
40 under 40: Craft Futures presents a companion catalog to the exhibit of the same name held at the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery. The exhibit, organized by Renwick’s Fleur and Charles Bresler Curator of American Craft and Decorative Art, Nicholas R. Bell, coincides with the gallery’s fortieth anniversary, and it highlights a diverse range of forty up-and-coming studio craft artists born since 1972.

With an aim to capture the evolving view of the handmade, this catalog communicates how prevalent and interdisciplinary American craft has become within twenty-first-century studio practices. Influenced by the philosophies of Slow Movements, DIY, and craftivism, artists profiled in the catalog merge traditional media with upcycled materials and digital methodologies, including 3D printing. Central themes include how craft has evolved from its aesthetic, media-centered roots in the twentieth century to its current hybrid presence in post-millennial making; the impact of post-9/11 political upheaval; environmental concerns; and failing economies on artists’ decisions to blend handmade methods as counteractive gestures to turbulent times.

Following the brief forward by Douglas Coupland, Bell provides a keen introductory essay. Establishing historical and contemporary context, he examines factors that set this generation of forty craft artists apart from previous ones. In the chaos of a post-9/11 world, these artists have searched for authenticity in individual process while simultaneously pushing craft beyond its traditional base, utilizing it as an agent of community building and social engagement. In addition to Bell’s informative introduction are three additional and equally well written essays by Julia Bryan-Wilson, Bernard Herman, and Michael Prokpow. These coauthors delve deeper into trends Bell introduces, e.g., the performative nature of craft, the role of the ephemeral in a culture of tangibility, and theoretical approaches to discussions of contemporary craft.

Brief profiles for each artist explain conceptual motives, uses of traditional materials, and how each artist blurs the boundaries of craft. Embedded within these profiles are an abundance of richly illustrated color photographs, some of which, unfortunately, have a dim print quality. Researchers will appreciate the detailed exhibition checklist, index, and alphabetical listing of artist biographies with accompanying color photos of each artist, selected exhibitions, and abridged bibliography for further research. Noteworthy also is the durable, tactile cloth binding.

Overall, this catalog is appropriate for art libraries wishing to expand holdings in post-millennial art and design, as it compliments with little overlap recent publications that also address twenty-first-century artistic shifts, e.g., Raw + Material=Art (2012) and New Image Sculpture (2011). Moreover, 40 under 40 will appeal to upper level undergraduate and graduate students in art and design programs.

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