

In the Spotlight

A New Era of Craft

Craft has long been thought of as an innocent pastime, but there are rumblings in the craft communities of the UK, America and Australia, and forecasters say the scene is set to erupt. A new era of young crafters is emerging and they believe they can change the world – stitch by stitch.

Words by Donna Peters

Stick it to the Man

It's a concept that has been with us for many years and although nobody really knows where or when the phrase was coined, almost everybody understands and empathises with its sentiment. Throughout history people have struggled against this metaphorical 'Man' – he's the one with the power, who calls the shots and has the ability to hold you back and keep you down. The concept is not black and white, nor is it about race or gender, it's about standing up for what you believe in, no matter how big your opponent may seem – and that's what crafters around the world are doing.

Why are they doing this? Well, besides giving in to their creative urges and embracing craft, what drives their passion

is the desire to take a stand against a social system they feel uncomfortable with. It's one in which sweatshops are normal practice yet ignored by the masses; where most people are content to wear the same clothes as everybody else and decorate their homes just like their neighbours. The 'Craftifesto' of Chicago's DIY Trunk Show states, "Craft is political. We're not just trying to sell stuff, we're trying to change the world. We want everybody to rethink corporate culture and consumerism."

Faith Popcorn, a leading trend forecaster, believes the resurgence of craft can be attributed to a renewed appreciation of handmade goods and a move towards a simpler life. "Smooth, shiny and uniform is now equated with crude and cheap, especially when compared with the

individuality of handcrafted products," she said. "We are hungry for things that have touched human hands." People are rejecting mass production and big business companies, and seeking an environment that's not hierarchically structured and non-competitive consisting of others who share similar values. Through this unique form of activism – known affectionately as craftism – they are attempting to subvert 'the system', or you could say they are using their craft to 'stick it to the man'.

All the Kids Are Doing It

Craft was once believed to be the domain of old ladies stitching booties and tea-cosies, but in recent years this has begun to change. Younger crafters are starting to flood the scene and taking to yarn and



needles with enthusiastic fervour and the belief that they can make a difference. Craft markets with a twist are popping up everywhere, aiming to turn the scene on its head by adding irony and whimsy to the community. "We are used to the suburban shows your mum and grandmother would go to," said Marisa Mouton of Urban Craft Uprising, a new craft bazaar in Seattle. "People are using the same methods and techniques that have been going for years, we're just putting an urban spin on it."

The teenagers of generation X and Y have grown up and found themselves in cultures orchestrated by the baby boomers that came long before them; they are now searching for a creative outlet using the means available. Leah Kramer spent her 20s trying to find an avenue through which

to unleash her crafty urges and now aged 31, she is well known as the creator of the website craftster.org. Her site epitomises the new era of craft and it's a Mecca for young crafters – or 'craftsters' – who use it as a source of inspiration and to share their works with others. "Craftsters is a funny way to combine someone who is crafty and a hipster," she said, referring to the term she coined. "Crafting used to mean painted cows and hearts on boxes. There was a stigma attached to it." Leah's site boasts 45,000 members consisting mostly of females aged between 18 and 34 – proving that any reputation craft may have had as an activity exclusive to retirement homes is all but banished.

The vast majority of young adults involved in this surge have little prior

experience in craft beyond the macaroni necklaces they made in kindergarten; they were not brought up in homes that needed to make do and get by on recycling old materials. For them, the idea of making something instead of buying it is a fresh concept. The new wave of craft enthusiasts and their projects have been labelled the DIY craft movement. While this title may seem a little obvious – in fact, all craft is 'do-it-yourself' and always has been – it serves as a link to other DIY revolutions that have attempted to change popular culture, mainly the punk era of the late 1970s and early '80s. A blogger by the name of Betsy, posted an essay on the web titled *why craft = punk rock*, in which she wrote: "craft is very punk rock to me ... I am inspired by the way punk rock influences my own



In the Spotlight – A New Era of Craft



brand of activism and craft." She also says craft stirs the same emotions she felt as a teenager playing drums and making zines. "When I started to learn how to knit, crochet, embroider, screen-print and so on, I regained my sense of self and that fire punk rock used to put in my belly when I was 16." Young women (and men) are discovering how satisfying it can be to make something and claim it as their own and learning to be self-sufficient. In a

society based on a throwaway culture, it is heartening to know that many are seeking an alternative, not because they need to but because they want to.

Riding the Third wave

This new era of craft has been linked to a Third-wave of feminism, and in essence, it demonstrates a 'because we can' attitude that is about women being able to choose what activities they engage in. However, not

everybody is happy with the current climate and, second-wave feminists are cringing at the thought of their young contemporaries embracing what they view to be the shackles of domesticity they worked so hard to break. An Internet blogger, known only as Jean, discussed the old feminist views that influenced her in her article *Feminism and the new domesticity* – "My disdain for all things domestic only increased throughout my college years.



I was a women's studies major and my professors, mostly second-wave feminists, perceived the home and its accompanying activities as something from which women needed to free themselves," she explains. "The subtext was that housework and the domestic arts were drudgery – work done by women who don't know better."

Betty Friedan was among the first to dismiss domestic craft and family life when she searched for "the problem that has no name" affecting middle class white suburban housewives in 1963 – she found it in house cleaning and caring for the family. She concluded that all things domestic were at the root of women's depression, and while many agreed with her and followed suit by ditching their aprons and threads, recent debate on the argument has revealed a number of

different views. It is now commonly accepted that the act of doing housework and crafts is not the problem, rather the issue lies with a lack of choice. In the past women were given very few options and the responsibilities that were assigned to them were often devalued and this led to resentment.

Debbie Stoller is well known as the founder and editor of the third-wave feminist magazine *Bust*, and she firmly believes that the feminist movement must embrace domesticity if it truly wants to achieve equality. "We already know what's respectable and fulfilling about the workplace – basically going out and making money – and there is a certain amount of pride and independence in doing that," she comments and adds, "but I think we, as a culture, need to relearn

what's valuable and fulfilling in the private sector – the home, children, crafts and making things." Many involved in this renaissance of craft are proud to be incorporating a large part of women's history into their modern lives. By giving in to their inner craftiness they are breaking down old stereotypes and proving life is more complex than narrow labels and you can be a feminist as well as domestic.

People everywhere are using craft to make a statement, be it protesting boldly against sweatshops and promoting recycling or more humble efforts such as making a house a home. Whatever the motivation, it appears that many are enjoying using their hands to make a difference and living life artistically, regardless of whether or not they are an artist with a capital 'A'. ❖