A hand made wood object: studio investigation into transformed nature.

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Abstract

This research explores the importance of retaining traditional hand skills in terms of their relevance to contemporary and future art practice. I examine the hand made and the process of transforming timber into a wooden sculptural form.

I investigate how the artist thinks with the material, and how this process gives the artist the ‘sight’ to identify new and original possibilities. Furthermore, I explore how the transformative approach perpetuates new knowledge, and how skills are modified and adapted to suit the changes. I describe this as a dialogic process.

The research examines the correlation between the transformative process and the hand made object, the imprint of the maker and how their memories of the processes used, remain embedded in the object. In addition, this research investigates the transformation processes used in creating an object, to provide individualisation within our highly mechanised world, while providing a bridge connecting the past and the future. Through the examination of traditional hand skills, I demonstrate how such skills provide an anchor, a standard of quality and artisanship that connects artists from traditional wood practice, through contemporary praxis, to hand made digital art. My research focuses on the transformation process and traditional hand skills, the vital role they play in the creation of digital hand made objects; as digital processes utilize new materials, processes and machinery that interfaces with traditional analogue tools.
Statement of Authorship

Except where explicit reference is made in the text of the exegesis, this exegesis contains no material published elsewhere, or extracted whole or in part from an exegesis by which I have qualified for, or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person’s work has been relied upon or used without due acknowledgement in the main text and bibliography of the exegesis.

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24. Jeannette Rein, 2015. (a) Laminated lemon leaves, (b) Laminated Bauhinia Purpea leaves


Prelude

“Using our hand grounds us – in work and in relationship. As we create something, hopefully beautiful, with our hands, we are transforming our moral and social senses. We evolve; we change. We notice things that we passed over the day before: the curve in a sidewalk to make way for a tree in the boulevard, the purl of a scarf, the transition of a capital that greets the ceiling. We observe the mundane and see it anew. The process of creating through the hands becomes a spiritual practice.”

Hiller- World through the hands

‘The hand’ has played a major role in my life, from the time I was a small child mimicking and helping my mother around our large house block. My mother was a marvellous role model, who had this incredible ability to ‘do things’. From a young age I mimicked my mother’s actions as she baked pies and biscuits. She taught me to sew and knit from the age of three to four. I learnt to landscape the garden by following her intuitive tutelage. As a child the garden was my haven, my inspiration, my solace and my companion. I learnt valuable lessons, a way of thinking and solving challenges that I still use today. My familiarity with materials and working with tools, soil, wood, plants, wool, thread and cloth, continued to play a huge role as I evolved from child to adulthood. My appreciation of shade, tone, colour, texture and form began at a tender age. These factors laid a foundation for a variety of important skills and a very creative way of thinking. In time I added and built on new experiences and skills, to create the artistic palette I have today. I have a culturally rich Swiss heritage and I was given an appreciation of nature, culture and the arts, as all featured significantly in my home life.

I look down at my hands and I remember my mother’s hands. We are linked through our hands back through the threads of time to our ancestors. Knowledge and skills have been handed down through the generations, like an investment that has evolved over time with changes in technology, and evidence of this remains in a handed down Fair Isle jumper designed by a family member. The uniqueness of the design, the consideration of stitch and colour is the lasting impression of the maker’s expert touch and skills.

Introduction

In contemporary society we desire the newest, yet as soon as it becomes available it quickly becomes redundant. Today’s cultural network of the global world relies heavily on the virtual and visual, creating a detachment of the mind and body and a severance from the physical environment. This detachment between mind and body activities signals a slow demise and loss of our culture’s age old skill base and a decrease in the interest and value attributed to an object made by hand in contemporary society. Objects act as anchors of time as they define the period in which they were made and, decorate, create and shape the environment in which we live. The form created by the maker’s hand is influenced by exploration, development and the changing attitudes and values of society. As an artist I celebrate process and the individuality of the hand made object, whilst my fine wood sculptures are contemporary renditions of traditional skills.

My primary intention in undertaking this research, is to explore the importance of retaining traditional hand skills and their relevance to contemporary and future art practice. Furthermore, I consider the indivisible link between such skills and the hand made wooden form. The values of the hand processed object are intertwined with material and conceptual qualities and are affected by the cultural fabric in which the object is made and received. I explore what effect the digital age will have on the retention of traditional hand skills and the value of objects made by hand, and conclude there is no likelihood that we will lose them. The context of creation requires the combination of old and new knowledge, skills and tools to create new products.

Using a broad research strategy I investigate the areas of praxis where transformation occurs to understand the physical and metaphysical forces at play, and argue my own philosophical or theoretical ideas. Transformation in this context refers to a complete or major change in the appearance and form of my medium, wood. In examining these ideas I realize the profound effect my dyslexia has on how I think, resolve challenges, and handle materials and tools. I discuss the impact dyslexia has on theoretical and practical aspects of my praxis. Furthermore these

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2 Juhani Pallasmaa. The Thinking Hand; Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture. (Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2009), 2.
thoughts are explored through experimental studio based art work, with the research outcomes presented at the exhibition of my practical portfolio.

My research has been centred on the practical creative processes engaged in the creation of sculptural forms in my chosen medium, wood. In this approach, processes and techniques used are intrinsically subjective to the understanding of both the practical enquiry and the outcome, not the product. The analogous philosophy of practice and research aligns with the theory of material thinking, which will form the basis of this investigation, which is discussed in chapter one. Using this approach I investigate the origin of ‘skills’ and the role the hand plays, in the dialogue between the maker and their medium. This presents the opportunity to evaluate the significance and contribution of the use of traditional skills in contemporary art praxis. It is my aim to reveal the location of the crucible from which innovation of new ideas and techniques arises in the process of making a wooden object.

In chapter two, I identify a selection of contemporary artists and discuss important commonalities we share. Whilst I acknowledge the importance of the art versus craft debate, to discuss it at any length would detract from the focus of this research. Next I investigate the notion of ‘lost’ traditional hand skills, and present the idea of mentorships as a means of fostering the learning of traditional skills and the sharing of knowledge. It is the sharing of skills that perpetuates the passing on of knowledge to the next generation. At the end of this chapter I discuss the impact of the digital hand made and what effect this new technology will have on traditional hand skills and contemporary art praxis.

In chapter three, I firstly discuss the importance of creative agency, looking at how the emphasis shifts focus from the product, and greater significance is given to the agents involved in the process of making the artwork. Next I present a discussion of the practical component of this research. My technical difference and unique philosophy is that I treat the wood as a textile. I provide insight into the origins and inspiration that flows into my sculptural wooden forms. The rigours employed in the making are discussed, taking rough bush timber and transforming it, bringing the sculptural form to the edge of destruction and yet the dynamic form remains whole.

My conclusion presents the argument that the process is dialogic with an interplay between the artist’s skills and what the medium itself calls for. I argue the resulting process is akin to the Chinese philosophy of wu wei.
Chapter One: The Thinking Hand

…the soul is analogous to the hand; for as the hand is a tool of tools,
so the mind is the form of forms and sense the form of sensible things.⁴

This chapter examines how the creation of an object is linked to the role of the artisan’s hand and their interaction with the medium, as the object’s site of genesis. It is from this process which innovation, new ideas and techniques arise. Furthermore, I will investigate how the old skills traditionally based in wood sculpture, still play a vital role in this transformation of a medium and in contemporary art practice. I will be using the theoretical premise, material thinking as the basis of this investigation. In studio work both research and practice are intertwined as relational objects of thinking, with “a prescribed delineated thought pattern based on material thinking.”⁵ Material thinking contemplates what is happening in the process at the face, or rather within the fibre of the material.

Wood is not a passive material and the processes used in the making of a sculpture, creates its own intelligence which interacts with the creative knowledge of the artist. Paul Carter says this collaboration between material and maker, “is not simply a pragmatic response to increasingly complex conditions; it is what begins to happen whenever artists talk about what they are doing, in that simple but enigmatic step, joining hand, eye and mind in a process of material thinking.”⁶ Carter draws attention to the importance of the interaction of the hand, eye and mind which are necessary constituents in material thinking. During the process of making, reflection and evaluation of the artist’s responses to changes in the process are continually being made. Material thinking is a cognitive process that gives my practice a rationale. It is a logic that supports a specific sensitivity that interacts with the intelligence of materials and processes used to create an artwork. It specifically identifies the area of where new knowledge evolves, within the fabric of the transformation of a wooden form.

Paul Carter investigates creative research by examining the various methods that artists encounter within the field of creative research, and concludes that the

⁴ classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.3.iii.html.
⁶ Ibid., xii.
“creative form has a non-linear structure.” Carter discusses how artists exhibit unspecified elements within their practice, bringing to the fore the idea of how artists explore the unknown as an open process. Carter uses John Wolseley’s practice of working with ink blots, to illustrate how the ink blots are a material interaction between the paper and the watercolour paints. (see fig.1). In Paul Carter’s opinion they embody ‘material thinking’ and they are “free from the burden to represent anything.” For an artist not knowing the outcome of a process can produce a surprise element that presents new potential for creative research.

Figure 1. John Wolseley A Natural History of Sand Dunes. Arrerente Desert. 1992-3. Watercolour, colour pencil, gouche, graphite and ink on paper. 86 x 141cm.

This investigation examines the importance of the hand and the role it takes in the transformation of a material. The most basic human tool is the hand and the acquisition of a skilful association with tools and materials, exists in all labour driven acts performed by humans. Tony Fry, a design theorist, and philosopher influenced by Martin Heidegger, states: the qualification of (art) practice is based “on the articulated relation between the hand and mind in making which serves a direct human presence, as the loci of power and knowledge, in the made.” What is crucial here is the flowing, seamless action where the hand, eye and mind collaborate into a singular and subliminal harmony of reaction and response. Conscious skilling

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7 Ibid., 25.
8 Ibid., 26.
9 Tony Fry. Green Hands against Dead Knowledge in Remakings. (Sydney, Australia: Envirobook. 1994), 97.
becomes unconscious with the involvement of ‘flow’. Juhani Pallasmaa, a Finnish architect and academic says: “It’s as if my existential sense exuded the work...the mental and material flow between the maker and the work is so tantalising that the work seems to be producing itself.” A Hungarian psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihayli identified this psychological concept of flow whereby the individual experiences effortless action, usually during a period of intense ‘being’ or concentration. "It is a source of mental energy in that it focuses attention and motivates action." Flow instils curiosity, it creates a rhythmic, cyclic movement, balancing feedback from the hand, into the process, back to the maker. The flow experience has a number of attributes:

- Clear goals every step of the way
- Immediate feedback to one’s actions
- A balance between challenges and skills
- Action and awareness are merged
- Distractions are excluded from consciousness
- There is no worry of failure
- Self-consciousness disappears
- The sense of time becomes distorted
- The activity becomes autotelic

Flow harmonizes the different constituents involved in the work process, creating greater efficiency and a higher degree of skill in the collaboration between the hand, tools and the material.

Few philosophers have taken technology as seriously as Martin Heidegger, and his insights are supportive of material thinking. In his book, *Being and Time*, he identifies with technology as an ontological faculty. He is of the opinion that our understanding of the world comes through our innate handling of material, not theoretically through reflective knowledge. The association we have with our environment, “are those things that we deal with, noting that the kind of dealing which is closest to us....is not bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind which manipulates things and puts them to use.” One does not understand and learn how

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15 Ibid., 95.
to use a material without first handling it, an innate process that starts in childhood. It is through the experience of handling a material that original ideas are discovered.

Material thinking occurs at the point of interaction between the handling and working of a material where something unforeseeable and unique occurs, and this is where new knowledge emerges. Barbara Bolt suggests that, “Material thinking is the magic of handling”\(^\text{16}\). “Handlability means that our primary access to the world is through “handling” - conceived as an active engagement with the beings about us - whereas Western theories of knowledge privilege a disengagement, reflective mode of ‘theoretical’ understanding.”\(^\text{17}\) Bolt and Heidegger both identify handlability as having a practical understanding, an evolving knowledge that is sustained by unpredictable occurrences within the process and the transformation of the material into the making of a form; such as my wooden forms.

Tacit knowledge plays an important role in material thinking, however there is ambiguity that surrounds this knowledge because of its elusive character. Tacit knowledge, a term coined by Michael Polanyi in 1966, is a type of knowledge through which: “….we can know more than we can tell.”\(^\text{18}\) This is not conventional knowledge as it is not ensnared in language or mathematics, instead it is embedded in the mind and body of a person and it is only witnessed by its action. In other words our skills and experience are based on personal knowledge which cannot be formalised, however it contributes to the making of the hand made product. Intuitively this relates to knowing what and how. Knowledge is a culmination of experience embedded within the artist. The reflective artist recognizes the accidental and facilitates this new knowledge into the transformation process. The artist can set up ‘the field of play’, so that this intuitive knowledge arises more often. This ‘setting up’ is itself an intellectual process. This embedded knowledge is especially invaluable when using wu wei to create new wooden art forms. Wu wei is a Chinese Tao concept meaning “emptiness and movement.”\(^\text{19}\) It fosters the notion that an empty mind has no preconceptions and holds onto nothing. This simple mode of thinking allows me to go with the flow as I work, learning to react at the right time with the correct amount of force.\(^\text{20}\) Applying the concept of wu wei here, “we don’t exist in


\(^{20}\)Ibid.
physical objects, instead we look at them. We exist in between the empty spaces and reality.”

To give an example, when I commence carving, my mind is peaceful and empty, giving me the ability to identify new occurrences that unfold as I work, but I cannot always verbally explain what has happened. Evidence of the occurrence remains embodied within the processes used to transform the wooden form. In comparing ‘flow’ with wu wei, I find that they are similar in providing a theoretical way of understanding what happens when peak performance occurs in artists. They both notice, for instance, how we seem to ‘disappear’ during peak performance, the boundaries of the body become flexible in such a way that objects are incorporated within. Philosopher Drew Leder supports this notion of the maker becoming invisible, because their focus is on the object before them, so they are no longer conscious of their body.

Leder, consolidates the theories of phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, by advocating that sections of the body are invisible because your focus is on the thing you are sensing and not on the function of sensing. Fundamentally this notion of the invisible connects with Leder’s concept of incorporation, whereby the tool becomes incorporated in a skilled hand, so much so that the artist no longer consciously notices the tool. “The disappearance of the hand-held tool is none other than an offshoot of bodily disappearance closing over the incorporated instrument.” With the embodiment of the tool and process, the body is free to focus and extend out into the surrounding world. To add to this, Leder states that the handle of a tool is made to suit the hand, while the other end allows it to act on the world. “To incorporate a tool is to re-design one’s extended body until its extremities expressly mesh with the world.” Information subconsciously flows continuously between each entity, adjusting and balancing actions and responses as needed. Metaphysically, the body and the tools being used become invisible to the conscious eye as they become enmeshed into the process of making a form.

John Dewey, American philosopher and psychologist was of the opinion that “…when we perceive an artwork, our subconscious continues to judge and evaluate the
experience against past works and this “presses forward in future experiences.”27

Our thoughts are intermittent, like flashes of light, but they occur in a continuum of meaning, with probable ideas accumulating to culminate in a potential of consequences. It is at this stage that the present and future collide to create an object of contemplation. John Dewey calls this form of knowing “direct perception.”28

This sense of knowing is to perceive with depth and greater understanding, resulting in intuitive recognition and appreciation.

A very specific knowing or sight develops through the artist’s handling of materials and technology in their practice. This kind of sight is based on everyday know how, like being able to draw, or to paint, or to dance and is what Heidegger calls “circumspection (Umsicht).”29 Emmanuel Levinas, a French philosopher states:

“It is by use itself, by the handling of the tool that the unexpected occurs providing a new potential, unseen before….but the movement gains access to objects not only in an original way but also in an originary way; the movement does not follow upon a representation.”30

“Originary is something so uniquely original that it did not derive from something else.”31 Circumspection gives the artist the ‘sight’ or rather ability to identify new originary emerging possibilities that evolve from the fabric of the praxis. There is no way you could predict or foresee the direction of such a happening, and Levinas says there may be no representation of this knowledge in the final product, as it remains rooted within the processes of the practice. However there may be evidence visible in the final product but this is not a surety.32 In the hand making of a form, so much of the new knowledge remains enmeshed within the fabric of the process. Nothing is static, everything is in continuous motion ‘building, perfecting,’ however this can only occur effectively if the mind is clear of preconceptions.

To capitalize on Heidegger’s notion of handiability, an artist needs the acumen to put aside all preconceptions, to be unencumbered with past understandings and attitudes. They can then work with an open mind, in order to provide opportunities for new emerging possibilities to evolve within the work practice. The proposition of casting off old assumptions, to unlearn past work practices can be difficult.33 Giles

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27 Ibid., 64.
30 Ibid., 19.
32 Emmanuel, Levinas. Martin Heidegger and Ontology, 19.
Deleuze, one of the most influential French philosophers, identified with this situation by saying:

They say that the painter is *already* in the canvas, where he or she encounters all the figurative and probabilistic givens [*donnees*] that occupy and preoccupy the canvas. To try and remove the figurative givens is a very difficult thing.\(^{34}\)

This is not a new notion as artists in the past have struggled to unburden their style of practice by unlearning all the principles and constraints of their art training, in order to be free to embrace an experimental mode of working. Interestingly the more I considered this idea of unburdening, I realized I could not remember never experiencing this, which created a great moment of self-reflection and insight. It never occurred to me how my dyslexia had percolated through all the layers of my thinking and doing, having a profound effect on my handlability with material and tools, and my ability to resolve challenges in my praxis.

My preference to sketch directly into the wood made me realize I am a material thinker. As a dyslexic, my brain is wired differently, “….dyslexics develop alternative methods to read and write,”\(^{35}\) and due to the setbacks experienced in their childhood, “They learn to look at problems from multiple angles and find new ways around their inadequacies. Having to work out creative solutions trains them to overcome challenges and turns them into natural problem solvers.”\(^{36}\) Dyslexia is estimated to affect some 10% of the Australian population.\(^{37}\) Some dyslexic artists are able to “perceive multi-dimensionally with heightened intuition and insightfulness.”\(^{38}\) These skills amplify and complement all the aspects of material thinking I mentioned earlier. The evidence of this disorder is not necessarily evident in the product but remains embedded in the maker and the process, as it occurs in material thinking.

Some basic abilities some dyslexic artists have are distinctive perceptual abilities, sharper peripheral vision, spatial reasoning and metacognitive awareness.\(^{39}\)


\(^{36}\) Ibid.


Metacognition is the awareness of one’s thinking and strategies one is using. Enables more mindfulness of what you are doing and why and of how skills you learn might be used differently in different situations.40 Dyslexic people do not tend to have a hand dominance, which means they can use their left and right hand for different tasks and are ambidextrous.41 As a consequence how they handle tools and work with materials would be different. I mentioned in the Prelude, I learnt to work with my hands at a very young age by imitating my mother’s actions. Wu wei develops from expertise and total knowing of a skill.

The handling of materials, tools and processes, becomes habitual over time and the nearly automatic or unconscious process is embedded in the artist. Nevertheless in regards to artistic praxis, umsicht (sight) also plays an important role in the enhancement of skill and ongoing dialogic responses towards the crafted object as it gets made. When considering skill in creativity, it is not just respect for the materials used, care or concern, or the use of materials and tools but rather the interplay and dialogue, between all the above elements and the artist. Barbara Bolt uses the phrase “concernful dealings” to depict how materials and tools have a life and an intelligence of their own, influencing creative decision making or creative intelligence.”42 Bolt believes that putting the emphasis on materials redirects the focus from the finished artwork, as the “tools are no longer conceived of as means to an end, but rather co-responsible…for bringing forth something.”43 As a consequence material thinking provides a specific logic to the artist that evolves, from an intelligence that endows materials and tools.

Embodiment of the maker is evident in the mark making that occurs in the process of making things by hand. The ability to select and erase these marks are a sign of high craftsmanship. Richard Sennett well known academic and author states, “All craftsmanship is founded on skill developed to a high degree. At its higher reaches, technique is no longer a mechanical activity; people can feel fully and think deeply what they are doing once they do it well.”44 Michael Polanyi was a prominent Hungarian- British scientist and philosopher, he proposed that we learn by emulating the skills and efforts of others and by observing them. He says “the observant student will copy not only the types of conscious actions … but also those which are
not known to the master himself."\textsuperscript{45} The hand gains knowledge through touch and movement and the grounding of skill occurs in physical practice, like hitting a nail with a hammer. Touch cannot be taught, while skill is a hand/eye discipline which is learnt over time and perfected, but it is not a mindless process. "A dialogue evolves into sustaining habits and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding."\textsuperscript{46} Craftsmanship is about commitment, refinement and honing of skills, focusing on objective standards and aspiring for quality in a hand made object.

Special linked pathways develop between thought and execution, process and material, however it is imagination that uncovers new solutions. It is an intangible, ambiguous area where I have had to adapt tools and learn to improvise techniques, to go beyond traditional perimeters of knowledge and skills. Both craftsmanship and improvisation is crucial to creating new techniques and solutions to limiting issues that arise in researching new ideas. For example, sculptor Alain Maillard,\textsuperscript{47} like most wood artists, began his art practice by learning basic traditional wood skills, making domestic items from green wood. Previously he worked as a carpenter, mason and roofer, which augmented his repertoire of material knowledge and created a multiple skill-set. Maillard said, "It's interesting to see that sometimes ideas and techniques play together…I had the idea, developed the technique, and the technique allowed me to realise new ideas."\textsuperscript{48} He spent two weeks in the workshop perfecting a new curved scraper\textsuperscript{49}, which created a major breakthrough in his sculptural work, enabling him to create, \textit{I Had a Dream} (Fig. 2) and many other complex multi axis turned artworks such as \textit{Seven Wisemen Dancing} (Fig. 3). Maillard's approach to solving his problem, subscribes to the notion that embodied ideas are given form during the process of making, where transformation acts as a metaphor for constant change and the evolution of new wooden forms.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{47} Alain Maillard is a prominent French wood sculptor and wood turner. Maillard uses regional timbers and is known for multi axis woodturning and green wood hollowing.
\textsuperscript{49} A scraper is a sharp metal single-edged tool used to refine a wood surface.
In the aesthetic transformation of a wooden object, a symbiotic exchange occurs between the maker and the material, matter and artistic form. It is one of respect, integrity and value. This exchange was codified by the modernist concept of ‘truth-to-materials’. The phrase means that the innate qualities of a natural material should complement its use, with the true characteristics of the material being obvious.

Roger Fry, a modernist visual art critic writing in 1911, stated that “to get at ‘material beauty’ it was necessary to respect the life and quality of the material itself”.50 ‘Truth-to-materials’ was a tenet of the school of thought in the nineteenth and twentieth century art and design movement and arose as a consequence of technological development. The industrial age brought rapid social change and a perception that

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materials were a medium to achieve a predetermined commercial end. This threatened the loss of the traditional skill by separating the unique relationship of maker and medium and in doing so created a division between the making process, the skills base and intellectual content.\textsuperscript{51} Yet in contemporary art practices such as mine, these age old skills are still inherent in the processes I use to make my hand made wooden forms.

The phrase ‘truth to materials’ reached its climax with Clement Greenberg’s formalism, with emphasis on structural elements and artistic techniques rather than content.\textsuperscript{52} Greenberg argued that each art “must be rendered pure” and in its “purity find the guarantee of its standards of quality”, “self-definition” and “self-criticism.”\textsuperscript{53} This philosophy believes only material things exist and though it supported originality and self-expression, it prescribes “art always takes place within specifiable conditions of production.”\textsuperscript{54} Greenberg’s approach places inception and development limitations, as it predisposes which material can be used for which purpose or form. Although the phrase has its origin in art and design, Greenberg’s theory moved far away from appreciation of the hand crafted object, thus it questions the validity of the application of the phrase ‘truth to materials’ to contemporary art work. Indeed this ideology runs contrary to Heidegger’s notion of how the originary emerges unpremeditated from the fabric of the practical, it also discounts the possibility of unaccountable phenomena to occur in the process.

Greenberg moved art towards minimalism, this dissolution seems to negate the artist’s hand. As Bradford Graves, renowned stone sculptor says, “Our age is one of dissolution, an artist must literally make the plastic form of his vision from the substance of experience without the guide of an aesthetic tradition.”\textsuperscript{55}

In 2009 the exhibition, \textit{A New Truth to Materials}, by the Brisbane based artist run initiative Boxcopy, reformulated the idea of materiality in contemporary art and practice.\textsuperscript{56} Contemporary society is heavily reliant on modern gadgetry, and life is lived through such gadgetry. The artists from the exhibition deconstructed gadgets,  

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., 4.  
\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 4.  
broke them open, showed their inner workings and scattered their contents. They were posing the question of the value and nature of modern day materiality, and prompting us to reflect on the physical nature of our contemporary existence. Since the inception of the phrase ‘truth to materials’ in the nineteenth century, terminology has had to adjust with the advancement of technology and innovation, and the shift in social and cultural materiality. “With the new attitude comes an appreciation that the artist could remain ‘true to materials’, simply by engaging with the content of the objects they work with.”57 In the contemporary context, the material used, whether manufactured or natural remains fundamental in the evolving of new art forms.

Two centuries ago the industrial revolution brought with it technological innovation, which resulted in the decline of the hand made and diminished the role of the craftsman. However the passion and the imagination of the artisan has continued, adjusting and making use of new technology, streamlining their processes and the hand made remained. We now have the digital handmade, which has pushed the horizon even further afield. Laszlo Tompa’s flower lamps (Fig. 4) exemplify this. There is a new age of creativity, “challenging all the tools of the trade, both digital and analogue, and combining a variety of skills and techniques,”58 creating forms that could not be conceived before. The interplay between the hand and the material is still evident. We have computer-aided drafting (CAD - modelling), sintering and computer numeric control (CNC) - milling working in conjunction with the skills of carving, casting and lathing.59 These are the tools of the contemporary artist, however the important interplay between the artist and the material is still in the making of a hand made art form.

![Laszlo Tompa's flower lamps](image)

Figure 4. Laszlo Tompa. Lamps from the *Flower* Collection, 2014. Cherry wood, dimensions not given.

59 Ibid., 9.
It has been feared that the world has detached itself from the hand, being no longer connected to the body and the mind, but this is not the case. The rendition of age old skills remain embedded in the processes used to create contemporary wood forms. The digital hand made has combined both digital and analogue skills and techniques, however the unskilled artist still needs to learn the creative process. The creative process begins with the unskilled artist consciously learning techniques. As a consequence, the new knowledge is consciously applied and over time this knowledge becomes embodied in the automatic part of the brain to be unconsciously used. New knowledge learnt during the transformative phases, may not be evident in the wooden form, instead it remains ensnared within the fabric of the processes used. The reflective artist recognizes the accidental occurrence as useful, which can lead to experimentation and extension of their embodied skills.

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60 Juhani Pallasmaa. The Thinking Hand. 4.
Chapter Two

Enmeshed in the Fabric of the Medium

Through the looking-glass (without Alice) is the nearest I can come to what one has in mind – something one knows must lie beyond the realm of the accepted ‘real’, but what is it and how does one express it?  

Art objects embody ideas and experiences. Every artist has their own unique concerns, curiosities and finesse that motivates them to create authentic art work. I will investigate these qualities by examining the work praxis of selected artists, who like myself use a traditional medium, while their use of that medium is very contemporary. I will further discuss the importance of age old hand skills, and the effect the digital age will have on their retention and influence in future studio praxis.

Throughout history the human race has expressed thoughts and feelings by transforming commonplace materials into art forms. As Carter says, “…material matter can act as a catalyst for relational enquiry.” For many artists their design starting point is experimenting with their chosen medium, working out the capabilities of the material. Bronwyn Oliver began working with copper wire after becoming enamoured with ancient metalwork from Egypt, Sumer and Britain that was exhibited at the British Museum and the Louvre in Paris in the early 1980s. Evidence of the techniques used in these ancient artefacts of twisted coils of copper wire, rivets and patinas, are seen translated into Oliver’s sculptural forms becoming embedded in her work practice. Oliver was interested in structure and working out what materials could do:

    My ideas develop from the materials which I use and are not remotely concerned with any natural observation. Tubes and cones are the easiest and simplest three-dimensional forms that can be made and ‘played with’ …a spiral is the easiest way to reinforce a cone or tube.

The dissimilarity that Oliver claims is supported by her use of “the formal language of sculpture which includes point, line and plane,” in her approach to design and consideration of the space, “flowing in and around each sculpture and on the

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62 Paul Carter. Material Thinking, 179.


64 Ibid., 72.

structural skin which defines and clothes each work.” Oliver pared back the aesthetics which assisted in making her sculptures stand adroit from the notion of ‘grown.’ Her sculpture Swathe (Fig. 5) exemplifies this claim.

Figure 5. (a) detail (b) full visual. Bronwyn Oliver, Swathe, 1997. Copper, 180 x 30 x 30 cm.

Oliver’s later works like Entwine (Fig. 6) show evidence of the artist’s hand, rhythmic body movements and the virtuosity involved in the technical manipulation of metallic wires. “The process of constructing intricate labyrinths of interlocking cell-like structures was painstaking and physically laborious.”

Figure 6. Bronwyn Oliver, Entwine, 2001. Copper, 125 x 130 x 110 cm.

66 Ibid., 71.
I concur with Oliver that the incorporation of spiral substructures in the walls of a sculpture creates strength, similar to the finger like projections of a bat's wing. I have developed this principle by incorporating spiral channels, with wafer thin panes in the planes of my helix shaped sculptures. *Serendipity III* (Fig. 7) exemplifies this. Both Oliver and I have taken a traditional medium and its processes, and interpreted them into a contemporary art form.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 7. Jeannette Rein, *Serendipity III*, 2015. Lace, paperbark, 55 x 13 x 11 cm.

The timeless forms of geometry that occur in nature that are evident in Oliver’s work are also a re-occurring element within my work, such as the asymmetrical circle and spiral. *Spinal Whorl IV* (Fig. 8) exemplifies this. I identify these spiral symbols with energy, my growth and attainment of knowledge, continuity and the evolving journey I have taken as an artist. Carl Jung identified these as part of the archetypal patterns, the circle and spiral as inherited patterns of thoughts or symbolic images, that come from the past collective experience of humanity and are present in the unconscious of the individual.\(^68\) Of these, the spiral was recognized as “the most subtle, most dynamic. Its special movement signifies the one constant factor in the universe: change.”\(^69\) Such symbols and their dynamics are important to my own work. The word change, describes the dramatic transformation the medium undergoes, from rough bush timber to highly refined wooden sculptural forms.

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Frank Hinder, a prominent Australian painter and sculptor, has significance for my research as he was foremost in using the concept of dynamic symmetry in his work. It is based on a natural design methodology and proportioning system. “Dynamic = movement, Symmetry = relationship: Dynamic Symmetry is concerned with the actual living movement you get in growth.”

My sculptural work has been influenced by this principle. It is the continuity and the energy within the spiral that creates the ongoing evolving, transforming of material, in a continued cyclic pattern. All these qualities are evident in Hinder’s painting *High Wind* (Fig. 9). As lines merge and new shapes emerge, it implies constant movement and energy, while in *Beckoning Horizons* (Fig. 10) painted later in his career, the artist invites your gaze to go beyond the picture plane. This creates a sense of moving through morphed panes or varying degrees of light and shadow, like walking through a labyrinth, a continuous path. The morphing and shifting elements speak of dynamism, the concurrence of time and space and the liminal. ‘Liminal’ literally means threshold, a place of transition where new prospectives can arise. It is where new outcomes are possible in the transforming of a hand made wooden object. My own work is also liminal, creating the same sense of intimacy with places of transition, rather than distance from the object.

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The effect of liminal space is very much a presentation of light and shadow. This is because shifting qualities of varying degrees of light and shadow, can create an allusiveness in sculpture. The use of shadows was an integral part of Bronwyn Oliver’s sculptural work, *Curl/ Schiaparelli* (Fig. 11), which shows elements of this phenomenon. Oliver says, “Sometimes the shadow would be more powerful than the object, becoming the work itself.”

Shadows can be evocative and imply the presence of a kind of life force. Oliver’s intentions were to create, “A presence, an energy in (her) objects that human beings can respond to on the level of a soul or spirit.” In eastern philosophy Chi is said to be present in all things. It is often called vital energy, as it is the life force of the natural world and it is both matter and energy, and it is released or given greater presence and flow through wu wei. In my own work I present the chi of wood as a living tissue that is continually evolving as

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75 *Taoism and the Taoist Arts – Main Concepts* (2).
we are, but to capture a glimpse of living light in a wooden form would be the ultimate for any artist.

Figure 11. Bronwyn Oliver, *Curl/Schiaparelli*, 1988. Copper wire, 80 x 80 x 25cm.

Shadows and a desire to encapsulate life’s energy in one’s artwork, can create a sense of mystery. Felicity Fenner confirms this by saying Oliver’s methodologies and meaning were shrouded in mystery. Hannah Fink attributes this mystery to the mystical qualities of Oliver’s work imbued with references to archaeology, geometry, philosophy and things that have been washed up out of the sea. “Because they don’t have backbones they look like they’re supported and they’ve floated in, they don’t share gravity like we do, they’ve come from somewhere else.”

There is a cognitive dissonance here that Oliver and myself use “hard” materials to create soft flowing forms. Applying allusive and elusive qualities in our sculptures, I believe displaces the work from the ordinary towards creating mystery in the art form.

This is because light is a central concern in terms of luminosity and the notion of weight in my sculptures. Like Anthony Scala I often enhance the liminal by adding a light source to my work. Scala, an English glass artist, works with optical illusion to create amazing refractive glass sculptures. *Annulum* (Fig. 12) and *Coriolis* (Fig. 13), are two of Scala’s most recent sculptures, and they illustrate the importance of the lit

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surface. “Light exists with neither mass nor substance, yet given the right conditions, can yield images of absolute solidity.”79

Figure 12. Anthony Scala, *Annulum*, 2015. Optical glass, 23 x 15 x 10 cm

Figure 13. Anthony Scala, *Coriolis*, 2015. Kiln cast glass and optical glass, diameter 25 cm.

As you move around the form, the sculpture appears to alter as varying degrees of intensive light plays over the surface of the object, and a temporary metaphysical change has occurred. The “laws of light, shadow and reflection combine in ways only nature can dictate, allowing us a tantalising, yet transitory glimpse of refractive possibilities, forever beyond our grasp.”80 This allows the viewer to immerse themselves in the intangible space, on the periphery of their sight. Perspective moves and blends due to the low light creating shadows, so that the artwork transforms implying a mysterious living dimension.

80 Ibid., 30.
Patrick Dougherty, an American sculptor, transforms saplings and other organic matter by bending and intricately weaving them into enterprising classical stick sculptures. Dougherty is often identified with Earth and Land Art and has crisscrossed the world with his art form. He uses sticks in an age old tradition as originally this type of building was used to make temporary shelters for sheep and goat herders’, before the time of Christ.81 His sculptures are a rendition of old hand skills, which he builds with the help of volunteers from the community in which the sculptures are made. Dougherty uses conventional drawing techniques to create compelling and sumptuous surface texture. He emphasizes the visual power of the diagonal line, by applying ‘sticks’ like a sketched line onto the final outer surface, giving the building a sense of motion and finesse. The sculpture Ballroom (Fig. 14), built for the celebration of Federation Square’s tenth birthday, exemplifies this continuous spiralling rhythm, generating energy and a vigour, which strengthens the structure.


The building process is transformative, the saplings woven into the walls convey a storyline woven around a fanciful illusion. Dougherty’s sculptures Spinoffs (Fig.15) and Call of the Wild (Fig.16) illustrate this. “…childhood shapes a sculptor’s choice of his or her materials…tree branches and saplings have the rich associations with childhood play.”82 Throughout childhood, tactility begins through playing with a variety of materials. This is a continual process, developing layer upon layer of experience,

refining dexterity skills, contributing to foundational knowledge of what materials can do.


Dougherty creates sculptures that respond to the site, by “folding something into a space, to make it feel like it has always been there, creating a rightness of being.”83 The sculpture, Around the Corner (Fig. 17) exemplifies the folding of the building wall to compliment the trees in the site. There is a timelessness, wit and humanity present

in Dougherty’s sculptures, created out of humble sticks that evolve into complex wooden shelters, evoking ancient architecture.

Figure 17. Patrick Dougherty, Just Around the Corner, April –Dec. 2003. Mixed hardwood saplings. 100 x 18 x 15 feet. University of Southern Indiana, New Harmony Gallery, New Harmony, IN.

Knowing assists the artist in honing their skills of perception through the processes of reflection and inquiry, influencing their expectations and assumptions to adjust to the new knowledge that filters through. It allows for the translation of visual stimuli, and with the assistance of unconscious foreknowledge, the artist can assess possible scenarios the art process could take. The German sculptor Wolfgang Laib says he experiences a tremendous vibration, while Bronwyn Oliver “had a surety of vision.” Dougherty speaks about “the feeling of rightness, referring to it as a way of knowing.” For me knowing is an essential tool that promotes personal growth and decision making in the processes used in the transformation of a wooden object. For myself, I find the sculpture has a warm vibration about it, it just looks right. This concept is difficult to articulate for the experience remains in abstraction. It arises from the artist’s embodied experiences, through intuition, perception, imagination and memory, which culminates from working in their chosen art field.

The hand and the environment, natural materials and instinct are also the premise of British artist Andy Goldsworthy’s practice. He produces site specific sculpture and land art in mostly natural and sometimes urban settings. Goldsworthy constructs his

86 Catherine Keenan (December, 2005). Twister. The Sydney Morning Herald magazine, issue 32. 68.
artwork in situ, often walking out into the landscape armed only with a camera, with no direction in mind, influenced by the season and the weather. (Fig. 18). “I enjoy the freedom of just using my hands and found tools – a sharp stone, the quill of a feather and thorns.”

Goldsworthy will find a material or just stop at a place, “for me, looking, touching, materials, place and form are all inseparable from the resulting work.”


91 Ibid., 53.


We learn by observing the skills and efforts of others and by emulating them. Michael Polanyi, brought “the crucial concepts of tacit knowledge and personal knowledge to the forefront of inquiry.”

Polanyi said “the observant student will copy not only the types of conscious actions … but also those which are not known to the master himself.”

Crafting masterworks of wood, ceramics, or metal – whether for utility or simply the delight of the eye – historically has been predicated upon intensive training, as generations of master craftspeople have counselled their apprentice in the tools and techniques of their trade.
In contemporary art practice artists learn and emulate skills through mentorships from artistic elders by attending intensive workshops, where masters share their technical and stylistic approaches. This is especially fostered in woodturning circles in America, England, France and Australia. Mark Sfirri, a world renowned sculptor and woodturning artist, who specializes in multi axis turning, has had a tremendous influence on wood artists, especially Alain Mailland and Derek Weidman.\textsuperscript{93} Multi-axis woodturning is based on mathematical principles, which is critical as six to ten, or more axis turns are executed in the production of the resulting form. This is an excellent example of the development of old skills and the genesis of new art forms, and is evident in the work of Mailland and Weidman (Fig.19 & 20). Gestures learnt become subliminal in the artist’s creative reverie, flowing on to new abilities to transform timber into unique hand made wooden objects.

Figure 19. Alain Mailland, \textit{Tectonique}, 2011. Locust burl, 26 x 15 cm.

Figure 20. Derek Weidman, \textit{Mandrill}, 2010. Box elder and pigments, 23 x 23 x 35.5 cm.

\textsuperscript{93}Mark Sfirri is an Associate Professor of Fine Woodworking at Bucks Community College in Philadelphia, USA. He has given lectures and demonstrations all over world. His work blurs the line separating woodturning from sculpture.
The notion of the hand made is synonymous with the qualities of the personal, unique and genuine. The hand is symbolic of the processes used to make the object. It creates a sense of something that is exceptional and has worth. Thus there will always be a place in society for handmade objects, as author Mark Thomson\(^\text{94}\) argues:

> People want tangibility. It’s that sense of grasping things, manipulating them and changing their form. And transferring your identity onto raw materials. You put yourself into that thing you’ve made and it sticks around long after you’re gone.\(^\text{95}\)

In the past most trades were represented by a guild. In the twenty-first century this has been almost replaced with the development of fellowship amongst makers being fostered by events like the Lost Trades Fair and artist collaborations, here in Australia and overseas. George Smithwick, a Cooper, said the “guardianship of trade secrets has contributed to the ‘trades’ downfall.”\(^\text{96}\) However in the twenty-first century new platforms have evolved in the dissemination of knowledge and skills. With the use of the internet and global travel, artists are seeking out and participating in artist collaborations and artist workshops, demonstrations and residencies. Craftsmanship, knowledge and skill dissemination all build on the past but also create the new. It is an evolving process that incites the transformation of a medium such as wood.

An example of this interchange is the Lost Trades Fair in Kyneton, Victoria originated in 2014, with the aim to provide a platform to revive and renew an appreciation of quality workmanship. One hundred trades and a variety of media are showcased. The idea is to give the public an opportunity to meet the makers as “people are fascinated when artisans and craftspeople openly demonstrate their skills and share their knowledge.”\(^\text{97}\) This event draws some sixteen thousand people, “who want to preserve traditions of making that epitomise long held values and aesthetics.”\(^\text{98}\)

The digital age is upon us, bringing new materials, processes and machinery that interfaces with the traditional analogue tools of the past, to create high quality individual art work. Lucy Johnston, author of *Digital Handmade*, states that computer

\(^{94}\) Mark Thomson is the author of Rare Trades, Making things by hand in the digital age.


generated artwork “retains the soul of the material and the skill of the hand.” Being curious about this claim, I recently attended a three-dimensional design workshop using Tinkercad software. The software is easy to use and I could see a number of applications that I could use in my sculptures, such as making my own leaf vein inserts that would be stronger and more durable than the organic ones I make at present. There are also a number of computer design studios online, offering a range of custom made products such as jewellery, housewares, puzzles and number of other items. Design studio Nervous System is one of these. People also have the opportunity to design their own product if they wish. This situation offers an amazing potential for individuation not known before, but sometimes such a process can be very expensive depending on the material you are printing with and the size of the product. It is important to note that Johnston applies the term ‘digital artists’ to those who use digital processes to create their physical work, signifying that this term is no longer exclusively used to identify artists using digital film and media. From my research, there are a number of digital artists such as Jeroen Veerhoeven, Ariel Zucherman, Laszlo Tompa, Gareth Neal and Paul Loebach, who work mainly with wood but are using digital processes to make their forms. As an example, Gareth Neal has been exploring materiality and processes associated with wood practice, in the pursuit to re-interpret wood by placing it in another context. Vessels (Fig. 21), exemplifies this.

![Figure 21. Gareth Neal, Vessels, 2009. CNC-routed in ash wood. 460 x 190 x 190 cm.](image)

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100 Nervous System is a generative design studio. [www.n-e-r-v-o-u-s.com](http://www.n-e-r-v-o-u-s.com) Accessed June, 2016.
Through multifaceted processes including both digital and hand skills, wood is being placed in a new context, however the elements of the hand made and the transformation of nature are still evident.

Though the digital era is combining new technologies and traditional tools, and is anchored by the skill, processes and vision of the traditional craftsperson, the digital transformative processes are benefited by the precision and high quality of this technology. However the connection between the artist and their material is still inherent as in the past. Digital art practice does not negate in maintaining traditional skills and trades, as it is in its interest to preserve the old traditions of making, values and aesthetics. Many traditional artisans wish to preserve the traditions of making which epitomise long held values and aesthetics. However, to maintain traditional trades and skills, it is important that traditional artisans share their knowledge and disseminate it through artist collaborations, specific fairs, artist residences, as well as artist websites and workshops, so that the global community can learn, take part in and support it. Through the processes of reflection and inquiry we sharpen our skills of perception.

There will always be a need for hand made objects, as they give people the ability to transfer their identity onto a raw material, and fulfil the desire to have something unique. Every artist formulates their own approach and manner of inquiry, which in turn alters their perception, ‘sight’ and ability to convert this knowledge into insights. As Goethe says, the artist doesn’t think about an object or material, “we think with the object.”101 It is the purity of the dialogue between the maker and material that creates a special presence, whereby the body and the life force remains in the artwork.

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Chapter Three: The Transformation

Art is a continuum, passed down from hand to hand, lost, rediscovered, found in objects as proof of a living spirit that defies the orthodoxy of materialism.\textsuperscript{102}

This chapter discusses the importance of creative agency, whereby the emphasis shifts from the product and re-evaluates the importance of the agents involved in the process of making the artwork. The body of practical work being presented for examination has been informed by my close association with my surrounding landscape and a desire for wood to be seen in a contemporary context. The processes used remain a delineation of traditional skills, but my unconventional use and handling of timber provides a fresh approach to a traditional medium.

Before commencing an analysis of the thoughts and processes involved in my praxis, the importance of Barbara Bolt's views must be acknowledged. Her point is that creative agency needs to be addressed from the phenomenological perspective, in order to complement the agency of materials, methods, tools and ideas within the collaborative process in creating an artwork. Bolt extrapolates that by attributing agency to "materials" transfers the focus from the product, to examining the interaction between the "collaborators". As a consequence the artist has an enhanced capacity to use tacit knowledge and the generative potential of process to "reveal new insights."\textsuperscript{103} In Heidegger's essay 'The Question Concerning Technology', he re-evaluated the fundamentals of subject/object duality that influences the creative process as a 'means to an end' (the product), to better understand the relationship between man and technology.\textsuperscript{104} Both entities of this relationship are co-responsible in making the art work visible, which "undoes the Aristotelian notion of causality."\textsuperscript{105} The essence of making is a relationship of "co-responsibility and indebtedness."\textsuperscript{106} As a consequence rather than the realisation of the intention of the artist, indebtedness here contributes to the notion that all agents

\textsuperscript{103} Barbara Bolt. A Non Standard Deviation. 4.
\textsuperscript{105} Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt. Carnal Knowledge. 5.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 6.
are working in tandem in the creative process, therefore unpredictable results occur, revealing new possibilities that are grounded in the process.

This concept of creative agency supports the use of material thinking in my research, as discussed in chapter one. Barbara Bolt suggests that materials have an intelligence of their own, as a consequence this, shapes creative decisions made by the ‘creative intelligence’ of the artist.\textsuperscript{107} To realise the handmade wooden form we now have the basis of understanding from where the original transpires. However, to assure the degree of resolution within the art form, agents in the creative process, work skills and workmanship need to be of a high standard.

The early years of my training and practice were in ceramics, jewellery and textiles and with a background in biological science, this assisted me to examine and understand the basic principles of the different disciplines and media. On shifting my interest to working with wood, I transferred my knowledge and skills from the other media. I taught myself how to work with wood. My aim was to create high quality, well resolved contemporary wood sculptures, with a fresh approach that re-examines the medium from a new perspective.

My designs and creative work are a direct response to my environment. I am heavily influenced by my landscape, which is the forest and the sea. Living close to the beach, I hear, I see, I smell, the ocean. I am continually intrigued by light refracting on and into the water and the ebb and flow of the ‘landscape’; I observe the rhythms and patterns, investigating and gathering curiosities left by the tide and litter found on the forest floor. These symmetries and rotations of spirals and ellipses seen there reflect in my sculptures. \textit{Mirabilis} (Fig. 22) illustrates this.

![Figure 22. Jeannette Rein \textit{Mirabilis}, 2014-16. Swan Valley Woollybush and oil, 75 x 21 x 22 cm.](image)

I have never been drawn to direct representation, but an abstraction of the natural world and the things in it. These influences, along with an eidetic memory, tacit

\textsuperscript{107} Bolt. \textit{A Non Standard Deviation}, 5.
knowledge and years of experience working with my hands, is what informs my practice. As a consequence, my sculptural work is informed by a keen eye, monitoring the slightest nuances that arise within the fabric of the processes used, in the transformation of solid rough timber to highly refined, thin walled sculpture.

Embarking on my research, the voyage has often been unknown:

Each person’s life is a narrative in which the author does not know how the story will turn out... Art plays a particular role in this life voyage, at least for artists. The work of art become like a buoy at sea, marking out the journey. Unlike a sailor, though, the artist charts his own course by making these buoys for himself. I have made decisions and found solutions that have taken me well beyond my past experience and knowledge. In this anonymous thought space creative possibilities ascend, proceeding is like standing at a threshold, contemplating what to do next, however having the courage and the imagination to step across into a transitional or liminal space, grasping onto the next stage of a process that slowly unfolds within the tissue of materials and process, as you continue to work. As a consequence, the name of my Masters examination exhibition is Liminal: Transitioning Wood.

To produce the work I will exhibit I have been carrying out research-based experimentation, exploring the alternative possibilities of timber as a vegetative substance. My technical difference and unique philosophy is that I treat the wood as a textile. It is my belief that timber is more like a frozen textile with long and short fibres intermeshed to create a wooden fabric held in place with resin distributed throughout its structure so as to give rigidity and strength. Indeed, wood is a living tissue, with each species of wood having a distinct character reflected in its colour, grain structure and arrangement and pore structure. The timber’s age and the location in which it grows creates even more variation. My technical enquiry has been narrowed to the specific exploration of the tensile structure of wood, and the unique textile and translucent qualities of mainly Western Australian timbers. I am primarily working with unusual timbers not normally used in object making and woodwork. They are Swan Valley Woollybush, Kings Park Bottlebrush and Lace Paperbark. I am always seeking alternative possibilities to push their known working boundaries.

Albert Paley is a highly regarded American sculptor, who makes metal sculptures which I admire immensely. He says, "It's only through the process and experience that I understand what my possibilities are and what my limitations are."

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109 The title of the Masters exhibition, is *Liminal: Transitioning Wood*. September 7 - October 2, 2016. St Georges Terrace, Perth, Western Australia.
The physical gesture is the point at which the artwork is materialized, as most skills begin as bodily experiences. The processes involved in carving of an object out of wood involves the whole body. How you place your feet, the positioning of the wood chisel on the wood, the striking of the chisel with the mallet, how the wood slices away, the repositioning of the chisel to continue the carving process. It is a co-ordinated rhythmic body movement which is embodied within the layered process of the creation of a sculpture. Within the resultant tissue all the knowledge learnt, every consideration, feeling, idea and technique has determined the final artwork.

Whilst working through the processes, breakages occur at times and this can create challenges but also prompt new shifts in my work, opening paths of opportunity. A new path materialized when working with a piece of Swan Valley Woollybush, which was very green and wet. Using a pro-industrial disc, which cuts and grinds, I noticed long fibres standing proud at a right angle to the sculptural form I was carving as shown in Fig. 23.

![Image of Swan Valley Woollybush sample](image)

Figure 23. Jeannette Rein *Frayed collar*, 2016. Swan Valley Woollybush sample.

It appears the long grain fibres at the outer edge of the wood near the bark, were flexible, generating a frayed collar. As the wood dries out, only time will tell if the collar is strong enough to remain attached to the sculptural form, but this discovery has added another dimension to my work.

Another approach I have taken is working with leaf vein, which is the skeletal remains of leaves. I experimented with a few different plants, but the most successful was with Fiddle leaf (Ficus lyrata) and Bauhinia purpea, (Fig. 24) as the leaves decayed the veins remain quite strong and could be laminated into sheets. I have incorporated these new techniques into my sculptures as seen in the work, “Shadows” (Fig. 25) as it adds another dimension and engages with the intra-spaces in vegetative material.
Another discovery occurred when investigating the local species of timber for translucent qualities, I came upon a fascinating quality found in Banksia wood. In removing the woolly thick bark from the timber, the lacy, finely indented cambium is exposed, (refer to Fig. 26a) and on examination of the underside of the bark a series of fine three to five millimetre protruding prongs are exposed as seen in Fig. 26b.
It appears that the bark is held in place by these fine prongs and a type of lock (cambium) and key (bark) system is being utilized. The cambium is highly textured with a random series of locks or holes. I found by leaving this natural surface untouched, but by cutting back and sanding the timber from the interior and working outwards, a fine natural mesh of approximately two millimetres is created as seen in Fig. 27.

Figure 27. Jeannette Rein, 2015. Thin slivers of Banksia wood. a) backlit b) unlit. Note the natural perforations.

Small slivers of Banksia timber handled in this fashion are self-supporting, however once you go beyond 120mm square the mesh requires some surrounding support. I have taken this new knowledge a step further and have been working towards creating a large, textile fabric in wood, which I hope to include in my practical portfolio presentation.

There is no other material like wood. When you hold a piece of timber you are holding a slice of history. The respect the artist feels for the material can be intense. Alain Mailland says, "when you hold it in your hand, it is like you received the past as a gift, I feel I have to succeed with them as a sign of respect for their beauty." As a consequence, in the making of a hand made object, it has an essential humanity that reflects the value, pride and spirit in which it was created. The purity of the dialogue between the maker and material creates a special presence, whereby traces of the body and spirit remains in the artwork. It is a living quality that becomes embedded in the artwork.

It is here in the making of the wooden form that the 'magic' or rather the theory of wu wei comes into practice. "Wu wei is the cultivation of a mental state in which our actions are quite effortlessly in alignment with the flow of life." The transfer of thoughts to materials and tools is effortless, if not automatic. However, sometimes I

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start work by making brief preliminary sketches before I start carving. Having the ability to visualize forms in three dimensions in my mind, I can see the intended sculpture in the timber, in all its complexity. Firstly, after having chosen a piece of wood, I closely examine the timber, determining the grain direction and note inclusions and occlusions, roughly working out a task plan before I start carving. The second step of initial carving is very physical. The rough carving of the form takes a quarter of the time it takes to realize the finished piece. By cutting, grinding and sanding, using a multitude of sanding discs and devices or any tool which I find does the job, I eliminate the excess timber and refine the form. The discovered form is dialogic and intimate. The third step is long in process. During this time I am deeply embodied within the process of releasing the tensions of the wood so that the fluidity of the object begins to free itself from the excess timber. In the wood tissue I find patterns and movements that assist in creating a flowing form. New unexposed lines, marks and colourations appear in the pared down wood. It is like nature’s own language being exposed. In places the walls of some forms are only two to three millimetres thick, to allow light through when the form is lit. Discipline and extraordinary patience is required to adjust to the sheer time scale needed by many of my sculptures to evolve. It can take up to eight weeks to transform the rough timber into a finely balanced and finished wooden sculpture.

My years of experience in working with wood has given me the ability to manipulate the timber to create weightless, delicate, diaphanous forms with subtle shifts in contours that, when lit, encourages the caressing touch of the viewer’s eye.

Figure 28. Jeannette Rein Serendipity, 2015. Lace paperbark, 43 x 15 x 12 cm.

*Serendipity II* (Fig. 28) exemplifies these qualities, which are achieved by a harmonious balance between the elements of design, use of materials, attention to detail and finish. The theories of dynamic symmetry discussed in chapter two and the balance between yin and yang are apparent in its application here. At times I leave
some roughness to the surface, showing some of the fibrous, gauzy character of the grain, which gives a fine light texture to a lit surface. I hope to create a sense of awe by exposing layers of time giving the sculptures a metaphysical presence and ethereal appeal.

The intention of this research is to bring light into wooden forms in terms of luminosity and weight, to reveal the fabric that makes up wood. I carve and create a thin lamina within the structure of the form which when lit, evokes other dimensions and ideologies. I have found that the luminous quality in wood is at its best when the timber is green, because water is trapped in the individual wood cells and when light shines onto it, the water trapped within the cellulose membrane (xylem walls) has a prismatic effect. Every timber species has a different lignin structure within its xylem walls. The timbers I am working have an annular or spiral arrangement as seen in (Fig. 29).

![Lignin](https://www.slideshare.net/image)


As the wood dries it becomes more opaque and a stronger light needs to be used to achieve this effect, and so I need to reduce the thickness of the walls by another millimetre to capture that same effect. I have experimented with the idea of soaking the wood in cedar oil to replace the water in the timber, but this only achieves marginal improvement in making the wood translucent. This is a whole new area for study, where I would need laboratory resources to allow me to see what happens in the timber cells, as the water migrates out and the oil replaces it, or experiment using other replacement substances. To be able to manipulate this process I would need to do some testing. In my investigation I found no research has been done in this area, and it is beyond the scope of this Masters project.
Recycling is an important aspect of my work, as I use refuse timber taken from people’s verges (after storms or tossed there during Council clean ups) and transform this material into something of beauty and artistic value. In changing the material, rather than placing it in a different context or unexpected juxtaposition, my objects do not link with Art Povera or Bricolage, but fit within a new naturalism; an alchemic and archetypal investigation of material.

To enhance the luminosity of structure I have been investigating the inclusion of a light source, to improve the illumination within the sculpture. The sculptural installation *Illuminated Trajectory* (Fig. 30) exemplifies this.

![Figure 30. Jeannette Rein, *Illuminated Trajectory*, 2014 -2016. Three elements of the sculptural installation.](image)

Luminosity where constructed using a small but strong lighting unit, and one that is interchangeable. It is difficult as there is a fine balance you need to mitigate between technical, process and concept, for the sculpture to be truly successful. There is really no ‘right or wrong’, but both an open, intuitive mind and an analytical mind are required to navigate this territory.

There is a duality between the materiality of wood and my push to transcend or expose the physical as wafer thin and reliant on light. I wish to capture moments in time, the ethereal nature of light and shadow. I want to capture that essence of the experience, whether it is patterns in the sand made by the ocean waves or wind eroding the landscape. I am also exploring time as a material. Simon Gregg said “the inherent quality of the natural world is an endearing feature of the natural moment and enhances its value to the viewer.”113 I explore natural qualities of wood,

but my choice of material is always determined by opportunity of context. People belong to the country they live in, in a reciprocal relationship. Social scientist Brian Martin says, “Art is vital to the formation of cultural identity as cultures rely on practices that articulate memories, which are embedded within a collective consciousness.” Thus the connection with the land is evident when the sculptural forms which “when lit become translucent, evoking the palette of the Western Australian landscape.” These “works embody three major components from this genius loci: light, landscape and elemental forms. The works become symbolic of the particularities of this place through their evocation of its metaphysical presence.”

These hand made wooden forms connect with and are evocative of the fragile yet vital connection we need to have with our land.

What is created is always a result of dialogic process. That is creative agency plays a vital role in the praxis as the emphasis is on the making of the art work, not the final product. The essence of making is the co-responsibility between the artist, their medium and technology along with the indebtedness of all these agents in the process working in tandem. This provides for new possibilities and the unpredictable to emanate through the process of making. Such agency is apparent during the transformation of the rough timber into wafer thin, ephemeral sculptures. While the luminous element appears to make the work defy gravity, lifting it above the ground it sits upon and giving the illusion that it floats. The theory of wu wei is discernible as the meditative hand, works with shaping the wood into dynamic art forms that speak of the imperishable and untouchable spirit of living things. The aim of the artwork is to seduce the senses, transcend the rational and invites the viewer to speculate about the unknown; to go beyond ordinary limits and express the intangible experience of going deeper into the structures of everyday experience of the natural. Nevertheless the processes used remain a rendition of old skills, however this enquiry illustrates that the contemporary is apparent in the unconventional use of wood, truth to materials and the praxis.

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116 ibid., 31.
Conclusion

At the outset of this research I began investigating the importance of retaining traditional hand skills, as I feared our contemporary lifestyle had detached itself from the hand made with the body and the mind perceived as unrelated entities, which resulted in a loss of connection with our environment. I read the theories of philosophers such as Heidegger and Leder, and art theorists such as Carter and Bolt. I realized that skills form the basis of how we make things, but I needed to know how they are employed in making art forms and whether skills evolve with new knowledge. These two points create the crucible from which innovation and new ideas and techniques arise, in the process of making a wooden object.

Our most basic tool is the hand and gaining a skilful connection with tools and material, is the basis of all labour driven acts. Here I am describing the theory material thinking, which is the joining of the hand, eye and mind in the process of making an object. I used this theory as the basis of my investigation. I suspected the answer to these queries lay within the process of transforming a material. I found skills are part of the indivisible link between the maker and the material, in the realization of making an object. Secondly this is where new knowledge emerges and changes and modifications are made to adapt to this.

My research and praxis show that the acquisition of material knowledge and skills builds layer upon layer throughout our lives, embedded within us, and is often used subconsciously as it is part of our handiness, or rather the skillfulness with our hands. Through handliability we get a practical understanding of materials, objects and tools. The artist thinks with the material, as the material transforms into a form. To facilitate this transference of knowledge and skill, a reflectiveness occurs. Process and dialogue between it and the medium gives the artist the ‘sight’, the ability to identify new emerging possibilities as they evolve. This is known as tacit knowledge, or body memory, which is only witnessed by its action. This process creates a greater efficiency and a higher degree of skill. When the reflective artist perceives and begins to make an artwork, it involves the agency of many parts to determine the final form. The artist’s subconscious continues to judge and evaluate this experience against past ones and into the future.

The important aspect here is that the transformative process is in constant flow and is evolving. I learnt that to support these changes, it is creative agency that shifts the emphasis from the product to the agents involved in the process of making the artwork. The essence of making is thus a relationship of co-responsibility and indebtedness. As a consequence indebtedness here contributes to the notion that all
agents are working in tandem in the creative process. Therefore unpredictable results emanate, revealing new possibilities that are grounded in the praxis.

This theoretical explanation of the transformation process signifies how my practical research is experimental. In my practical research my technical difference is that I treat the wood as a textile. Firstly, in my enquiry I narrowed my selection to specific Western Australian timbers, in order to build a depth of knowledge on certain species of timber. Secondly, I have found that some timbers will fray when green, mainly in the bark and cambium area of the timber, while the fray length varies with grain length. Thirdly, another approach I have taken is constructing sheets of skeletal leaves and then incorporating them into some sculptures. Fourthly, I discovered new ways to internally incorporate spiral and linear lines to reinforce the walls of my very thin walled sculptures. Fifthly, I uncovered a natural mesh which I will be utilizing in constructing a timber fabric. I have experienced varying degrees of success with my practical research and this work will be presented in the exhibition titled *Liminal: Transitioning Wood*.

Another finding of this body of research, is my realization that my dyslexia gives me many advantages in how I perceive processes, work with my medium and deal with problems that arise. No doubt there may be other benefits not identified, but I am compelled to say this condition has a strong influence on how my work is generated.

Investigating the work praxis of selected artists, there were a number of commonalities that supports the ethos of my research. Bronwyn Oliver and I both use the timeless geometry of the spiral found in nature. I concur with Oliver that the incorporation of spiral substructures in the walls of the sculpture creates vital structural strength and visual energy in the form. Similarly the vitality of light plays an important role in my sculptures as it does for Anthony Scala’s glass sculptures. We are both interested in capturing light in our forms to give our sculptures that added glimpse of that transitory dimension. Perception, intuition and imagination plays a major role in Andy Goldsworthy’s art practice, as it does mine. Looking at form in nature, touching materials, inspires me to further explore my medium wood. Lastly the magnificent stick structures of Patrick Dougherty reminds me of play and the continual process, layer upon layer of experience. The refining of our dexterity skills contributes to our knowledge of what materials can do. It is significant that all these artists, like myself, work with a traditional medium and through transformation processes, create unique hand made contemporary sculptures.

Contemporary or traditional wooden objects made by hand allude to the transformation process; as the imprint of the maker and the processes used, remain
embedded within the object. The key principle is transformative processes used in creating a hand made object. This provides a vital connection to our environment. Touch and reflection grounds us, the object created has the value and individuality necessary in a highly mechanised world. Thus the hand made wooden object provides a necessary bridge to span the past and future.

The contrast between traditional wood practice and contemporary art praxis, is that the skills are more fixed. It is not part of the ethos of the traditional artisan to find new ground in their practice, as they maintain a set design, and the product they produce has fixed expectations, like the production of a Windsor chair. What contemporary praxis takes from traditional praxis are the qualities of craftsmanship and high degree of resolution and skill. In other words, at some point of time, contemporary artists working with wood, first learnt the traditional wood working skills, which they have evolved over time to suit their art practice.

I have also briefly discussed how notions of medium have evolved. Since the industrial revolution new technologies have sidelined a number of traditional trades, pushing them into obscurity. The only way to preserve these is to create a platform such as specialized fairs, web pages, mentorships, workshops and residencies. There are a number of avenues to publicise a trade or craft, in order to perpetuate the sharing of this knowledge with interested people and the next generation. The importance here is the transfer of knowledge. Thus the key to retaining traditional knowledge and skills, is by utilizing digital media resources to connect with interested people in the greater global community.

I discovered that traditional hand skills provide an anchor and a standard of quality and craftsmanship that is also utilized when making hand made digital objects. Although digital processes utilize new materials, processes and machinery that interfaces with traditional analogue tools, to create high quality crafted art work. Though many of the components are digitally realized, the assembly and finishing off the artwork is essentially still done by the hand. As a consequence conventional hand skills still play a vital role in the creation of a digital hand made object.

Through my research I came to appreciate how our innate handiness connects us through our sense of touch and sight to the world around us. I realized that we learn the basics of how to work with a medium such as wood, by learning old known established hand skills. Consequently there should be no fear that we will lose them. The context of creation requires them; and this was emphasized by the knowledge that the digital hand made, uses both analogue and digital processes to create new products.
The inventive processes used to create my hand made wooden sculptures remain a rendition of age old skills, however this enquiry illustrates that the contemporary is apparent in the unconventional use of wood. By treating timber as a frozen textile this has led me to discover a further areas of potential from this research, resulting in innovative expressions in wood sculpture. In the future I would like to investigate what happens at a microscopic level to the wood fibres under certain conditions and explore how specific Western Australian timbers react when subjected to various manipulations. To date I have found no research has been done in this area. This research could be useful in promoting the use of smaller species of timber, not profitable for commercial logging, but could be utilized more widely by the fine wood industry in creating highly sought after smaller individual crafted items, and resulting in a better use of natural resources.

This research has shown that in making wooden forms, the transformation process will provide greater opportunities for technique and mastery to evolve. The introduction of new technology in the form of digital design and processes complements traditional skills and techniques to provide unprecedented challenges, original forms of expression and more economical use of resources. In conclusion I realize that traditional skills provides a platform, which acts as a reference point for contemporary artists. The creation of new ideas and potential is in the ability to adapt tools, to learn to improvise techniques and processes and to embrace new technology, enabling the contemporary artist to journey beyond traditional parameters of knowledge and skills.


___classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.3.iii.html.


Appendix 1


Swan Valley Woollybush, 108 x 42 x 51 cm

*Step 1. Rough timber*  
*Step 7. Using wood chisels, carving discs the form emerges.*

*Step 12. Further refining of the form has continued.*

The final artwork is finely sanded and finished with cedar oil.
Appendix 2


Swan Valley Woollybush, oil finish, 75 x 23 x 24cm.

Step 1. Rough sawn timber.  
Step 5. Design lines carved into the timber.

Step 12. The walls of the sculpture are now to be refined to 3 – 4 mm.

The finished art piece viewed from different sides.
Appendix 3


Swan Valley Woollybush, Currant bush, leaf vein, sterling silver, 21x 17 x17cm.

Step 1. Pencil and chisels outline the form to be.

Step 8. The spiral form is defined.

Step 14. Spines are inserted.

The back and side view of the finished artwork.
Appendix 4

Jeannette Rein, *Shadows*, 2015

Coastal Myrtle burl, leaf vein, varnish finish, 38 x 38 x 7 cm

Step 1. Making of the armature.  
Step 11. Varnished armature.

The final artwork is illuminated from below.
Appendix 5


Jacaranda, leaf vein, acrylic, LED lights, 120 x 55 x 27cm.

Step 1. Preliminary drawings

Step 3. Preparation of timber

Step 12. Carving of the pods

The completed installation.
Appendix 6


Elm with varnish finish, 47 x 50 x 25 cm.

Step 1. A slice of wood cut from the trunk.  
Step 6. The folds are carved into the wood.  
Step 23. The form is refined to 5mm

The completed sculpture
Appendix 7

Installation – Banksia and acrylic, 120 x 55 x 27 cm.

Step 1. Rough sawn timber

Step 4. Carving and removal of excess timber

Step 17. Refining of the cell walls

Closeup of completed artwork

A fine gauzy wood fabric has been created, which is strong enough to be self supporting.