YOUNG CRAFTSMEN LIKE JOSH FAUGHT ARE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE SLOPPY CRAFT MOVEMENT. GLENN ADAMSON DISCOVERS WHY THE HAPHAZARD HAS BECOME SO HIP.

WHEN CRAFT GETS SLOPPY

IT’S A SCENE THAT REPEAT itself over and over again in art schools these days. The eminent professor of a craft-based department, visiting a student’s studio, inspects the work in progress. What she sees is expressive. It’s got personality. It is work that’s clearly going somewhere. There’s only one problem. It’s really badly made.

That is exactly what happened a few years ago at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The professor was the textile-based artist Anne Wilson (recently featured in the Victoria and Albert Museum show Out of the Ordinary). The student was Josh Faught. But the conversation didn’t go in the expected direction. Wilson was intrigued, not appalled, by what she termed her student’s ‘sloppy craft’. As she says of her department’s pedagogical approach, ‘Technical skills are presented and taught quite rigorously, but not with an emphasis on fine-tuning high skill as the goal. The concept is the goal.’ To her, Faught’s devil-may-care approach seemed perfectly acceptable. It was well matched to the content of his work, which explores the dynamics of individual and family dysfunction through a combination of personal and archetypal imagery.

Faught, in turn, embraced the label – or at least the idea that ‘calculated sloppiness’ was a fair description of what he was up to. It aligns him, first of all, with a line of artistic thinking running back to the first Feminist artists, such as Miriam Schapiro, Joyce Kozloff, and Judy Chicago, who often employed homely crafts with which they had no particular expertise. The 90s fascination with low or ‘abject’ forms, in the hands of such artists as Mike Kelley and Sue Williams, is another point of reference for him, as are the fibre artists of the 70s – Magdalena Abakanowicz, Sheila Hicks, Walter Nottingham, and their peers – somewhat fashionable in their day, then deeply unfashionable as their work came to seem emblematic of a hairier, hipper, and more hedonistic time. The worm has turned again though, at least in Faught’s eyes. In

RIGHT ‘Nobody Knows I’m a Lesbian’ (detail), Josh Faught, hand-woven Jacquard cloth, gold lamé, black vinyl, plaster, papier mâché, gold sequins, chicken wire, screen-printed wallpaper, acrylic yarn, dye, paint, batik cloth, drawing paper, Indian ink, beeswax and mirror, 2006
early fibre art, he sees a 'sense of restlessness, or even a sense of downright domestic hysteria at play.' His 2006 installation Nobody Knows I'm A Lesbian, with its haywire pileup of textile techniques and confessional imagery, returns to all three of these historical points of reference - Feminism, fibre art, and abjection. In doing so, it suggests just how unprocessed those moments are in the history of art-through-craft.

A cynically-minded person, however, could view Faught's work as a transparent bid for success in the contemporary art world, which has long made a point of embracing my-kid-could-do-that aesthetics. In the UK, Tracey Emin's hilariously bad embroideries and Sarah Lucas's casually thrown-together sculptures are notorious, but the trend is much broader than the (once) Young British Artists. The list of other prodigious talents from around the world who craft at least a little bit sloppily includes Ghada Amer, Rachel Harrison, Tim Hawkinson, Christian Holstad, Shinique Smith, and Franz West. The New Museum in New York has just opened its new building with Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century, an exhibition of mostly sloppy sculpture that is billed as 'conversational, provisional, and un-heroic'. And when the art world turns its gaze on traditional craft materials, as is the case with Rebecca Warren's (Turner Prize-nominated) or Grayson Perry's (Turner Prize-winning) ceramics, the sense is that it's not only OK but necessary for a contemporary artist to be amateurish. The lack of evident skill somehow implies the presence of concept. The same goes when avant-garde designers approach craft. This is a particularly noticeable development in the Netherlands, where the Droog collective pioneered a peculiar slick-sloppy aesthetic. Latter-day exponents include the clay chairs of Maarten Baas, the witty product designs of Chantal van Heeswijk, and the narrative furniture of Atelier Van Lieshout.

So why has the unkempt become so very stylish? Perhaps it's a matter of production values. If one wants to make sense of the bewildering visual cacophony of a major contemporary art fair (like Frieze or Art Basel), it's sometimes helpful to ignore how things look, and what they are supposedly about, and instead focus on how they are made. We are in an art boom, and faced with spectacular installations like those in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, anything seems possible. But making things, it turns out, is still quite difficult. Indeed, the one thing that seems to bind the majority of contemporary art together is the lack of skill required to create it. What we have now, mostly, are found objects, outsourced fabrication, bad painting, big photos printed on expensive equipment, relational situations requiring only rudimentary props, and of course, outsized sloppy sculpture. Seen in this context, perhaps what we're looking at in the proliferation of the sloppy isn't about concept at all. Maybe it's a response to the economics of art-making. For the lucky few with big-name galleries and patrons, fine craftsmanship and multimedia production are easily bought off the peg; but for those without financial backing, size and guts will suffice.

Like any contemporary artist, Josh Faught must negotiate these conditions of production. And yet his particular brand of sloppy seems, as Wilson intuited, to be going somewhere special. Faught's work puts a new spin on the always-interesting dilemma of why we value craft in the first place. There are as many answers to this question as there are ways of making, but one dichotomy seems especially crucial. On the one hand, skill commands respect. We value the integrity of the well-made object, the time and care it demands. Therefore, what we most want out of our craft is something like perfection. On the other hand, though, we value craft's irregularity - its human, indeed humane, character. We want craft to stand in opposition to the slick and soulless products of
systematised industrial production. In this frame of
mind, we might care less for an immaculate object
like a Fabergé egg than someone's first pinchpot, or
a knitted jumper made for a grandchild.
Faught seems to come down on the latter side
of this argument, hard. But it's not so simple. Like
the artists that inspire him, he indicates a way out
of the conundrum, a refusal of the false choice
between the perfect and the affective. There are
great differences between Sheila Hicks, Miriam
Schapiro, and Mike Kelley, but all are similar in
one key respect. They each separate themselves
from the amateur even as they quote it. This is not
only a matter of form - content does count here -
but form is a big part of it. The swagger of Hicks's
cascading braids, the historical layering of
Schapiro's 'femmage,' the disturbing unpredict-
dictability of Kelley's collaged stuffed animals, all
find correspondence in Faught's installations and
sculpture, which are (formally speaking) anything
but inept. This is, perhaps, the dirty secret of
sloppy craft: there may be nothing so difficult to
pull off convincingly.
I asked Wendy Maruyama, the great American
furniture-maker, for her opinion about sloppy craft.
She responded, 'I completely understand its usage.
Sometimes it's done well, sometimes it's done
poorly and sometimes it pisses me off that some
people do it poorly so well and get away with it!
Joshua David Riegel, a curator and critic in Brook-
lyn, agrees. In work like Faught's, he says, 'there is
a purposeful defiance of a perceived easy construc-
tion (belying our desire to equate "sloppiness" with
celerity) and a consequent irreverence for easy con-
sumption (in that expectations are turned on their
head if not shattered altogether').
In the post-disciplinary art environment in
which students are trained today, a long-term
investment in dedicated skills is less and less com-
mon. As Tanya Harrod noted recently, a line was
crossed when instructors began teaching skills on
an 'as and when' basis. Students learned how to do
something - embroider a pillowcase, throw a pot,
carve wood - only when they thought they needed
to. Indeed, they might only do it once. No form of
pedagogy could seem more appropriate to a culture
that seems afflicted with attention deficit disorder,
and at the same time obsessed with informal
knowledge. Right now the quintessential art forms
may no longer be physical objects at all but rather
music video mashups and hypertext-rich blogs.
The DIY movement, currently at the height of
fashion, is an obvious expression of this open-
source culture, and the crafters' emphasis on com-
This permissiveness has deeply penetrated art-school culture, blurring the line between hobbyism and professional endeavor