

Fuzzy Logic

Essay by Audrey Mast



Stacia Yeapanis, *Inara Serra*, 2009

“Craft” is a fantastically nebulous term. We might associate it with actors, glassblowing, witches, or cuisine—and each would be apt. More commonly, it might evoke a variety of handmade items (ultimately, “craft” simply connotes the maker’s hand), including knitting, latch-hook rugs, needlepoint samplers, tatted lace, and patchwork quilts. These traditional handicrafts provide the inspiration—as well as the techniques and materials—for the work in the exhibition *Fuzzy Logic*.

The contemporary reclamation of traditional craft—driven by issues of sustainability, frugality, anti-consumerism, and a feminist reclamation of “women’s work”—is something of a cultural phenomenon. Arguably, it is a response to a world of ubiquitous technology. The current DIY (do-it-yourself) renaissance has its roots in everything from the Arts and Crafts movement and the Whole Earth Catalog to punk culture and Riot Grrl. Bolstered by the Internet, it has democratized media as disparate as publishing,

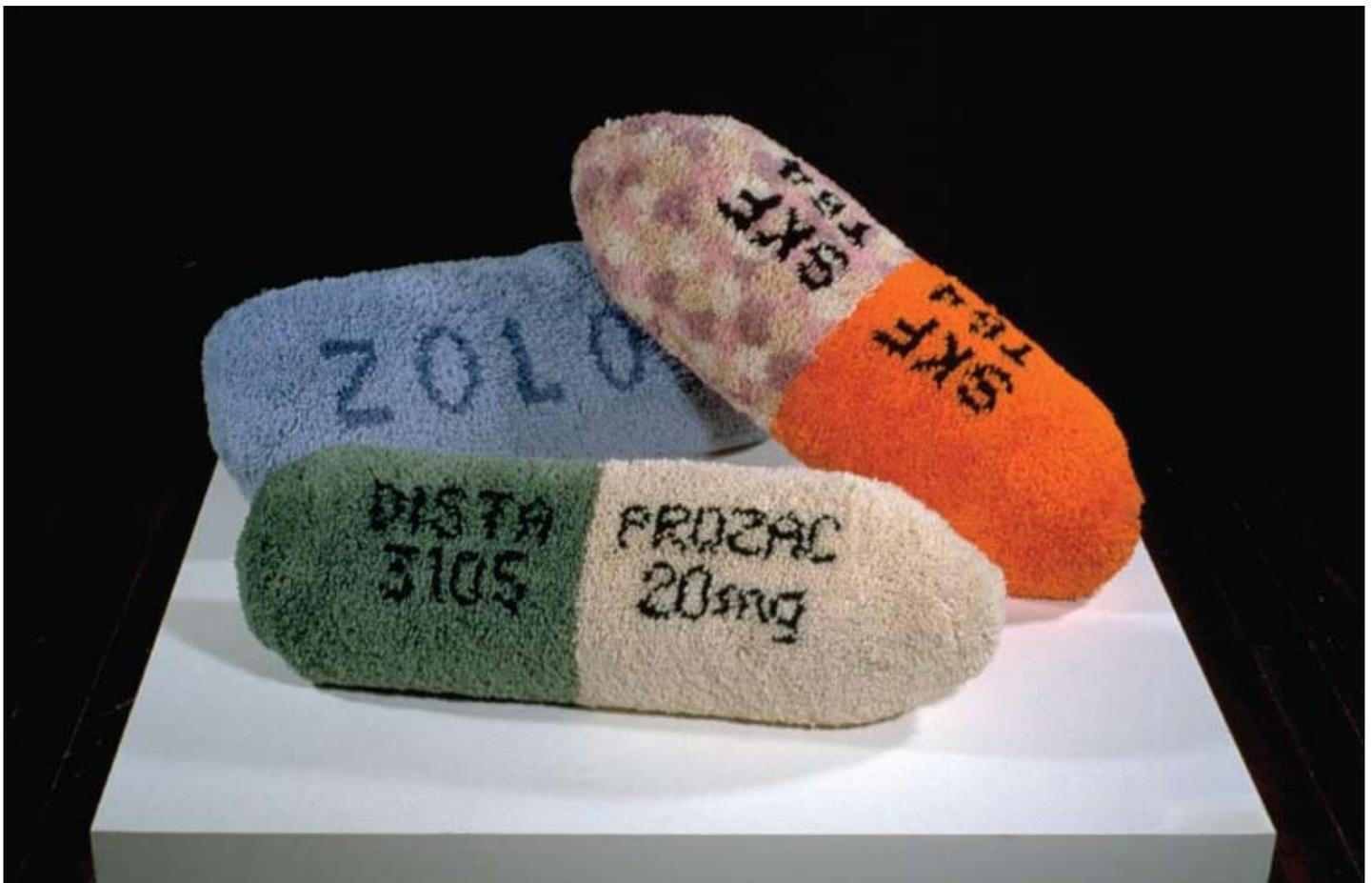
cinema and, of course, handicrafts.

When handicraft is utilized in the realm of fine art, many of its cultural associations are subverted. But since knitting has become a hip hobby, simply utilizing materials like yarn, felt, or fake flowers isn't particularly radical. Instead, we are faced with the term's multiple meanings—in particular its connotation of utility—which contradicts the already tenuous delineations between “fine art,” “design,” and “craft.”

It is not my interest as a curator to make such delineations, but to provoke a discussion of how the intersections between each can affect our experience and understanding of a work.

The artists in *Fuzzy Logic* do not merely present craft with a twist, but explore its potential more fully. Because craft is democratic, it is familiar and accessible to the viewer. It is textural and tactile, inviting our participation, taunting us to touch it. The work in *Fuzzy Logic* exploits this, evoking our desires for comfort, connection, contentment, and indulgence—as well as the complacency, superficiality and fleeting joy that might accompany these feelings. While myriad new directions in fiber art have been explored in depth by such landmark exhibitions as *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* (Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2007), *Poetics of the Handmade* (MoCA, Los Angeles, 2007), and the excellent book *By Hand* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), encouraging us to consider the ways craft can look and function, the artists in this exhibition ask: “how does it feel?”

Our emotional response to this work is where my interest lies. How do the materials ask us to feel? While a traditional patchwork quilt may be both beautiful and functional, what it asks us to feel is straightforward: good. Warm. But the artists in *Fuzzy Logic* recognize that even good feelings may have a more complex reality beneath the surface.



Laura Splan, *Prozac, Thorazine, Zoloft*, 2000

Laura Splan's *Prozac, Thorazine, Zoloft* (2000) is a trio of plump, huggable pill-shaped pillows. Made for an exhibit at the first Ladyfest in Olympia Washington, these are some of the first craft-based soft sculptures Splan ever made. (Continuing her interest in modern medicine's mediations on the body, Splan has since created doilies that depict the pattern of a virus; gloves cast from her own hands made from the remains of a cosmetic surgical peel, and a scarf knit with clear vinyl tubing that intravenously drains the wearer's blood).

It could be argued that *Prozac, Thorazine, Zoloft* arrived on the cusp of the contemporary DIY movement (*Readymade* magazine was founded in 2001, as well as Boston's Bazaar Bizarre, one of the first indie craft fairs). Ten years later, Splan's cheerful Pop sculpture still plays on our desire for comfort, but as mood-altering drugs have become increasingly common, we now read them as iconic objects—like modern-day Campbell's soup cans—whose cultural significance reaches beyond their literal use.

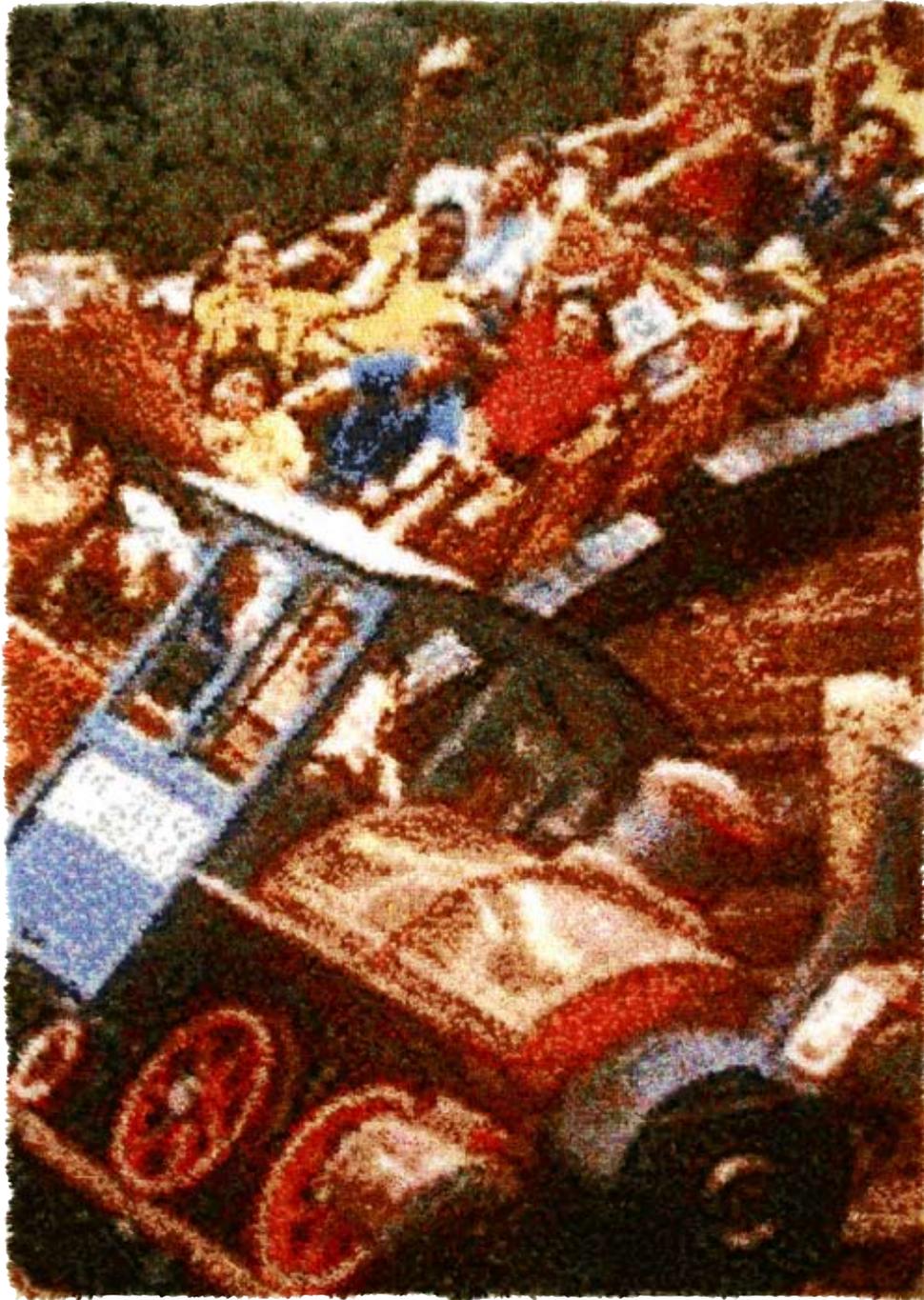
Splan has noted that the process of latch-hooking itself is so repetitive as to be mind-numbing, like a drug. But the process of needlework, with its detailed, singular focus, can also be introspective. Stacia Yeapanis' *Everybody Hurts* is a series of cross-stitched screen stills of her favorite television characters in pivotal moments of emotional duress. She says that "the act of cross-stitching is a slow reproduction of a single moment from a time-based medium by hand. It is an act of cruelty, contemplation and commemoration." In her work, needlework is not used with irony, but with a sincere recognition of how the media informs her process and concepts. Formally, the tiny, precise stitches mimic the pixels in a digital image.

Yeapanis sees television as a repository for contemporary myths. Her TV-viewing tastes tend toward science-fiction or cult-classic shows with unforgettable characters, like Inara Serra of Joss Whedon's space opera *Firefly* or Bill Haverchuck of the short-lived comedy/drama *Freaks and Geeks*. Part found photography, part portraiture, this work is deeply personal: Yeapanis identifies with and freezes the emotional state of her subjects, noting that "emotions mediated through stories are not 'unreal' emotions." While Yeapanis' subject matter is not real, her experience with it is visceral, and as viewers, we sense its catharsis.



Amanda Browder, *Bonfire*, 2001

The ways in which we perceive reality are also present in Amanda Browder's soft sculptures. While Yeapanis uses a meditative process, Browder utilizes brightly-colored, common materials—chiefly felt and recycled fabric—to address the psychedelic experience, recreating the "subtle change in perception" that arises at the intersection of the familiar and the strange. *Rocks O' Plenty* (2009) and *Bonfire* (2001) are "similar to the images in a comic book...reduced, simplified, and reconfigured to be idealized and sensational," says Browder. She uses the idioms of Pop to exaggerate and celebrate, but is, like many of the artists in *Fuzzy Logic*, uninterested in irony. Her idealized interpretations of nature (or human intervention on it)—achieved by fashioning hard rocks with soft stuffing and making flaming logs with faux fur—are lyrical, not cynical.



Rob Conger, *Big Thunder Mountain*, 2005

There is more than a touch of irony in Rob Conger's latch-hooked wall hangings, which he has been making since the mid-'90s, depicting TV-game-show sets, portraits of technological innovators, and, in a series called *Disneyland Deaths*, various sites of the relatively few times people have died accidentally on a ride or attraction at the "happiest place on Earth." *Big Thunder Mountain* references the following incident, recounted on Snopes.com and reprinted by Conger in a statement accompanying the work:

"A 22-year-old man, Marcelo Torres of Gardena, California, died when a locomotive separated from its train along a tunnel section of Big Thunder Mountain Railroad. Torres bled to death after suffering blunt force trauma of the chest."

Conger's *Big Thunder Mountain* does not depict Torres' death; on its surface it is an innocuous (though visually dynamic) picture-postcard view of revelers enjoying the ride.

But Conger's wit is not insincere. Working from photographic source material, he develops a detailed pattern in Photoshop before embarking on the simple, though time-consuming, process of hooking the yarn through canvas mesh. His process and materials are a way for him to reconcile "barriers between finance and crafts, business and homemaking," he says. In the book *By Hand*, Conger also observes that "I am fascinated and fulfilled by the idea that I can use craft to surprise people into seeing through their shields." This is perhaps the strongest link between the works in *Fuzzy Logic*: that the tactile and familiar encourage us as viewers to let our defenses down long enough to discover a real connection to the art.

Carson Fox's work makes use of some of the most disarming materials one might imagine: silk flowers, glitter, and artificial birds and butterflies. Fox packs this girly, gaudy ephemera into balls, wreaths, and other sculptural objects that reference Victoriana, funereal memorials, notions of decorative art and beauty, and what she identifies as the "lingering biases against 'low' materials and their associations with class and gender." While much of Fox's work in this vein has been in pastel, candy colors (carrying words like "fraud," "slut," and "liar"), this installation of wreaths bearing the word "NO" represents one of the first works she dyed black. Made in anticipation of her first major solo show in New York, Fox sees it as a way to memorialize the many rejections she faced as an emerging artist. "I am interested in beauty, but I mistrust it. Instead, I look for beauty that exists in tension with the materials or the circumstances that invent it," she says.



Carson Fox, *No*, 2004

Like Stacia Yeapanis does in her freeze-frame emotional portraits, Alvarez memorializes each object, simultaneously preventing us as viewers from entertaining our instinctual desire to touch it. This tension is inherent in the piece: Alvarez has noted that her work is more about her own desire to touch while making than it is about inviting the viewer to do so.



Shelby Donnelly, *Rainbow Love*, 2009

In creating work like *Strategic Recreation*, Shelby Donnelly “began looking at art historical paintings of leisure and battle scenes. I wanted to create a leisure scene that took on a the physicality of being socially awkward...I think of the picnic blanket as a place for leisure, a social battle ground...a place where strategy is needed.” Indeed, in one of the most famous paintings of a picnic in history—Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*)—there is an unsettling dynamic between the figures in the foreground (a nude woman sitting with two clothed men, who seem to be ignoring her). Donnelly’s bold juxtapositions of color and texture (which often incorporating paint with fabric) oddly-stretched shapes, and punctuations of kitschy materials evoke uncomfortable, even physically painful, feelings. Her use of traditional textiles like doilies are more than poignant than sardonic, and part of a process of unraveling art’s idyllic and heroic ideals.

A similar tension between materials is also at work in Mike Andrews’ woven wall hangings. His use of synthetic yarn is an effort not just to democratize his materials, but to elucidate their shortcomings: “Craft-store yarn is both a cheap and tender material...[it] is generally intended to be a comforting, nurturing, and tactile experience, but the reality is that its inherent sentimentality is completely manufactured,” Andrews says. He is interested in how these materials evoke the uncomfortable feelings that may arise when one receives an unattractive, shoddily made homemade gift. But this work is not solely driven by material—his initial process utilizes Photoshop collages and abstract drawings

interchangeably, and his use of tapestry technique is as much about its ability to “have a dialogue with painting, sculpture, or common domestic objects.” Recalling decorative wall hangings (particularly from the ‘60s and ‘70s), Neo Geo painting, and the abstractions that arise from enlarging pixels in a digital image—as well as referencing the seasonal-color whims of fashion—the work encourages multiple readings and potential uses, straddling conceptual boundaries between art and ornament, offering, as Andrews hopes, “moments when the pathetic transforms into something powerful.”



Mike Andrews, *Lemon Menace*, 2009

The technical definition of “fuzzy logic” relates to a branch of mathematics called “set theory,” in which collections of objects, rather than individual items, are classified and studied. In popular parlance, we might understand “fuzzy logic” as “decision-making with imprecise data,” as defined by answers.com, and/or a way to solve “problems that have many solutions rather than one,” according to *PC Magazine*’s online encyclopedia. Interestingly enough, “fuzzy logic” was conceived in the mid-’60s by a computer scientist attempting to develop handwriting recognition software. Since our handwriting has nearly endless variations, it would be impossible for this software to operate with binary (i.e., “true/false”) user input.

Even in a technology-driven world, our lives are full of “imprecise data.” As the artists in *Fuzzy Logic* navigate between the realms of “art” and “craft,” other spheres emerge and overlap: rare and common, public and private, masculine and feminine, handmade and machine-made. The work in this exhibition does not exist in an either/or realm of any kind. Its intangibility—its literal fuzziness, its lack of hard-edged qualities—encourage us as viewers to rely on our emotional intelligence, however imprecise, rather than quantifiable definitions and prescribed ideas, as we interpret its myriad meanings.