio's pasta-making workshop/family dinner last fall as examples of how the handmade isn't as 'alternative' as it once was.

For Kelly, the integrated aspect of contemporary handmade culture is rooted in its performative nature. In her essay for *Bona Fide* she compares the handmade to the work of conceptual artists like Gerald Ferguson, where "you define a task, do it and the artwork is the result of that task being carried out."

Much like how a quilt can tell a particular unwritten history, contemporary handmade objects have the ability to convey a concept. It's not necessarily the object itself, but the making of the object that is the substance and subject with their preoccupation with the homemade.

From Sackville-based designer Paul Henderson's event posters to Glasgow-based Deirdra Nelson's fine-knitted garments for found toy animals and A Handmade Assembly participant Robyn Love's literal *The Knitted Mile* project, the handmade engages concept with a wider community.

Kallie Garcia, who runs The Little Armadillo Print Shop out of the old hardware store in Sackville, is all about community engagement. She loves giving workshops, teaching members how to do things themselves and providing tips to help make screen printing as accessible as possible to people.

"I like the idea of looking at art as a form of communication," Garcia says, which makes sense given her shyness, "where you don't have to show people much, but they can just go through the motions."

But this performative engagement shouldn't be confused with traditional sewing bees and crafting groups. Many of the fine artists in Sackville approach the handmade first as a solitary studio practice before a more communal, shared affair.

Baie Verte fibre artist Anna Torma helped establish this tendency. Although she won't be participating in this week's events in Sackville – her exhibition *Encyclopaedia Domestica* opens Saturday, April 2, at Cambridge Galleries in Cambridge, Ont. – she has impacted many of the participating artists.

Torma moved to the Sackville area in 2002, and says she had to establish a culture of the handmade in the fine art community. But not through organizing events.

"My contribution to the area of craft is showing it can be serious. Probably many people welcome it, because if you have something of high quality you



A screen-printed pillow by Kallie Garcia, founder of The Little Armadillo Print Shop.

salon



...nes From a Secret World.



Left: Jerry Ropson's 'Little Red Book,' ink, paint, tape and vinyl in tiny sketchbook 2010-11.



Right: Deirdra Nelson's 2011 silk and gold leaf 'Dowry.'



Above: one of Sackville artist Leah Garnett's fine embroidered handkerchiefs.



San Francisco-based Rachel Beth Egenhoefer's 'Looped,' low-tech animation made by a computerized knitting machine.



can grow to emulate that," Torma says. Torma is surprised to see so many young people working with the handmade. She worked with it out of necessity – it was all she had. John Murchie says it's the same for many young people, except it's a decision that that's all they want to have.

And Murchie, with the Struts Gallery board, have been supportive of this decision. Open Studio residents working with the handmade have inspired local artists, and the residency too has encouraged artists from abroad to pursue the handmade.

Jerry Ropson, who is now Sackville-based and teaching at Mount Allison, was one of those visiting artists. Although he became involved with zines, comics and handmade culture through his fine art practice, there was always a divide. Then he had his residency at Struts.

"There were my zines and comics and then there was my fine art. My fine art belonged in galleries and my comics and zines belonged in envelopes in the mail," Ropson says. "I showed John (my comics) and said, 'I kind of want to make more of these, would that be OK?' He looked at me like I was crazy for asking permission. It was the first time I realized I didn't have to differentiate between my art making and the things that I do every day."

It's the accessibility and potential for widespread distribution that attracts Ropson to the handmade. He jokes that his zine *Bats Want My Girlfriend*, which has been exhibited as far as Italy and Sweden, has gone further than he will ever go with his "art."

This expansion of influence is also part the ambition behind Struts' interest in hosting A Handmade Assembly. While aiming to be a venue for discussion and clarification of the myriad motives behind the handmade and its potential uses and impacts, the gallery is also using the power of the homemade to reach a wider audience.

"It may be modest in a lot of ways, but there's the ambition of all of us here – in the region – to do something that will have an impact of some kind beyond here," Murchie, who wants to move beyond the exhibition/residency model, says. "It always seemed to me really important in terms of developing anything to develop something that transcends the one-off."

And what better place to start than with the handmade. It's inherently multiple, performative, accessible, intimate, useful and more. Most importantly, the handmade has a natural ability to share a story and harbour history. S

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For up-to-date programming information for A Handmade Assembly visit: www.ahandmadeassembly.wordpress.com.



Tokyo-born, France-based, artist Yoko Homareda paper cutouts.