

Are museum displays of contemporary art and craft under threat in our digital age?

Showcasing the future

Glenn Adamson

As regular readers of *Crafts* may be aware, I used to be a museum director. From 2013 to 2016, to be specific, at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. I still drop by now and again to see how the place is getting along. I'm pleased to say the programming has been unfailingly compelling under chief curator Shannon Stratton (who announced her own departure earlier this year). That remained true on my last visit, in early April.

Two floors of the museum were given over to an exhibition called *Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die*, about graphics of the punk era – which is to say, the stuff I was into in high school. So, of course, I loved that. But it was a smaller, weirder show that really caught my imagination. Even its title bristles with ideas:

Non-Stick Nostalgia: Y2K Retrofuturism in Contemporary Jewellery. The brainchild of curator Kellie Riggs, the project aims to map a millennial approach. The punk show is a fun nostalgia trip, but Riggs's exhibition is rather more complex: an examination of what happens when the near future collides with the recent past.

Riggs had noticed that people her age (she's 32) were retrospectively fascinated by the turn of the millennium – which seems very recent history, until you recall that Facebook didn't even launch until 2004. Her generation was the first to grow up in the all-pervasive glow of the internet. Their young psyches were shaped by social media, and the experience of swimming in infinite seas of information. The message that came through, Riggs says, 'was that it would be so marvellous. We would be riding hovercrafts on Mars. But, in fact, we're all just addicted to our cell phones.' The idea of a failed utopia seemed a key to the sensibility of her peers: 'Maybe they are making the objects that they'd hoped would fill the future.'

The show pursues this thesis both through its exhibition design – developed in consultation with young design phenomenon Misha Kahn – which strikes a retro sci-fi note, with amoeboid white casework and glass domes, and through its selection of works, which tend to seem optimistic at first glance, but on closer inspection prove obsessively anxious. Swedish jeweller Annika



A younger generation of makers want to display work on their own bodies, in a casual way

Top: PWSCO by Simon Marsiglia, 2018

Pettersson, for example, is represented by a series of digitally printed brooches. She began with a Victorian brooch, scanned and printed it, then repeated the process over and over again. Imperfections creep in each time, eventually overwhelming the form – human intent overtaken by the vagaries of artificial intelligence.

Timothy Veske-McMahon, who leads the jewellery programme at Rhode Island School of Design, probes similar territory. Gripped by the transfer of human memory onto our devices, he creates jewellery inscribed with vast data sets. 'What happens when we outsource the last of our memory?' he asks. 'Will algorithms understand what it is to mourn?'

Several artists in the exhibition, including Ines Alpha, Ada Chen, Simon Marsiglia and Darja Popolitova, produce work primarily for their own digital avatars, which circulate via social media. They do 'craft' jewellery, but primarily for virtual space. There is an intriguing implication for curatorial practice here. Riggs found most of the participants in the show online, and says that even when she knows an artist personally, she tends to follow their work via social media.

'The standard used to be: photograph jewellery on a white background,' she explains, 'and I'm glad that happened, because then it could be anything it wanted, just like art in the white cube gallery. But a younger generation of makers want to display work on their own bodies, in their own environments, in a casual way. Social media is good enough as a means to show the world.' Though almost all the artists in the exhibition do make jewellery in real time, that is starting to feel more like an option than a requirement.

Riggs curated *Non-Stick Nostalgia* for a museum because, in 2019, that is still the platform that validates work. But how much longer will that be true? Though the participating artists were allocated small honoraria (a progressive policy implemented by Stratton), displaying their work in a non-commercial context – 'held hostage' from the market, as Riggs puts it – is hardly a sound business model. Building a profile via a museum exhibition, or for that matter on Instagram, is all well and good but, if unremunerated, profile is all there is and we'll have to call it quits.

This leads to a big question. Newspapers, manufacturing and politics have all been violently disrupted since 2000; will museums be next? Sure, they'll always be able to show ancient artefacts – like punk posters. But perhaps museums will soon be considered totally inadequate to the art and craft of the present day. Whatever that looks like, it's sure to be interesting. Meanwhile, I'm just grateful that young curators like Kellie Riggs are pointing the way. 'I hope there's something in the show for everyone,' she told me. 'Even people who are very confused.'
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