

Nature as Object

Art Gallery of Western Australia
2 July – 6 September 1998

THE 1998 THIRD INTERNATIONAL CRAFTS TRIENNIAL EXPLORED
THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND NATURE



Toni Warburton, *Blue Quatrefoil Bowl*. Courtesy Mori Gallery. Photo: Ian Hobbs. First exhibited in *Wake* at Mori Gallery, Sydney, in 1997, and this year in *Nature as Object: Craft and Design from Japan, Finland and Australia*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.

AT A TIME IN OUR HISTORY ON THIS PLANET WHEN OUR TENURE IS SEEMINGLY LESS assured an exhibition that explores our relationship to the natural world is of necessity framed within the rhetoric of sustainable development. Artists are more aware of the ecological implications of their interventions with nature than most, and many now base their practice on the careful management of resources.

NATURE AS OBJECT, THE MAJOR EXHIBITION OF THE THIRD AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL CRAFTS TRIENNIAL, can be interpreted as a celebration of the process of minimal intervention in this world; of making the most of the least, of recycling and of providing aesthetic and ecologically sound insights into the natural world. Of course all interventions have an impact and no one who has worked in the arts would be foolish enough to propose that the practices of artists are less harmful than other forms of production. However, the overriding message in this show is one of acknowledging that working with nature and with natural processes can be liberating and rewarding in surprising and exhilarating ways.

Its subtext is that through travel and exchange, quite different cultures, arising from widely different geographical conditions, have created similar responses to their environment and nurtured similar approaches to dealing with the natural world. The entrance to *Nature As Object* welcomes visitors with a few select pieces from the Art Gallery of Western Australia's permanent collection. Pieces by Finnish artists such as Alvar Aalto and Japanese artists such as Sesei Okazaki, and a final window for Australian artists, including a work by Western Australian potter Eileen Keyes, act as a preface to the exhibition. It is a very clever ploy, for it not only reinforces the on-going exchange of ideas that has flowed between Japan, Finland and Australia since the turn of the century, but it also highlights the role of the natural world as a key influence on the development of craft practice in all three countries. For those who know the collection well it also stamps the personality of curator Robert Bell on the show, because it was Bell himself who was responsible, as Curator of Craft at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, for the purchase of many of these works and for bringing many important exhibitions of craft work from those centres to Perth over the past two decades.

Nature as Object is a remarkable exhibition which surveys some of the most innovative craft work from these three countries in an attempt to come to a deeper understanding of this cross fertilisation of ideas about the natural world. Although many are aware of the influence of Japanese ceramics and Scandinavian design on Australian artists and designers, the linkages highlighted in this exhibition indicate a deeper and more complex set of relationships. One of the more interesting being the rise of nationalism in each country which was linked to an appreciation of local flora, fauna and landforms.

Two of the most important movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts movement, took nature as their subject and linked it to the rise of nationalist feeling. Japan's Meiji Restoration, in the late 1860's, the Finnish arts-led resistance to Russian rule in the late nineteenth century, and Australia's centenary celebrations and move towards Federation, all linked national identity with an emotional connection with the land. Considering this background, and with our knowledge of the vastly different geography of each of the three countries, we might expect the delineations between the contemporary works from each country to be quite distinct, however the flow of artists and ideas between all three has ensured that while some works resonate with our preconceptions about one or other of the countries represented, many works blur those boundaries.

Catherine Truman's delicately carved *Invisible Places to Be No:17 Muscle*, borrows from the Japanese aesthetic of the small carved object while Susan Wright works within that same netsuke tradition to create works that use Australian imagery. Each is responding to the forms and conceptual base of Japanese culture, but in a highly original manner that adds to the corpus of works produced in that traditional mode.

One of the most pervasive influences throughout the show is the continuing importance of the tradition of 'making do' with available materials and experimenting with natural forms. While this was initially a necessity to overcome shortages imposed during the Depression and after the war, it has

become an important principle for many of the exhibitors. The cult of the tea ceremony in Japan is one of the best known examples of an aestheticised 'poverty of materials' and in many of the works on show from all three countries that same obsession with the rough and weathered surfaces of natural materials is much in evidence.

Markku Kosonen's *Willow 1* is a beautiful example of the creative mediation between an object found in nature and an artist's creative intelligence. Using budding willow branches he has fashioned baskets from their long stems, allowing the buds to circle the woven shape in a profusion of energised forms. This work and fellow Finnish artist Janna Syvänoja's extraordinary necklaces formed from recycled paper turned on a lathe, epitomise the tradition of exalting the natural beauty of materials and transforming them through human intervention into works of great beauty to encourage a contemplative meditation on their inherent qualities.

Within the Japanese section the same aesthetic and conceptual concerns are evident in the exquisite woven forms by Hisako Sekijima, who transforms willow bark into small-scale sculptural forms that seem to hover above the surface. For these artists the ability to provide a structure that enables material culled from the natural world to be viewed in new and unexpected ways is the guiding principle of their practice. Whether it be bark, reeds, wood or paper the re-presentation of the material opens up new perspectives and alternate readings. For example, in Elsie van Keppel's work the dyed paper squares—arranged in a graded grid of coloured shapes and lightly pinned to the wall—reference modernist experimentation with pure abstraction while simultaneously providing an opportunity to investigate the nuance of colour and the variation in surface and detail of each individually created element.

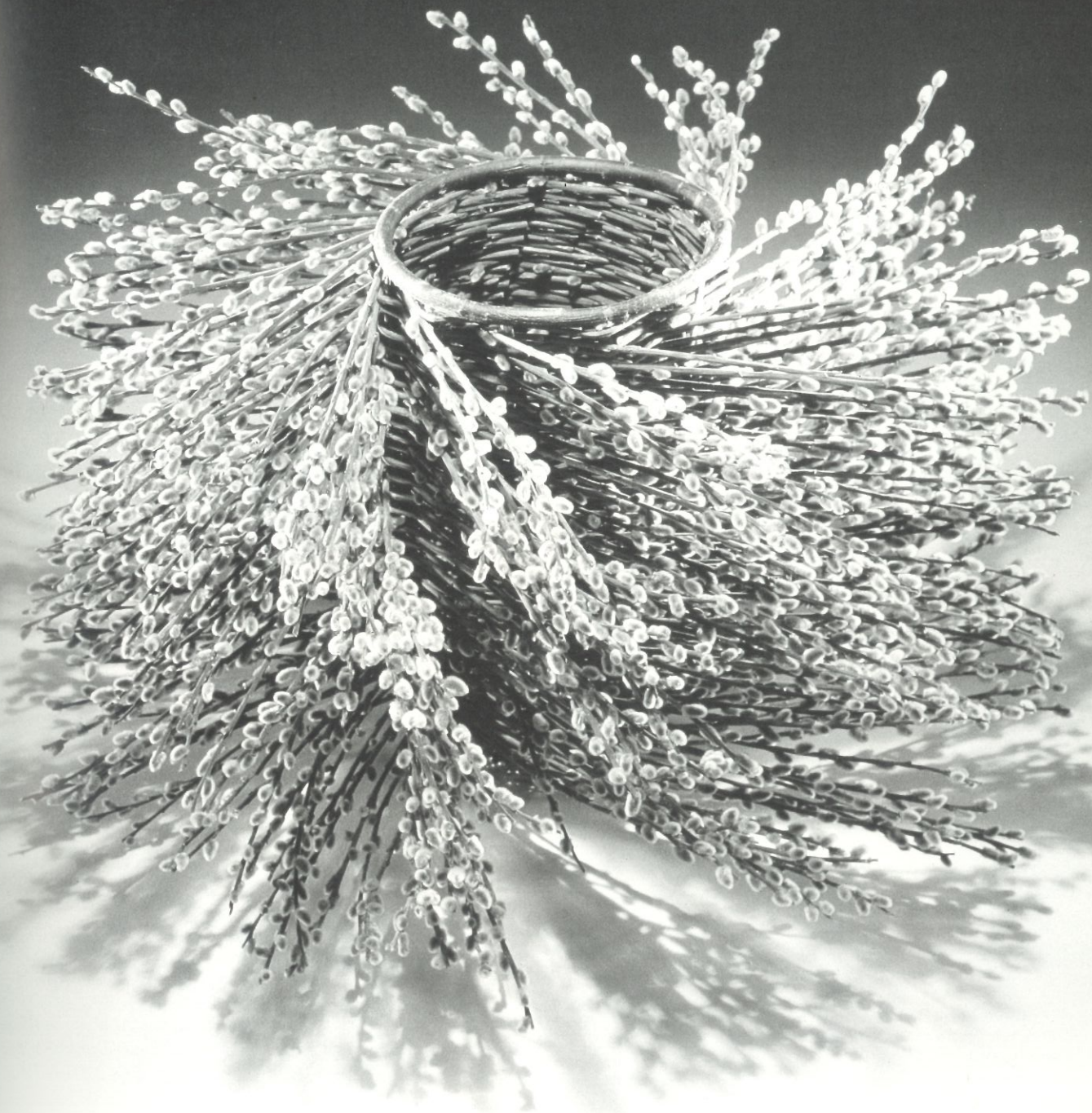
In a related form of practice several artists included in this show work with traditional craft techniques to recreate the nuances of surface, texture and colour that they discover in nature. Fujiwo Ishimoto, a Japanese artist who works as a designer for the Marimkeno textiles company, began working with clay ten years ago on receipt of a grant from the Arabia ceramic company, creates objects that replicate the winter surfaces of ice and snow. His mysterious objects are not from the natural world, but they evoke its qualities.

This is a diverse show and not all works reference older traditions or explore the qualities of natural materials. Jutta Feddersen's extraordinary installation *Fragility* occupies a large area of the gallery with huge inflated latex 'eggs' in various colours of white to grey, interspersed with feathered wings set on aluminium stands that emerge from this field of egg-like forms. The delicacy of these forms, gently nudging each other, combined with a sense of our own reduced scale, creates an atmosphere charged with anticipation of what might occur; of what might emerge.

In such a large and impressive exhibition it is hard to encapsulate its impact in a few words, however, curator Robert Bell has provided us with a key to his approach by explaining that the contribution of all of the artists he selected derives from their ability to create "... a new form of 'natural history' where human interaction can record a little poetry". It is a curatorial thesis that has succeeded in bringing together a diverse body of works that opens up the discourse on Nature, and our interactions with it, in refreshing and surprising ways.

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Markku Kosonen (Finland), *Willow I*, 1996. Basket, woven willow. Photo: Marco Melander. From *Nature as Object: Craft and Design from Japan, Finland and Australia*, The Third Australian International Crafts Triennial. Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2 July – 6 September 1998.