

# “NEW MATERIALITY” AND THE SENSORY POWER OF CRAFT

by BA Harrington

After the Furniture Society conference in Boston, I had the fortune to see “The New Materiality: Digital Dialogues at the Boundaries of Contemporary Craft,” currently on view at the Fuller Craft Museum. The exhibition is curated by Furniture Society member Fo Wilson, and among the sixteen artists included are several other FS members. “New Materiality” represents a wide variety of craft media in objects that all incorporate digital technology, or “new media,” in some manner. As one might guess, much of the work includes video, but there are many other ways the digital dialogue with craft is worked out. One of those ways is in Sonya Clark’s *Madame CJ Walker (large)* (2008), a portrait of America’s first female millionaire, who made her fortune in the early 1900s in the beauty product industry. The scale of this piece is grand—8’ wide by 11’ high—rivaling the beautiful and poetic (and I must add, the most elegant use of zip ties I have ever seen!) *Sounding* (2008), by Donald Fortescue and Lawrence LaBianca, for the largest presence in the show.

Clark’s wall piece is amazingly simple. In fact, it may be the most low-tech work in the exhibition. However, if I think about the “dialogue” at the boundaries of craft, the piece is genius and full of complexity. A quasi-pixelated image of Madame Walker emerges from the overlapping of manipulated black plastic combs. Different degrees of black are achieved by removing teeth on individual combs, then configuring the combs 4 x 4 into squares. The square units of eight combs are attached to each other with metal rings. The spines of the combs become warp and weft, and the combinations of teeth and missing teeth create the image. As Wilson points out, the language of weaving is binary—warp and weft, as is computer code—ones and zeros. A pixel displays the code, and the bigger the pixel, the less defined the image it produces. So too with weave, the larger the weave is, the less defined the image is. Here, the dialogue with technology is integral to the piece, not a separate material being incorporated into a form.

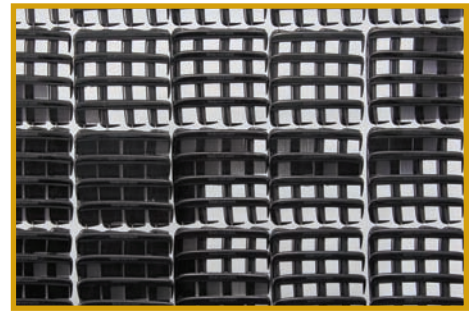
Clark’s work is multilayered in many dimensions. She moves it to another boundary

of craft with her peculiar choice of material, a commonplace, “dollar store” object. The comb, however, is potent in its reference to hair as a fiber and its particular relevance to the African American female community, those whom Madame Walker’s business catered to, a community where hair was traditionally worked by women’s fingers, not a fine-toothed comb. The success of the African American beauty industry was a result of cultural pressure on black women to conform to other’s standards of beauty. It is Clark’s own fingers, in the labor intensive process I imagine



*Madame CJ Walker (large)*, 2008  
Sonya Clark | © Taylor Dabney

it took to create the work, that connect her conceptually loaded material to her historic subject matter. According to my calculations, the piece is made up of 3,072 plastic combs, each manipulated by hand. Contemplating the making of Madame lends additional meaning to Clark’s other work in the exhibition, *The Important Thing* (2006). The video documents the repeated action of tying a ribbon around a finger, an old mnemonic device for remembering something important. Fingers, in other words, relay memories.



*Madame CJ Walker (large)*, 2008  
Sonya Clark | © Taylor Dabney

Wilson’s essay in the exhibition catalogue is a very smart and thoughtful reflection on Western thinking about craft, beginning with the shift in attitudes toward manual productivity that came with the enlightenment and industrial revolution, to Craft’s current resurgence with a focus on theory. I was struck by a particular section in which she discusses the enlightenment emphasis on intellect at the expense of handwork. Wilson writes:

*[A] revolution was occurring that slowly trumped the virtues of labor and regard for the hand as a worthy location of human industry and intelligence. As modern philosophical theories were being debated in the seventeenth century and the natural sciences were developing in the latter half of that century and the beginning of the next, a shift was taking place in how we regard intelligence and where in our anatomy intelligence fundamentally resides. The beginnings of modern philosophy during the Age of Reason argued that the senses were unreliable sources of knowledge and that knowledge was best confirmed and acquired through our ability to think.*

I am particularly interested in the question of “where in our anatomy” is intelligence located? In Clark’s *Madame*, it is her intuitive understanding of techniques and materials coupled with her intellectual knowledge of their relation to history and culture that enables her to make a work so successfully complex. The computer generated, pixelated image of CJ Walker used as a template did not have the same power. It is the intelligence of Clark’s body translating the image through techniques and materials that weave new meaning into the portrait of an historic figure. To fully appreciate this complexity requires something beyond just vision. A bodily response to both the process and the material enables us to take in all the conceptual layers at work here. Clark pushes the boundaries of her textile background again by mimicking weaving with an unconventional material to portray an unconventional image. A bodily fiber, hair, is what weaves technique, material, and subject together, even though it is not physically present in the piece. We imagine hair via our other senses and the knowledge they conjure for us.

As far as furniture is concerned, even when we make objects that no longer function in the traditional sense—the purely sculptural forms many of us now make—the reference to utility is still there, and we all know it. Susan Working and E.G. Crichton's *Table 1: Murmur* (2008), a slanted cherry table with video of an aspen forest embedded in the top, cannot function as a table in the traditional sense, but we understand it as such by its form. We know why it wouldn't function well, because we can imagine our physical body engaging with it. In fact, it relies on this knowledge for its conceptual content. It relies on our understanding that something is askew. In Shaun Bullens' *Anxious* (2007), there are two side-by-side table forms. One holds a birdcage, the other has a small tree trunk piercing its top and extending upwards. Each scenario incorporates a video of a parakeet. The tables have cabriole legs, and the birdcage stand has a turned column, resembling a tilt-top table or candle stand. We naturally read ideas about domestic space into the piece, even if it is not consciously registered. Wendy Maruyama shifts the scale of an ornamental object, a Geisha's decorative hair comb, in Kanzashi "Stroke" (2007). Although we might not immediately recognize what the oversized frame around the small video screen is referencing, it's obvious that it's more than just a frame. The long teeth at the bottom, along with the hair being sensuously stroked in the embedded video give us our clues. Although we don't touch any



*Stroke*, 2007  
Wendy Maruyama | © Jared Nelson

of these objects—we aren't allowed to—we understand something about them sensorially. Our bodies relate to them in space, and we use our bodily understanding of the forms being referenced to interpret the work. We experience it on both a visceral and cognitive level through our bodies, which aid our minds in understanding through all our senses, what we in actuality are only seeing.

Wilson points out that "craft practice in America for the first half of the twentieth century was often promoted as a remedy for a change in human values heralded by the Industrial Age." Craft, at the dawn of the twenty-first century has much to offer beyond simply satisfying a nostalgic pining for the days of the handmade. Recent discoveries in neuroscience are now telling us that the intellect may not trump the hand after all. As neurally based phenomena finally succumb to the latest nanotechnology and surrender their secrets, we are beginning to understand the mysteries of sensorimotor perception and things like intuition. The cognitive understanding which we in the Western World demand, which requires a scientific explanation, is finally revealing what others, cultures we consider "primitive" for instance, have understood all along; what we do with our hands affects not only what we know but how we know it. An understanding of something that combines cognitive knowledge with bodily knowledge is a fuller, richer human understanding.



*Sounding*, 2008  
Donald Fortescue & Lawrence La Bianca  
© Bryan Alberstat

We who learn hand skills and make objects steeped in utilitarian craft traditions have also known this all along. I am reminded of the theme of our recent conference, "Fusions: Minds and Hands Shaping Our Future." It was a fantastic conference from which I walked away with the strongest feeling I have had as yet that I was among my people. I realize this overwhelming feeling came not just from the fact that we do the same thing, but that we know some things in the same way. No matter how far we stray from those traditional boundaries from which our craft has evolved, they remain its foundation and we understand what we do in relation to them. We have skills through which we can translate knowledge and ideas from our minds into tangible objects through our hands and bodies. Even those of you who use sophisticated technology to produce your work still use your physical body in the process, and you are able to make use of the technology because you have an understanding of how to work your materials. Some of this has to do with muscle memory acquired through the training and use of skill; some has to do with an intuitive understanding of materials that has come to you over time. It seems very fitting for us then, to engage with the technology to explore the ways in which our further understanding of the operations of the human brain/mind is materialized. Craft is in a unique position to help us understand ourselves anew in light of the recent discoveries in neuroscience. A kind of knowledge that has for centuries been placed at the bottom of the hierarchy may in fact be a key to moving us into what seems like an inevitable paradigm shift and the dismantling of hierarchies.

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*Table 1: Murmur*, 2007  
Susan Working & E.G. Crichton | © E.G. Crichton