

Tobias Birgersson - "The Toolness of things"

Five solid pieces where interaction was encouraged. Forged steel and turned wood assembled into "The Toolness of things" The tool form is derived from the African Gourd and hand tools. Five tool like pieces made from steel and wood. They are forged, fabricated, turned and loved. Size approximately 35 centimeters (14 Inches)

I was invited by Southern Illinois University and the Surplus Gallery to take part in their annual Faculty show. I was working at SIU Carbondale, as a caretaker, professor and AIR for their Metals department as a Faculty exchange with Professor Rick Smith. It was a great way to test out the beginning of this my most resent body of work.

The department SIU Metals have focus on forged steel therefore I based my work on a published discussion in the form of abstracts I created with Damian Skinner. My focus was the tool as a vehicle for traditional craft and by removing the function of the tool I was able to look at the pieces as raw form with connotations to the tool.

In this I was looking for the recognizable in tools, wooden handles, tool like steel forms without referring to a specific tool. To recognize but not being able to place my tools in a specific context makes them into some kind of strange artefacts or symbols for the "The Toolness of Things". At the opening I experimented with the traditional "Do not touch" rule that most museums and gallery's apply and printed my own "Please handle the art" signs. When the public finally dared to use my pieces, it created a beautiful interactive level to the work in stark contrast to the "Do not touch" pieces included in the show.

"The Toolness of Things" – "Tillverkat Här" (Made here)

5/5-20/6 2018 at Gallery LOD.

This is how the Toolness of things project got started, but when I finally got the pieces delivered to Sweden they needed a different kind of interaction. I invited Art Historian Damian Skinner to discuss and interview me around the project and write a text about it for the next time they were to be exhibited. Damian agreed and after several video link sessions he produced the text enclosed below. "Tillverkat Här" at Gallery LOD, Stockholm, Sweden. I showed the five pieces as wall pieces interpreted by Damian Skinners text. The exhibition "Tillverkat Här" required professional pictures that put the work in relation to the the human body, I therefore contacted Christian Habetzeder a portrait and object Photographer to see if he was willing to work with me on "The Toolness of Things". Christian agreed and we worked with the photoshoot during a very fruitful weekend. Christians images aim to enhance the Toolness within the objects without giving them a specific Tool function. My pieces have handles that are just a little bit to large for a one hand tool but looks exactly like they should if they were to be used, I worked with Christian and his Camera eye in the same way. The pictures are at first glance recognizable as a human with a tool but then it becomes hard to recognize how they are meant to be used. Below follows Damian Skinners text describing "The Toolness of Things" better than I can.

Tobias Birgersson – The Toolness of Things

What are they? They are forged steel forms, flattened planes of metal forming a wonky gourd silhouette, that have been attached to wooden handles. While they follow the same general pattern, each of them is different: the size and angle of the swelling double circles that make up the gourd silhouettes are idiosyncratic; the wood grain and details of the handles are subtly altered.

They appropriate the signs of tools, and by extension the signs of blacksmithing. Steel has been forged, Wood has been turned, like real tools made of these materials. But these objects don't have a function. They are tool-like: the right size and weight to be a tool, held in the hand just like a tool, robust and hard-wearing like a tool, but ultimately there is no use for them, no action they undertake or problem they solve.

This is why I use the term 'appropriation'. These aren't beautiful or exquisite tools, adding a big dose of art and skill to heighten the often-overlooked aesthetics of functional, everyday objects. These objects stage a deliberate gap between themselves and the things they reference. The overt marks of beaten steel in the metal silhouettes aren't just the effects of a particular process that is the most successful or appropriate way to forge this shape, but they are cultivated as an end in themselves, to evoke the category of blacksmithing. The size and weight of these objects aren't arrived at because they aid function and effectiveness, but because they conjure sense memories of holding and working a general category of tools.

These objects are made and presented in a series. There is more than one of them, and this seems important somehow. Because they are idiosyncratic, there is a danger that just one will seem frivolous or superficial. A group reinforces their seriousness, enforces their status as a position or a statement. Together, they claim or mark out a territory that is parallel to and in dialogue with the category of tools, but an accumulation of them also emphasises the ways in which they differ from tools.

These objects exist as Tobias Birgersson's declaration of where the integrity of blacksmithing might lie in the twenty-first century, in a time when the historical purposes of blacksmithing have been rendered obsolete, and the opportunities of studio craft are limited to precious non-functional objects for the home, and the idea of blacksmithing as sculpture results in bad, large public art. Blacksmiths can still make bespoke functional objects – like gates – for appreciative and wealthy clients. But in what ways can blacksmithing as both materials and techniques and a mode of thinking and making assert itself in relation to an awareness of fine art and contemporary thinking about craft?

This is the place that these objects exist.

Text by Damian Skinner.

Tobias Birgersson is a maker and lecturer at HDK-Academy of Design and Craft. Damian Skinner is an art historian from Aotearoa New Zealand. They talk frequently about craft.