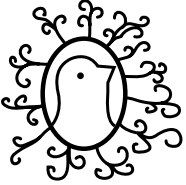


core77® design network
curator's statement



Canary in a Coalmine -- The 2003 Coroflot Members Show

Formidable works signal important changes in the design world

Curator's Statement

Coroflot is a New York-based website run for the worldwide creative community, and is home to over 10,000 members displaying their work. The service is free—the database is open to facilitate uninhibited connections between people. Given Coroflot's size and continuing development, it is safe to say that the database is not an insignificant sample of design today.

Coroflot's size was one of the hurdles to putting together this show. There are too many excellent designers at Coroflot to label this as a "best of" show. The breadth of the work—spanning 15 categories, from Architecture to Illustration—prevents any kind of representative "all-Coroflot revue." Timing the show to coincide with the ICFF, we weighted the selections toward furniture and objects. But to be meaningful and manageable, however, the focus had to be narrowed further.

This is the genesis of the theme, Canary in a Coalmine. Faced with thousands of choices, we had to begin mining and sifting the Coroflot database. The process of finding talent was one of extraction. We explored, we identified veins of ideas that ran through the sample, we found rich deposits of talent. The raw results of our efforts were processed and refined, feeling out the connections that were shared by the outstanding work in our pool. The end product, this show, was not manufactured, but discovered.

The work is on the periphery of traditional design. There seems to be an absence of interest in the commercial role of design; there are new forms and ideas indicating an important change. Mirroring the larger role of the designer vanguard in our increasingly commercial culture, these designers portend a shift in the field of design itself. In the metaphorical space of our show, they are the canaries in the coalmine.

The traditional environment of the designer, the commercial world of production and consumption of goods, is growing rank. The challenge of the designer—the struggle for impact and significance to society—is being lost to corporate interests of ROI, market share and perpetual profit increase. The increasing power of the consumer, through the rise of focus groups, has moved from the arena of consumption, whittling away what remains of the designer's self-worth.

Design as an art is corrupted and polarized, leaving those who choose to practice in the commercial realm to fall prey to either of two camps: the hubris of design master as a "creator," asserting the self onto a problem to the detriment of solving it, or into life as a neutered tool of the marketing department, subservient to the whim of the consumer; leaving stores filled with vapid product for the masses, or dotted with inscrutable personal meaning by the hand of a master.

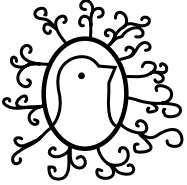
The commercial design environment reaches the point of noxious saturation—canary dead.

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Canary in a Coalmine, Curator's Statement (cont'd 2/3)



But it is not so here. The canary lives! These designers are not inert instruments, they are not unthinking barometers. They are not only indicators of change, they are also the agents of its creation. They have sounded the alarm by flying rather than dying, responding to change with change.

Where are they off to?

The clear skies of concept, the moist soil of craft, the lush foliage of art. Some designers practice self-removal from the design process, performing minimal interventions, re-purposing, assembling, translating. Some focus on the minutiae of design, concentrating on the solid specifics of making a mechanical object work, or just building something big. (Witness Chad Vermeulen's 73" scale model aircraft carrier, made from over 8,000 pieces of Lego.) Others choose to create the fanciful—items without use. Some look back at the environment they fled and mock it with intentionally frivolous work. Some re-purpose product to begin a conversation—with abstract thought or shared introspection—striving to tell stories, both narrative and critical.

In the larger migration to concept, art and craft there are many specific paths taken by the canaries:

Purity of Practice

Ramon Vilamarin's *Fold Table* is about a very specific physical problem being solved—strict use of planar components in a folding table. There are folding tables that work perfectly fine, but has there been one that set itself parameters such as this? The boundaries are created as an internal challenge to his skills and determination. For these kinds of designers—like monks, through denial, restriction and abstinence, they find purity in their craft.

Removal from Process

Many of the objects signal a self-removal of designer from design; not only from the field of design, but the act of design. Todd Falkowsky, as designer, treads lightly with the *Toy Chair*, a collage of pre-produced toys, leaving little evidence of his passing contact with the piece. Sangmin Bae's *RhythmFish*, is similar in its absence of the hand of design. Its pure, found object aesthetic and mysterious function recalls design's lost ties to invention and alchemy.

Professional Introspection

There is a suspicion of the design proposition itself, and designers ask if the questions design answers are worthwhile in the first place. Fremdkoerper, designers of *Europallet*, offers "solutions for no problem" as they say, while Benjamin Bearsch, with his *Emergency Tea Kit* and *Spirit Frame*, provides satisfaction for the most basic and compulsive needs.

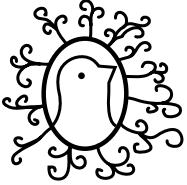
Absence of Practical Purpose

How about a mobile? It doesn't solve anything. It is there to please, spurring flights of fancy or a sense of tranquility. Mike and Maike update the form with an aerial vocabulary but allow the object to remain humble.

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Canary in a Coalmine, Curator's Statement (cont'd 3/3)

Response to the Undefined

There are pieces that offer answers to questions that are unasked or even unidentified entirely. Mark Meerdink's *Ice Cream Cone Head*—perhaps it is about play or violence or totem-making? The point is that it exists, is evocative, and asks the observer to look for its origins.

Commentary

There are pieces that aspire to address cultural or moral issues directly, making critical commentary: Mike Simonian's *24110* monument to the U.S. nuclear policy and Michael Sans' *Smoking Mask* clearly provide commentary on important societal matters. Guido Ooms and Davy Grosemans' *Dutch Delight* tell their story more obliquely.

Iteration

The graphic pieces included in the show are closer to their profession's center than those of their product counterparts. But they are exceptional pieces, examples of editorial and craft-based work; the product flock would do well to take cues from them. One lesson to learn might be that of iteration. As seen in Oberon Kok's *Entertainment is Killing Us!*, the variation is more important than any individual sample; it mimics the repetition of the commercial messaging it is parodying. Likewise, *Alexanderplatz* and *ChangeChangeChange*, from Henning Brehm, use iteration to speak of the existence of larger systems of nature and economics within the specifics they document. Cedric Sportes & Antoine Laverdiere's *Mirror* series is an example of the power of this narrative device when applied to 3-dimensional form. The series' story is hard to parse, a solid meaning remaining elusive, but when combined with the strong physical properties of the form and material, it viscerally connects the viewer to the indefinite.

Together, one can see that the designers are working to find a new home for themselves and design. One that is far away from base commercial interest.

And while we hope it is true, that design can relocate itself like this, we might have it all wrong. While listening for direction, trying to extract meaning from the database, we were naturally inclined to find what resonates with us. Are the canaries indicators of radical shift, or simply representative of design now? You can follow it yourself: the doors of Coroflot are open, the same tools for discovery are available to you. The resource is waiting to be mined again.

Eric Ludlum
Curator

