

EXHIBITIONS/SIMON OGDEN

21.05.2009 to 13.06.2009

Based on designs drawn from the artist's lino-collages, Simon Ogden's large-scale rug works were produced in conjunction with New Zealand, Christchurch-based rug-making company Dilana Rugs. Since the company was established in the early 1980s, Dilana Rugs have shifted their focus from producing rugs as commercial products to an approach that now emphasises the importance of original design. To this end, Dilana rugs are now almost exclusively designed by practicing artists, either as one off pieces or as limited editions for exhibition using 100% pure wool dyed yarn. However, as Ogden is quick to point out, Dilana's rug production is still very much one of collaboration between artist and experienced rug maker. Taking his lino-collages as templates, Ogden worked with rug maker Samuel Maloney who provided the project's technical expertise as the pair discussed what fibres and techniques might be employed to best transcribe Ogden's design into its final woven form.

The pieces that feature in this exhibition present an interesting play between traditional craft and fine art practices, in many ways dissolving the binary opposition between these two disciplines. While practices such as rug-making have typically fallen under the rubric of 'craft' -- with their value largely determined by the technical and decorative aspects of the work -- Dilana have been instrumental, at least locally, in broadening this definition through their collaborative projects with artists. While this way of working has certainly expanded the possibilities of creative work within the field of craft, the rugs produced by Dilana are also providing artists with challenging new ways of conceptualising their own fine art practices. One of the successes of Dilana's projects lies specifically in this exchange of knowledge, both practical and conceptual.

The significance of this reciprocal relationship lies in the differing aesthetic values ascribed to 'fine art' and 'craft'. Within Western culture, craft has traditionally been viewed as an endeavour founded on the technical rather than conceptual skills of the craftsman. Often perceived as being utilitarian and/or objects of decorative beauty craftwork has, until recently, lacked the kind of critical discourses that surround fine art practices.

In his Critique of Judgement, Immanuel Kant identified what he saw as the fundamental difference between craft and fine art. According to Kant, craft can be characterised by its adherence to learnt methods and sets of rules. Creative freedom, alternatively, is key to fine art. Yet it was also clear to Kant that craft might be treated as though it were fine art if it were intended "to be merely looked at, using ideas to entertain the imagination in free play, and occupying the aesthetic power of judgement without a determinate purpose" [Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, Indianapolis, 1987, p. 193].

In many ways resonating with Kant's statement, the rugs in this exhibition have purposefully been displayed on the gallery wall rather than on the floor. There is a certain playfulness in this gesture, but it is also a move intended to highlight the disjunctions between our conceptualisations of art and craft practices. Like the found pieces of lino scavenged and given new life in his collages, Ogden's rugs are objects typically intended for the floor. Walked on and viewed from above, the rug's relationship with the viewer is one primarily based on function. Its purpose is utilitarian. When displayed on the wall, Ogden's rug works solicit a different kind of engagement and suggest a more assertive, self-assured presence. The works that confront the viewer are, in the context of the gallery, more easily read in terms of drawing or painting. In this way, Ogden's experiments in rug making/design are tied to the legacy of fine art practice; it's modes of display and address.

Kant's notion of the sublime is pertinent here too. The expansive dimensions of the hung rugs and the powerful effect of the contrasting patterns that dominate Ogden's compositions, suggest the awe-inspiring vastness that Kant associates with the sublime. In the 2.2 x 2.2 m *Blue Moon Waiting* (2007-08), this dynamic can be easily read in terms of a grand landscape; a yellow sun rises above what might be rocky outcrops that thrust skyward. These 'landforms' are thrown into focus by their placement on a muted, delicately patterned background so that a sense of depth -- which relates more strongly to traditional representational strategies -- is suggested.

This conventional figure and ground relationship is complicated in the massive 7.2 x 2.5 m *Kaitorete Rose* (2009), which brings more intensely-patterned forms into close proximity. Making use of 16 different coloured yarns, the imposing effect of these clashing areas of colour, pattern and texture results in an increasingly abstract relationship between figure and ground. In the building of his lino-collages, Ogden inserts roughly organic or biomorphic shaped pieces of lino into larger patterned pieces that act as background. These cut 'objects' are demarcated by incision lines, and the occasional gap where edges do not quite meet. In his rug works, however, this definition is less clear. This is especially true in the energetic *Kaitorete Rose* where lines and spaces evident in the lino-collage are reworked into the rug design. Yet, rather than adding depth to the composition, there is a sense of flattening the already heavily patterned surface so that a more complicated spatial dynamic emerges where colours and forms engage in a game of push and pull. The 'objects' jostle for perceptual space, not only with each other, but also with the vibrant pinks and striking blue roses of the 'background'.

Beauty is clearly also an aesthetic in which Ogden has a keen interest. Slowing down the act of looking, the artist sees beauty in found pieces of lino that carry the marks of time. Worn, faded and scratched, these signs of wear and tear are an intrinsic part of the artist's lino-collages that become living textures whose colours, shapes and patterns represent an unknown history. One of the challenges of remediating these works and presenting them as rugs has been the problem of how to replicate areas of deterioration or discoloration. Treated as though they might be the artist's own marks (rather than something distracting to be cleaned up or repaired), rips, dirt and fading are carefully reworked into the rug design using various different patterning and weaving techniques. The different weaves that have been incorporated into the rugs also cleverly emphasise the tactile, sculptural qualities of the woollen medium. It is in Ogden's acute awareness of the formal, aesthetic values of fine art practice combined with the technical skills of the rug maker's craft that these visually compelling works find their currency.

Barbara Garrie, *A Sublime Craft*, University of Canterbury Department of Art History and Theory