

Dear Katrina...

A letter to a Year 12 art student who asked some questions for an HSC (Higher School Certificate) assignment on “aims and qualities of an artist’s exhibit in a public gallery”.

Dear Katrina,

When we are examining craft works and the work of craftsmen, two questions inevitably arise. The question of how and the question of why.

You have asked why I make jewellery and metalwork and you have asked what is my background and training. You concentrate on the reasons why and look for the thoughts and inspirations behind the work. In wanting to understand why, I feel that you have concentrated on the more important question of the two.

If you had asked me how I make my pieces, what materials I have used or what unusual techniques or processes I use, I would have been disappointed. Questions of materials and processes are questions of how, and these are best answered by the many books that have been written on the processes of the crafts and silversmithing. I believe that processes and techniques are only means to an end. An examination of process cannot tell of the soul of the object, the intention of the craftsman or maker, or of the loves or concerns that he holds.

It is true, of course, that process is necessary in all forms of art. Process and technique is necessary to almost all craftwork, and to some people it is a definition of the crafts. Crafts are often seen to be about materials and tools and processes, but to me this is not an adequate description. Crafts are also about ideas.

A craftwork is a synthesis of ideas and materials brought together by process: it is a mindful object of the arts.

To ask why is to ask the more difficult question. (Why does man create?) In my work the answer is related to my background and experiences. As you already know, I was born and grew up in the country, and I have spent the rest of my life in the city. I was not born into an artistic background, although as I look back, there

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were many creative and expressive things going on around me as I grew up. My father was a farmer, always making something, my mother a very creative cook, and my grandfather had reputation for a very neat line in plumbing and downpipes.

My life in the country was relatively close to nature, dependent on seasons and a logical pattern of existence. The basic beliefs and concerns which I hold stem from these background experiences. I learnt a lot from the raw material of the landscape and the environment. I learnt a basic rhythm and sense of things.

When you ask me why I make the things that I do, and what is the basis of my inspiration, I reflect on the importance to me of my early experiences. The social and economic order has changed, not only for me but for all of us in society. In only a few years our country has turned from a rural based economy and society, to an industrial or post-industrial society of mechanisation, consumerism and technology, based in cities. These factors have a lot to do with the pieces I make.

When I make an object, my function as an artist, maker and communicator is to relate my experiences and concepts to others. I question the relationship and order in our ways of doing things today. I wonder what sense there is in farmers leaving their farms and going to the cities and what is modern man's relationship with nature.

After I completed my training, both as an art teacher and gold and silversmith, I began to look around me for new inspirations for my pieces of metalwork and jewellery. I don't think I set out to do anything particularly "Australian" when I started, I just wanted to make pieces that were personally important to me. As I looked around for symbols and elements for my work, I turned to the landscape and environment. My first conscious attempt to include some of the feelings and elements of the uniqueness of the Australian environment in my own work, was to use the lines and forms of the hills around the family farm. Later these elements became more and more literal and more recognisable as aspects of the Australian countryside.

I looked for low technology examples and found them in windmills, huts and cottages and other farm objects.

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cottages and other farm objects. I looked for symbols which related to man's balanced relationship with nature and his respect for the natural features around him.

The "Three Farm Yard Boxes" which you ask about are in the National Gallery of Victoria and were made in 1977. These were the first boxes made with the windmill symbol, and were made at a time when I wanted to return to functional objects after my exhibitions of "Constructed Images" and wall panels.

The windmill is a favourite symbol with me; it seems to say something about the lonely, expansive landscape, about the low technology devices which are important, and about the relationship of man to the land. It represents for me the delicate balance which is so important. By using the windmill form I hope to communicate my concerns for the country and to have people think about these things.

Katrina, for me my metalwork is a way of expressing feelings and emotions, a way of using the gold and silversmithing skills which I have, to communicate my ideas. Making objects is a creative, expressive and satisfying activity, made more rewarding by seeing the finished piece. Jewellery and metalcraft is my way of reflecting on society and the world around us. Through this medium I can illustrate my concerns and thoughts, and share them with others.

Good luck with your assignment, keep looking for why.

Norman Creighton

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