

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Gary Noffke

The following is an interview summary from a conversation conducted by Tom Spleth on behalf of the curator in May, 2007.

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

He has an abiding interest in metal, metalsmithing, hollow ware and hot forging with alloys. He does the work because he can and because it is needed. The idea that craft is essential for the well being of our culture is important to him.

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?

He feels that the history of metalsmithing is the richest of all the arts. His own background is in painting, and the abstract expressionist movement has caused him to be more interested in personal feeling over and above image.

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

He makes utilitarian objects for use with food which directly connects to his interest in cooking and eating. Function is essential in his work and he believes that form follows function. Something that is without function is not interesting to him. Pushing functional object to an art status is the challenge—to do this as creatively as possible.

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



Gary Noffke- Mint Julep Cups

Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007

He is committed to working with others and is more productive when he is working in collaboration. He has combined his metals with glass artists at Penland since the 70's. One example of collaboration was his response to Fritz Dreisbach's request for a cappuccino machine. It was a new functional object. They were not saleable because of safety issues of the steam under pressure. After initial forming and fabrication the steam's pressure helped create the final form. To test them, however, became a performance piece: they tended to blow up, some flying over 50 feet leaving a vapor trail. It was Interaction Sparks Creativity.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

He does not place too high an interest on mastery. Technique can be learned except for those without the personality to accomplish the task and put in the effort. To master a craft does not make one a master. Innovation and creativity must be a part of the endeavor. He uses techniques that breaks sacred rules in the metalsmithing craft and he feels that it is important to know when to break the rules. For example—clean soldering is the expected accomplishment but he uses sloppy soldering to draw upon the surface or to activate the surface of the piece. His forging techniques push gold and silver alloys beyond their native ability to hold form and where cracks and holes are not usually tolerated, he intentionally forces the material to break down in order to create opportunity for repair. He then applies gold to silver or even copper to gold to create color opportunities.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South? If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?

He grew up in Illinois and finished graduate school at Southern Illinois University. Upon graduating, he taught for two years in Florida where he fell in love with the weather. He moved to Athens in 1971 reluctantly—it was too far North. But he would never live in cold snowy weather again. So it's the weather that is the real draw.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

Place, especially rural Georgia, has been important to him. The rural community is similar to where he grew up and the work ethic and presumptions of rural life are in line with his own beliefs. There are things he makes that are directly related to the rural Georgia environment such as birdfeeders. He shoots them up when the squirrels get on them and now the squirrels are attacking the railing on his deck.

He makes the tools that he needs, say, in the garden and this work is directly connected to the tools he was around as a child that his grandfather used — beautiful tools which feed his work. He forges stainless steel (nearly impossible) for this purpose and he has an old hoe with hand-made hickory handle fitted before he was born that came from his grandfather.

In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

There is not an underlying look or philosophy that is caused by the South. Craftsmen have a national awareness and work done in the South can easily be very similar to work done anywhere.

However, there is a presence in the South of more traditional craftsmen and in the Southern rural setting craftsmen are working more traditionally in contrast to current popular trends. Less functional work is being made in urban centers. Neither understands nor appreciates the popular consensus that non-functional work is conceptual and functional work is not. The Southeast preserves the tradition more than elsewhere.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

He does see himself as an innovator. He has re-invented Etruscan alloy methodology. Is his work really innovative since he is working with technology that arose before Christ?

He does not think it is his call to say that he is an artist, but he will say that he has been innovative.

He sees evidence of the influence of his work all around in the work of young people who probably don't have any idea of the origin of influence. This is due primarily from a lack of contemporary craft's history in academia. He is proud of the distribution of his ideas.

His contribution to the craft lies in this experiment in forging technology, especially when forging non-ferrous. He wanted better, quicker technology to further his expression.

How is your work evolving?

He doesn't really have a sense that the work is evolving at this moment. But he has circled through some ideas about two times, now. He began with great interest in surface embellishment but when he noticed that the forms were weak, he dropped the embellishment altogether and just made form. This lasted about 20

years. Currently he is making a large gold bowl with many layers of chased and burnished lines so he is back on to the surface of his work.

His recent surface work is enough to destroy the piece physically, and that is what he is working on now—finding the point where one more move will destroy the piece, and he does destroy many. He is pushing it this far for expressive reasons.

His evolution goes from extreme attention to surface to form and form-follows-function and back again, trying to integrate expressive forms and surfaces without destroying function.

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

Athens supports a large crafts community, a community that includes sculptors as well. Some of these people he sees daily. Everyone learns from each other. Because of the rural environment and their close proximity, the “fine artists” know about the craft and are more familiar with craft than artists in urban settings.

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?

Legacy: He wants to do work that preserves the craft and makes the culture a better place. As time goes on, he sees the presence of craft and its influence sliding down hill which increases the challenge of working with these ideas in mind. In academia, craft programs, which were fought for in the 60’s and 70’s are being closed down, retiring faculty are not being replaced, and now there are only a handful of metalsmithing programs in academia across the country. Literally maybe five or probably even less.

The problem is not external but internal as most of the new generation who use craft techniques want to be known as conceptual artists and are turning the traditional craft areas from specific media into object making with non-traditional materials: paper jewelry, twig pots and wall hangings made from telephone wire and bottle caps are displayed as if this were new technology and progress in education. He feels he failed in his academic career, politically. He is proud of many of his students who are active artists and metalsmiths, however feels he saw no progress in education.

He would like for his daughter to be able to sell his work to museums or serious collectors when he is gone, for her security and to have his work appreciated and see the field grow.

How did you learn your craft?

He went to Eastern Illinois University in 1961. He took ceramics courses, and drawing and painting classes. He was very interested in printmaking and those processes. He did drypoint and etching, which led to an interest in metals. At one point, after his second year of graduate school in painting at the University of Iowa he had to choose between painting and metalsmithing and he chose metalsmithing because he felt it offered more opportunity than painting. He had two really fine professors: painter Carl Shull at Eastern Illinois that gave him confidence and taught him to break all the rules; then years later, Brent Kington who taught him what the rules were. This became ultimately important to him in his work and teaching. The more one knows about traditional materials and processes the more one can abuse them properly.

Do you share your knowledge with others—the next generation of artists?

He has spent his life teaching. He has always worked in the studio with the students and shares everything he knows or has learned. It is very important to him to share all. There are no such things as trade secrets.

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, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, etc have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South?

He feels that academia plays a critically important role in the health of craft. (For example, Penland's wealth of summer faculty comes largely from academia and this has strengthened Penland.) However, he is in an uproar about the decline of craft programs in academia.