



ASSEMBLE 2010: AUDIO TRANSCRIPTS

Session: Making and Creative Production

Speaker: Tom Gallant, Artist

Chair: Dr Jane Harris, Director, Textile Futures Research Centre,
University of the Arts, London

TOM GALLANT: Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and thank you to the Crafts Council for inviting me to come here. I'd like to begin by showing you the Eureka moment, the light bulb moment that I had in my career which was back in 2002 when a close friend of mine sent me a pack of Chinese papercuts.

Now these are cut in a very commercial way, generally about fifty layers of tissue are compressed together and cut through at the same time. The tissue's unsized, and then they're inked afterwards to give them their colour. When I received this, taken them out of the individual wrappers, I realised that they contained an element which was separate from my background. My background was in fine art printmaking. And I realised that these objects were sculptures, these were forms of two-dimensional surfaces that had been turned into a three-dimensional object.

And at that point my background in graphic design, illustration, fine art printmaking and a research-led practice, which took me through from the language of folktales through feminist literature and into pornography, my relationship with craft was an appropriation of the language of craft, the marks of craft. And it was this that led me to create my first body of work, which was based on Chinese decorations, cut directly into the pornographic magazine using surgical blades.

The next body of work was looking at Victorian hybrids of roses and the illustrations of Pierre Joseph Redouté, who made a series of botanical

illustrations from Victorian roses, and these were widely displayed across middle-class houses.

In 2004, I was given my first show at a gallery called Museum 52. And for that, based on John Fowles' *The Collector*, I created a series of 108 moths, based on the Sphingidae of the Eastern Palearctic which is a group of moths in the Natural History Museum's online archive. Again all of these were cut from Asian pornography. Equally in the show was 1001 origami cranes. The making of 1001 origami cranes is said to bring you good luck, and this was in fact the start of my career.

The second Eureka moment was being given the book *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which is by a Victorian feminist writer called Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in which she describes the act of her husband, a physician, taking her to a country house and placing her in this room where she becomes obsessed by this wallpaper. She becomes obsessed by the pattern, unable to find the repeat in it. And she starts to see female forms moving through the walls. The end of the story results in her turning into the graphic, she becomes the wallpaper, and having torn away to release the female. And it was this that started a huge body of work based on William Morris's designs for wallpaper, for Persian rugs, and subsequently for stained-glass windows.

Working with repeats then meant I started working with assistants, which completely changed the way that I was working. Previously I had used computers purely for scanning in images and printing them, and I was working directly with photographs as opposed to anything graphic. The need to work with assistants came from the scale of the works, and it became very apparent very early on that I couldn't translate that information directly enough to the assistant that I was working with at the time, and so I ended up having to scan in the images, cut them or print them, cut them, scan in the cuts, and then give her these black and white images for her to be able to follow. What resulted from that meant that I was able to completely change the scale of my works, I was able to increase the scale, but maintain the level of detail and intricacy within the works.

This is a Persian rug based on the traditional forms and composition of the Persian rug, and it's made of hundreds of pieces which have been cut individually from magazines.

For me the language of the Persian rug ties in to the language of the veil, but in my case the veil is pornographic, rather than the erotic being hidden behind the veil. And, the element of time and labour in my work is a surface that I use in order to seduce the viewer, in order to bring the viewer into the realm of the dialogues that I'm having with my research. Unfortunately what this can do is also create a surface through which the viewer sees the work and gets the work, and then moves on. And I believe there's a danger within this, and there therefore has been over subsequent years a need to develop and change the work.

Through many years of producing, or realising that I was producing rather than creating, I've had these moments where I've had this direct need to change and radically alter the way that I make my work, and for this project I worked on a series of British birds, and, British birds all cut from Readers Wives, from British magazines, and it allows me to, or it allowed me to return back to the photograph, to turn the photograph into several layers, these tie in with the language of taxidermy, and this is a collection of eighteen British birds.

So the process of making. For me it started with this design for William Morris & Co by John Dearle, and it was a wallpaper and curtains and upholstery for sofas that my grandmother's house was adorned with. And, the simple process is taking the image, printing it, cutting the layer as I said, returning it to the repeat, and returning it to individual layers, which are just a background, because the foreground, using these layers, then allows me to expand the scale of his pieces metre by metre, sixty within the golden section. And then working with the computer to translate these images, intersect drawings, and then printing out the individual sections. On this piece there are over 150, and so working with assistants is paramount.

These works are then glued and sandwiched between layers of glass, which heightens the aspect of the shadow within my work, the sculptural quality

within my work, and also the layers, both physical, literal, and of course the layers of meaning and understanding.

[...]This piece was made for the Museum of Arts and Design show entitled 'Slash: Paper Under the Knife'. And it was a show which brought together a group of artists who all work with paper, in particular cut paper. And, it was commissioned by a curator called David McFadden, who is the head curator of the museum, and he saw my work through a collection I made with a fashion designer called Marios Schwab. In 2008 Marios approached me to work on a collection for his autumn/winter 2008 show, and he had seen my work through a collector of mine. And what started out, or what I thought would start out as being a simple case of making a group of prints for him to then use, turned into a very intense and very important collaboration.

Within the process, Marios wanted a particular design for a single placement dress, and the rest of the prints would be used as he wished. The collaboration got more and more involved, and it became apparent, [there was] a greater need [for] control. And so I took over and worked with pattern cutters directly in order to be able to fabricate the dresses, we used laser cutting. And it meant that I had to, in some cases, redesign the pattern in order to ensure that the patterns or the images fell in particular areas, that they covered the darts, that the seams had enough space. I worked with the laser cutter to ensure that the patterns that they were cutting were large enough, that the fabric wouldn't just fall apart. I think it was about three or four attempts before I realised the thickness needed.

And the show became, the show became a critical success. Unfortunately the criticism levelled at the work was that the models could hardly walk, as these dresses went down to their ankles, and there was very little space, but, in many ways conceptually it was a very successful project, and certainly as a collaboration, which I've always been interested in, it was amazing to work with somebody so open and cross-disciplined. It meant that we approached it without ego, without one of us trying to force the other one into a particular corner.

It was the first of four collaborations that we worked on, but each subsequent collaboration, it felt, for me, that the time constraints put upon fashion, the seasonal time constraints, were very limiting, and subsequent collaborations felt that I was more of a technician rather than an artist within the project. And, coincidentally it was also at the same time that I was having difficulties with my relationship with my gallery, and I was also feeling exactly the same thing, that I was, was being constrained by time, I was having to make work for art fairs as well as for shows, and ended up producing rather than creating, and there's danger within the language of the work that I do that it's time-based, it's obsessional, and it leaves very little time, given those constraints, for creating and developing new work, which is one of the reasons why I left the gallery and now work alone.

My ideal would be to reach a point where I can re-approach Marios and work with him, work on a body of work that will stand up to this collaboration. Thank you very much.

Further information about Tom Gallant's work can be found at his website: www.tom-gallant.com



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