A Makers Hands: Approaches To Textile Work In Canada

In 2005 the Textile Museum of Canada celebrated its thirtieth year, The Textile Artist Designer Association and their publication, Surfacing Journal, shut down eighteen months short of its thirtieth anniversary. From the ashes of Surfacing Journals’ remains, or rather, from its mailing list, fibreQUARTERLY began. Right from the beginning it has been a game of hurry and catch up while looking forward. We continue to be concerned about the recognition of our craft within Canada. On the positive side, one of our senior craft practitioners, Micheline Beauchemin, born in Longueuil, Quebec, October 24, 1929 - died in Quebec City on September 29 2009. She was able to attend the opening of a major retrospective of her work which was accompanied by a 191page catalogue at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in Quebec City. Because of this juxtaposition of a major show honouring her work and her being able to attend at the end of her life, her place in contemporary craft history and her contribution to the art of weaving seems secure. On the minus side, others of similar historical importance and artistic merit have faded from our discourse.

In December of 2005 Aiko Suzuki, whose large architectural fibre installations such as Lyra for the Metro Toronto Reference Library and her sets for dance pieces by choreographers like Patricia Beatty and Christopher House of Toronto Dance Theatre passed away. West coast artist writer Bettina Matzkuhn wrote a profile for us -- having discovered Aiko’s work only after her passing was noted by fibreQUARTERLY (see “Aiko Suzuki - a debt of gratitude”, Volume 3 Issue 1).

That year also saw Artichoke Magazine, the only magazine in Canada dictated to fine crafts including textile and fibre arts, shut its doors after a run of funding cuts from the Canada Council that had designated Craft a “region”-- a category the CC was no longer funding. Having begun a series of books entitled Craft Perception and Practice, Artichoke founder and Editor Paula Gustafson passed away in June of 2006, leaving her daughter Nisse Gustafson and Amy Gogarty to finish Volume 3 which came out in 2007.

In 2009, while I was researching a 1973-74 exhibition, Textiles into 3D, the curator, Helen Duffy, passed away. As a fibre artist herself she was active as a curator and critic during the 1970s, during the time the international “Fibre Revolution” was changing attitudes of Museums, historians, curators, educators as well as traditional textile craft practitioners and art makers. “Textile into 3D “was up in Toronto when the World Craft Council held the conference and exhibition “In Praise of Hands” at the newly opened Ontario Science Centre. As an invitational exhibition, participants came from across Canada. Guerite Steinbacher who was born in Amsterdam, Holland in 1901 and who was living in London Ontario at the time of the exhibition has disappeared from accessible reference material. Gallery owner David H Kaye was in his mid twenties when he made his untitled, “double tatted bar” in linen and jute. Helen Duffy’s approach as a curator was to support makers whose imagination was supported by solid technical skills. She put together the inaugural exhibition “Here and Now” for the Cambridge Galleries in 1986. For this exhibition, she brought together eighteen textile artists -- not in a survey exhibition but to show as she wrote in her catalogue essay “The days of puzzled questions such as: ‘what does it add up to?’, or ‘how long will it last?’ may be over, but the commitment to experimentation continues.” The Cambridge Galleries’ mandated collection of contemporary Canadian Textile Art has grown out from that exhibition.
As the editor/publisher of a textile crafts and art publication, I am member of a very small group of publishers trying to address and reach a larger audience than a regional guild or national organization. There is international interest in what is going on in Canada. We are moving forward with hardly a nod to the past. To have a history of textile crafts in is necessary to have biographies and technical analyses of materials and methods, as well as critical analysis in terms of aesthetics and use. The current mode of imposing critical theory, which contextualizes the work to fit sociological and philosophical theory, is another way of examining a maker's work and contribution to the field. The more information that is preserved the better able we are to apply critical theory to current output.

In the past five years fibreQUARTERLY has looked at: appliqué, beading, crochet, felting, knitting, quilting, and weaving. We have presented textile construction and surface design. We have looked at makers: of art, craft objects both functional and decorative, clothing, fashion and interior design accessories and costumes. We have looked at people, university and art school fibre and or material culture courses and the associations and guilds that support continuing practice. In this, our fifth anthology I thought it might be interesting to present a selection of profiles of people and organizations segmented by their "method". Beading: Natasha St. Michael, Embroidery: Knitting: Regine Faust and Lysanne Latulippe, Printing: Judy Black and Virginia Johnson, Quilting: Carol Seeley and Kathy Tidswell, Surface Design: Dorothy Caldwell and Gunnel Hag, and Weaving: Marilyn Bernier and Rilla Marshall.

These articles are by the artist themselves, curators, established critics, historians and students perusing post graduate degrees.

This is our readership, and our community moving forward and trying to bring along the past. Entering the 10th year of this new millennium we have a century of post industrial craft techniques, learned and lost skills along with art-making to celebrate, remember and build from. Certain historic techniques exist in experimental replication because the original skills are long dead but the renewal of interest and new analytical tools are assisting understanding --if not a revival of that knowledge. Sharing without documenting is a habit we need to break; writing without knowledge is as useful as knowledge with out the skill to pass it on. It is the responsibility of the maker, the critic, the educator and institutions to make history accessible and useful.

That's what publishing is about. joe lewis April 19, 2010

a makers hands photo by Pauline Groen