

Rachel Dickson

Can We Drop the Adjectives Please?

I am an artist, I am an artist, I am an artist. This mantra was given to me at the beginning of my MA in Ceramics & Glass at the RCA, by my formidable tutor, and glass artist, Tessa Clegg. Two things are significant: I have never forgotten my given label, and I was there to study ceramics, but I had been allocated a glass tutor. What help could she possibly be?

I now find myself on the other side. I have become the educator, as well as the artist. I feel a responsibility to my students, to enable and encourage them to be the artist they want, not to attach adjectives of ceramicist, painter, sculptor, craftsman. The adjective determines how they and their work are viewed, where and how it should be seen, and even the material value. I am reluctant to label them, or even myself.

Surely, if these students are makers of things, and thinkers of ideas, the integrity of the material and thought should determine the response?

I am also a hoarder of things. Recently, I unearthed my 'end of year one' report from the RCA. I had debated my role in the world and the context of the work I was producing. I was uncomfortable with the adjectives, even then. I find myself returning to this idea continually.

Yet, 'I am an artist, I am an artist', though some days it is difficult to remember, and I still debate these issues in my own practice. I work in paper and paper clay, so I can be labelled in many ways: craft, ceramic, installation, sculpture, art? Sometimes this depends on the funding opportunities. I often use 'found' ceramic plates, and draw images to become decals, which I now employ a company to print. Am I still the craftsperson? The incorporation of industrial processes cannot be disregarded within the realm of craft.

If I am asked to exhibit in a 'craft' gallery, I, and my work, are viewed very differently than when I take over an empty shop-front to show objects in a 'pop-up gallery'. In this instance, alternative audiences have access to art works, and the potential of creativity to enliven the derelict high street can be quickly achievable. The nature of craft is changing, and we must strive to encourage our students (and ourselves) to embrace the skills of making, but equally the skills of thinking. Richard Sennett's view of the craftsman seems sometimes in opposition to this idea. Those of us who are 'makers of things' need to reassess how and where they are seen. If these objects do not seem to fit certain gallery spaces or curators' notions of what constitutes art, then exploration of alternative venues and audiences are required. We are thinkers as well as do-ers, therefore we need to take control of our context.

To return to my MA tutor, she was instrumental in my questioning of my work and my ideas. She did not have to be a ceramicist to understand. Perhaps even with the adjectives, we are not quite so different.