

REDEFINING A TRADITIONAL CRAFT: PRACTICES OF BLACKSMITHING IN THE ARTWORK OF TOM JOYCE

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ABSTRACT

In this study I focus on the creative practice of American artist Tom Joyce and examine how his work can be seen to redefine the traditional craft of blacksmithing. Joyce uses traditional and contemporary blacksmithing techniques to form contemporary sculptures as well as functional items such as custom made architectural and lighting fixtures, vessels, and furniture. He thus brings together fine arts and traditional craft practices in bridging the categories of fine art, craft and design. Through appropriate design, the recycling of selected metal materials and community involvement he creates social awareness around environmental issues as well as highlighting cultural craft practices. The imparting of metalsmithing skills that Joyce has been involved in through teaching groups and individuals by way of apprenticeships and workshops is of particular interest to my own artistic blacksmithing practice. As a maker of forged sculptural works, I have over the last ten years used my work and experience of blacksmithing in facilitating life skills training for South African children and youth, recognizing the value in passing on such skills and experience. The primary aim of my research is to examine how the adoption of a traditional craft practice such as blacksmithing into the realm of fine art may be shown to provide a tool to invigorate sculpture within social and educational contexts. In my research, I draw mainly on writings in the fields of anthropology and craft theory. Texts by anthropologists Tim Ingold, Alfred Gell, Mircea Eliade and Charles M. Keller and Janet Dixon Keller are consulted in my examination of the craft of blacksmithing as an “essential alchemy of art” (Gell in Adamson (ed.), 2010: 464) in which materials and the ideas associated with such materials are used and transformed. Looking at the craft and mythological significance of metalsmithing in relation to Joyce’s creative practice, I go on to consider the potentially transformative experience that the development of metalsmithing craft skills can entail. Writings on contemporary craft by Glenn Adamson, Howard Risatti, Bruce Metcalf and others are brought into my discussion to further elucidate on the value of craft-based work. I finally outline my own creative work produced for this degree in relation to the above.