

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Craig Nutt

The following text is a written questionnaire completed by the artist on behalf of the curator.

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

When I graduated from college, I was involved with painting, sculpture and free-improvised music. All of these were very unstructured activities, at least the way I practiced them. I was reacquainted with the ethic of craftsmanship when I was working in the restoration shop of an antiques business after college. I became intrigued

with the way things were made that had lasted so long— in contrast to most manufactured goods from our time. To make things well seemed like an antidote to the planned obsolescence and cheaply made goods that were covering the planet. Many of these objects were being passed down in families, generation to generation. It seemed like one could do worse than make an object that was worthy of being passed down, and to treat the earth as though it were worthy to be passed to another generation.

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?

Of course, the history of furniture and other craft objects has influenced me. However, I have been influenced as much by such diverse things as Theatre of the Absurd, Dada, Surrealism, Music (free-improvisation, jazz, 20th Century composers), paleontology, and so on.



*Craig Nutt- Celery Chairs with Peppers, and Onion Blossom Table
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

I do think that a craft object, whether it is functional or not, takes its place in the continuum of the objects to which it refers or even to objects to which it opposes. As a furniture maker who began by making period-style furniture, I feel much of my work respects those historical styles, even while referencing the clichés of those styles, and the conservative tastes that mandate the furnishing of contemporary homes with copies of styles passed.

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

I always think about how a piece functions and is experienced, even if it is purely sculptural. It does not bother me if someone puts a chair I made on a pedestal, but I also want it to be comfortable and durable if they sit in it.

Beyond that, there are other things about function, or perceived function that interest me. Functional objects are accessible. Someone viewing a chair, no matter how unusual can latch onto the fact that it is a chair while they try to decide how to react with the rest of the piece. The fact that it is a chair gives them an instant frame of reference. So function becomes a device to open a channel of communication. The aspect of utility can in a sense animate a work. The way you interact with a piece of furniture adds a dimension that a purely sculptural object may not have. A cabinet holds the mystery of what is inside, as does a drawer. When you open it, is what you see unexpected? How does it feel to pull the drawer out? The fact that it invites some form of physical interaction gives some pieces a theatrical dimension, a piece of stage business.

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

I have done both. For 20 years my studio was in an art center in Alabama, and other artists were working in nearby studios. Because we were near the University of Alabama, I was able to find art students to work for me on a part time basis. Now I am located in the country, and currently work alone. Essentially, the process has been similar, whether I have help or not – it is a fairly solitary process. I love the quiet of the country, but I do miss having other artists around to bounce ideas off, share resources, and help keep one another's energy up.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

To me “mastery” means assimilating technique to a point that it is no longer an issue. Technique becomes invisible. Anyone who has taken dancing lessons remembers having to count each step; mastery is like not having to think about your feet.

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

No, I was born in Iowa, but I have lived in the South for over 45 years.

If born in the south, how do you think you've been influenced by it? 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?

I moved here as a child, so nothing in particular brought me to the South. Yes, of course. I have the experience of being treated both as an outsider and insider in the South. As an outsider, I think the more conservative and provincial aspects of the culture made it easier to express myself, since it was unlikely that I would truly fit in, anyway. On the other hand there is an incredible richness in the Southern culture and landscape, which one cannot help but absorb. The people, the food, the music, the literature are all unique. The people not only tolerate eccentricity, but celebrate it.

The South I have experienced is connected to its rural roots, even in the city. Everyone grows a garden. When I started growing a garden, about the time I started making furniture, I gained a way to connect with people here. I think the use of vegetable images in my work is related to the role gardening played in connecting me to place, although that was not the reason I started using vegetable images.

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?

I grew up in a farming town in Iowa, and the things that I am mostly connected to in the South are rural in nature. However, today it is possible to have the amenities of the city and live in the country. In Alabama, I was in a college town, and now I live in the country outside Nashville. Both are cosmopolitan, yet connected to the country.

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?

The importance of narrative cannot be overstated in southern art, whether it is writing, painting, craft or music. Representational or figurative work often implies a story, even if the story is not explicit. That is not to imply that narrative does not exist outside of the South, but you really have to come to terms with it here.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

I do value uniqueness and innovation, and try to find innovative approaches to my work. At the same time I try to keep my work grounded. So, I do not do things to be different, but to express things that are personal—that I think are interesting. From a purely personal point of view, I can say that I approach my work with an innovative and inventive perspective.

How is your work evolving?

I have worked on a related body of work far longer than I would have imagined when I started—to the point that I developed a personal visual vocabulary. I think the work has achieved a certain refinement because of the time I have spent refining that vocabulary. 35 years ago, I wanted everything to be new, shocking, and edgy. Now I want to see if I can get it really right. I didn't use to relate much to production potters, or someone like Sam Maloof, who continually try to perfect the same basic form. While I don't really do the same form over and over, I have learned to see the value in sticking with an idea and seeing how that evolves. I haven't given up working with new ideas, but I do understand the merits of refining a form or idea. Now, I think which way one goes is largely a matter of temperament.

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

I have been involved with craft and art organizations throughout my career. That and the fact that my work was unusual enough to need a national market, has made it possible to feel a strong connection with the national craft community. I am now spending part of my time working for the Craft Emergency Relief Fund, and that is extending my connection to that community in an even more significant way.

In Alabama, we were better connected to a wider variety of affinity groups. For instance, we knew a lot of attorneys there. We have been in Tennessee for nearly a decade and I am just beginning to meet a few attorneys. It was pretty easy to connect with the arts scene in Tennessee, because I already knew a lot of people in the field here.

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?

Artists contribute to the culture with work that represents their personal experience or observations. To the extent that there is resonance between their work and segments of the culture, perhaps that is captured in their work – so the work, in the context of time, becomes a sort of repository of culture. To some degree, making something by hand is an anachronism, now. To the extent that a personal connection to making objects is disappearing, a craftsman keeps it alive.

Having worked with antiques, I do like the idea of sending a message into the future in the form of my work, hoping that it would communicate something about me, my culture, and my time - to someone in the future. I have been the recipient of such messages in museums, in objects I have acquired, and in repairing those objects. Basically, I hope I am creating some work that resonates with someone out there, in the present or in the future.

I know that my furniture is fairly radical – that it does not really blend in like most furniture does. I would feel successful if I thought my work gave someone else permission or courage to express their own ideas, whether that is another maker or the buyer who is clearly making a personal statement by putting it in his or her home. If someone is at the edge trying to decide whether to jump, it is the artist's job to give them a little push.

How did you learn your craft?

I started as an aspiring painter and experimental musician. My first exposure to furniture in any serious way was after getting a job working in the restoration shop in an antiques business. I started making missing parts, and eventually making period style furniture. There was not a lot of good material (early 70's) then on how to cut dovetails, etc. so I learned mostly by observing the old work and figuring out how they did it with the tools they had available then. Eventually *Fine Woodworking* magazine came out and suddenly there was a lot of information available. I had been making furniture for four or five years before I discovered that there was a whole national craft scene out there (no Internet!) There were a couple of wood conferences in Purchase, New York in 1979 and 1980 that were influential. Then Jane Kessler recommended me to serve on the American Craft Council Southeast Board and I started attending conferences. Those were a big help in my professional development— both in helping me push my work, and in learning things related to the business of art.

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

Yes. I teach at schools like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, etc. I frequently do conference presentations on all kinds of topics from technique to navigating the art world. I helped to start The Furniture Society, and have been involved with that organization ever since. I am thrilled that The Furniture Society has been so successful in attracting students and young furniture makers!

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the south? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C Campbell Folk School? Other?

While there are some notable college and university craft programs in the South, I think the alternative schools have really been more responsible for advancing the field. There is an energy in those intensive courses that is difficult to duplicate in a university setting where students have a full course load. Many of the more motivated students spend their summers moving from one school to another, to get exposure to more artists and ideas than they can in one university.