

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Tom McCarthy

The following text is from an interview with Tom Spleth in May, 2007 on behalf of the curator.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

Tom McCarthy became fascinated with jewelry when he wondered why people wear stuff. He is interested in the adornment of other cultures. And, at bottom, it is a real fascination with jewelry.

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

Everything is an influence. He enjoys making things wearable. The history of jewelry and jewelry making is very important to him. He is drawn to the ethos of craftsmanship, the ideas and foundation which come out of the past. Tradition is an underlying hum in the background, influencing some of the forms which appear in his work. Partially, his feelings for his work come out of the sense that he is honoring past traditions.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Utility is a vital part of the work. It is important that he is making something that is wearable.

McCarthy: Function creates intimacy by allowing the wearer to literally incorporate the jewelry with their body.



*Tom McCarthy- Velia Pendant
Photo by Tom McCarthy*

He feels that the body is the center of our understanding of the world.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

He works alone in his studio. “What is the difference between isolation and independence?” he asks.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Mastery of method is a means to an end and craftsmanship itself is not focused on anything specific. It is to practice until one can do it without question. It is something that is not on his mind at all.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?

Tom moved to the South when he came to Penland School of Crafts in 1984 to be a Core student. He had been at a concentration study the spring before and was invited back. Penland was like basic training for him.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

No, because he is so connected to tradition. Innovation is overvalued today and may be just a marketing ploy. There are other aspects of work that are more important than innovation.

How is your work evolving?

The work is becoming a lot looser and is less concerned about precious materials. He looks at anything and asks how he can make it wearable. Silver, however, is still important to him because he knows it so well and he can do anything he wants with it.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

Community was more important to him in the past. Starting out, community was vital. It helped him find out about the craft world. Much of his early community experience was centered at Penland and when he returns, it is “old home” week. But he is not a member of SNAG (the Society of North American Goldsmiths) or of similar Florida groups. He’s more interested in finding passionate people who love what they do, not necessarily with crafts or jewelry.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

This question comes out of Dungeons and Dragons. “You may Pass.” (Deep voice.) Does he need a cape?

All joking aside, “legacy” is not a concept on his radar. He feels that anticipating legacy would be like titling a piece before it is finished (and three weeks later it’s so embarrassing and it’s really horrible but by then it’s already in the catalog).

How did you learn your craft?

He feels like he became a born-again jeweler. In his senior year in college, he took an elective in metals and decided that was what he wanted to do forever. At the time he was a history major. He went to the Penland School of Craft concentration program when he got out of college in 1983 because he did not know if he should make such a life changing decision based on one semester in an elective class. Penland confirmed everything. He worked with John Cogswell. Really, Penland opened the door.

The Core program was his basic education. Later, he apprenticed himself to a couple of jewelers and worked briefly in a commercial jewelry store. He went to graduate school and confirmed that he specifically wanted to make jewelry instead of a broader endeavor in metals.

After grad school he took a two year residency at an arts center in Florida that is now the Gulf Coast Museum of Art in Largo. Since then, he has been in the state for 17 years. The community is great. As for being a Floridian, he bought his first pair of shorts four years ago. And he has been told that there is a beach somewhere nearby.

Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others—the next generation of artists/craftspeople?

Sharing his knowledge is an important part of what he does. He loves to work with students especially those who are as excited about jewelry as he is.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? What role do you think places like Penland School of Crafts, etc have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South?

He is not an academic. The last time he was in academia was when he was a student. He went to grad school in order to have the degree so he could teach in college and found out that it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Penland and the other places are the backbone of craft and have been for a long time. Their histories are interesting because they were started in order to provide economic opportunities for local communities. Craft was not really central. This, as a premise, is not a problem for him. (He is very well versed in the history and the differences between the various craft schools.)

McCarthy: The thrust of craft education at Penland, etc. is to get the grammar down and then write the essay. In academia, the thrust is to write the essay and then who knows what? I don't know that academia is perversely backwards, it just has different priorities. Pre-war era craft education in universities was tech oriented and a means to another end, usually occupational therapy. Post-war moved [craft] to art departments and became an end to itself.

The technology oriented university programs in the pre-war era and into the 70's were a good thing, but they are being dismantled. The South has been the epicenter for craft because of the presence of alternative schools. They are vitally important.