

Modernism Has Two Faces

Eva Berendes, Simon Bill, Enrico David, Karin Ruggaber and Sarah Staton

The theme of the 2011 summer exhibition of work by artists Eva Berendes, Simon Bill, Enrico David, Karin Ruggaber and Sarah Staton at Mount Stuart takes its aesthetic energies from Modernism both as a conceptual orientation and as a gambit, a polemic of sorts. The term Modernism here specifically focuses on what has been called the first avant-garde, approximately the second and third decades of the 20th Century, including various movements and what Alfred H. Barr, the first director of New York's MOMA called 'styles', including Suprematism, Cubism, Dada and Abstraction. 'Modernism has two faces...' expressly sets up a historical trajectory, a kind of narrative, that posits two 'visual grammars', hand-made art and machinic art: the first being unique, 'grainy and irregular', something painted, carved or woven, and the second being 'inhuman', 'reproducible' and 'unvarying' as if constructed on an assembly line. It is the former, however, the hand-made art, where the applied arts meets fine art, that positions the thematic territory of the exhibition between so-called 'rustic' modernism, the contemporary art on view and Mount Stuart itself, the late Gothic Revival ancestral home of the Bute family. The premise and potential of the exhibition then is to see what happens when contemporary art looks back at certain defined moments in artistic practice and thought through its temporary insertion into the Neo-Gothic 'excess' of the house, with its unyielding commitment to fine craftsmanship, ornate surfaces, dynamic architectonics and spectacle: a house as event.

These three elements of the exhibition not only refer to the distinct qualities of craft, the decorative and ornamentation but also to workmanship, to labour, and above all to the idea of a return: a return to a certain ethos established before high Modernism: Victorianism and Medievalism. One figure who embodies such thought is John Ruskin (1819-1900), the 19th Century critic and author of *Modern Painters* (1843-60), which championed J.M.W. Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), and most famously, *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), a thesis on the architectural anatomy of the city including its celebrated espousal of Gothic Revivalism. In 'The Nature of Gothic', Ruskin suggests that Gothic – and by extension its revival – as both architecture and aesthetic were not only styles but also ways of thinking, moral paths to being. For him, Gothic epitomised a kind of essential 'material form' as well as a sense of 'mental expression', a truth from within oneself like the truth in nature's 'noble imperfection'.ⁱ A strong sense of 'values' and fervour underpinned the Neo-Gothic revival, a kind of piety that would even turn against many of the advances of the Industrial Revolution, nascent capitalism and the rise of class division with the advent of a humanist socialism, particularly in the work of William Morris (1834-96) and the Arts and Crafts Movement, inspired by Ruskin himself.

Mount Stuart, originally designed in a Palladian, proto-neoclassical style was rebuilt after a fire, commencing in 1878 at the behest of the 3rd Marquess of Bute and was never finished as such. And although the house was built in a lavishly Neo-Gothic style it was also equipped with the most up-to-date modern conveniences including

an indoor swimming pool, telephone cable and electricity. In addition, much of the architecture and interiors of the house had been influenced by Italian, French and even Spanish styles of Gothic, with even its structural girding constructed from newly industrialised steel, rendering the structure less 'hand-made' and more 'machine-like', benefitted by the latest building technologies. As opposed to its earlier neoclassical incarnation, and neoclassicism itself, with its emphasis on rationality, linearity, liberalism and secularism for which Gothic Revivalism stood both aesthetically and ideologically against, Mount Stuart remains a jubilant homage to syncretic Victorian ideals and beliefs.

The first avant-garde too was a heterogeneous category of 'isms' and styles with its attendant manifestos, philosophies, values and practices from Marinetti's Futurism, with its zealous embrace of the chaos of modernity and machines and rejection of the past, to André Breton's Surrealism, and its investigation of Freudian concepts of the psyche, Marxism and automatism. Following the premise of the exhibition, however, the focus here shall be on ideas around the early Soviet and later German models of Constructivism and Productivism: the former employed planar and linear 'constructions' or geometric abstraction with a combination of fine art and applied art materials and objects; whilst the latter grew out of a politicised rejection of art's autonomy altogether in favor of aesthetic principles applied to design for the good of a new society. Here there are echoes of the Arts and Crafts movement and Ruskin's unwavering ideas on materiality and values, piety without religion, situated in an altogether different heterodox field of activity under different conditions of production, suggesting an almost approximate confluence between the Neo-Gothic and neoclassicism.

The Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943) particularly reflects this mode of production and is a kind of symbolic force behind the exhibition through her innovative use of textiles, marionettes, embroidery and industrial design. Influenced by early Cubism, her practice was committed to the exploration of geometric abstraction – the possibilities of colour, line and form – with the aim of unifying the autonomy of the art object with the necessities of functionality, and leveling out their differences, for example, by building and furnishing her own home with her husband, the artist Hans Arp. By dissolving the traditional disciplinary boundaries between art and design through the free use and exchange of materials and contexts, Taeuber-Arp has become central to rethinking a strain of Modernism, a 'rustic' modernism, for the exhibiting artists at Mount Stuart, opening up a historical lineage and the possibility for new forms of visuality today.

The concept of the hand-made and the crafted are reflected in the vast array of things found throughout the house, objects and architecture that are put in play, set against, correspond and at times are displaced by the contemporary works of art in the exhibition. This frisson between and amongst objects and contexts creates a kind of scene, a series of trans-historical tableau as one walks through the Hall, the Chapel, the Purple Library, the bedrooms, the Horoscope Room, down the marble staircase or around the walls of the Mount Stuart Trust offices, evoking layers of time and experience. Whether it be a painting by Simon Bill or Enrico David, a wall

hanging by Eva Berendes, a relief by Karin Ruggaber or a sculpture by Sarah Staton, the five artists in 'Modernism has two faces...' all employ the 'poor' materials of fine art and craft including aluminium, bark, clay, canvas, ceramic, concrete, copper, corduroy, dental floss, emulsion, fabric, magnets, marker pen, mud, paint, pigment, plaster, silk, thread, video tape, wood and wool. These materials and their application are a response in turn to Modernism, to its relationship to Gothic Revivalism and to its gesturing back to Medievalism, building layer upon layer of histories of practice and beliefs.

But what is at stake then for artists to reinvigorate these discourses, these histories? By leveling the field between the visual arts and the applied arts the artists are not trying to launch a new avant-garde as such but rather endeavour to investigate what exactly the practice – the labour – of an artist is today, reevaluating such notions as authorship, 'skilling' and originality, as a proposition for the future.

© David Bussel
Mount Stuart 2011

ⁱ See John Ruskin, *On Art and Life*, London: Penguin, 2004.