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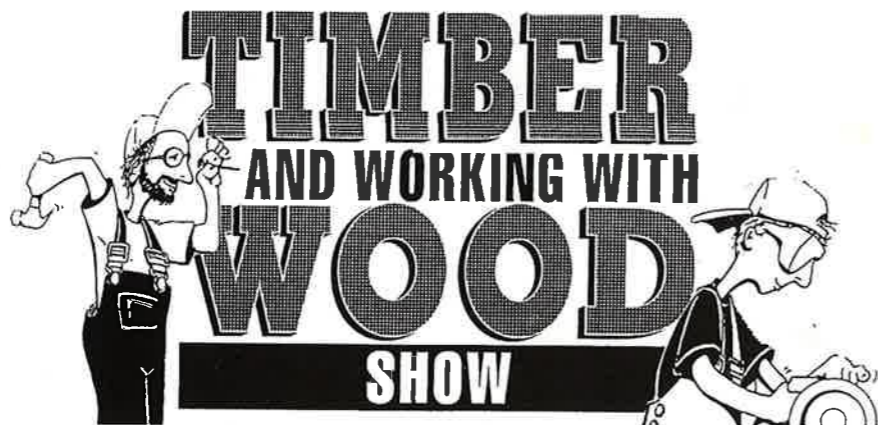
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Reader Speak

The Devil Gets All The Tunes Wrong

Dr Robert Nelson is a painter and lecturer (cum-journalist) in Art & Design at Monash University, Melbourne. I would like to take up some of the issues raised in his article for *Object* (Summer 1993/94), *The Devil Gets All The Tunes*.

Nelson quickly designates the design work of Furniture 94 into his own genre defying categories; a very postmodern approach. However the logic which defined not all but at least some of his categories is somewhat problematic, and lacking in objective critical distance. One might argue that everything is perspectival, subjective and we can't speak without coming from a given position. The perspective of this contemporary thinker was most evident under his sub-category SEX.

As he states from the outset, 'There is plenty of sex if you have an eye for it'. No objection from me. But it is the way in which Nelson denigrates the work of designer Arthur Koutoulas that is not very generous, for all sort of reasons. The first that comes to mind is his objection to the way in which Koutoulas fetishizes the breast and vagina.

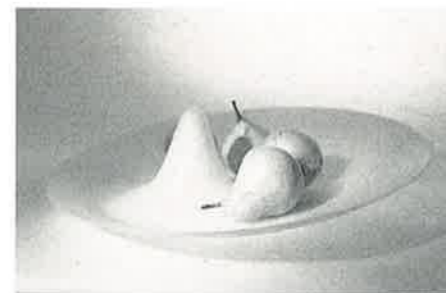
'I am not very happy about Arthur Koutoulas' *Vase/Fruit Bowl*.'

He elevates his own subjective point of view to grand master narrative when he stands in judgement rather than expressing reasoned critical argument. And this subjective and highly emotional knee jerk response evokes for the reader a sense in which Koutoulas' work has been stamped, as though he had done something 'bad' or 'wrong'... try ... EROTIC... perhaps concerned with the sensual and sexual. Nelson validates his moralising with: 'Its [*Vase/Fruit Bowl*] two aspects show a breast and vagina; but the fetish somehow highlights the non-functional character of the craftsmanship, thus even granting the piece a non-teleological character of fetishes.'

I would like to problematise the philosophical basis of this statement. Nelson argues that the quality of craftsmanship depends upon the work's telos, the level of functionality, thus the utility of the object. The object's end use. This attributes a negative quality to Koutoulas' work, if indeed there is no utility in it, which I believe is unfounded. His objects have a utilitarian use on both a material and physical level. But

what is most interesting about his work is the way in which they have a psycho-political function. His work announces the personal as political.

Nelson sounds extremely Platonic in his disapproval when confronted with Koutoulas' design. Plato's ideal republic called for rejection of the image, of all false copies of reality: thus artistic forms of reproduction would have been repressed if Plato's state came to fruition. Only that which had some utilitarian function would have survived Plato's purges. Sounds remarkably dictatorial when we look at it in this light. The



Arthur Koutoulas, *Vase/Fruit Bowl*... 'There's plenty of sex if you have an eye for it'.

implications of rejecting that which isn't homogenous and doesn't have a particular 'use' in the utilitarian classical sense leaves out that which may be purely aesthetic, or perhaps reflecting on form or concerned with the materiality of the surface — the modernist sensibility.

This calls into question what is art, what is design? Is it at all possible to carve up the aesthetic universe into discrete compartments known as disciplines and genres? I would also like to take up Nelson's problem with the highly charged erotic nature of Koutoulas' work. What I feel makes his work distinct and somewhat subversive is that it both fetishizes and is seduced by the masculine and the feminine.

Nelson provides a stunning critique of Koutoulas' *Soap Dishes* by stating simply:

'They look fine as an installation of flying saucers but the evocation of mammaries gets in the way.' What I would like to draw to Dr Nelson's attention and to the attention of *Object's* readership, is the feminist sexual revolution of the sixties and the legacy of that liberation as it is articulated in the nineties. The phallus no longer dominates discourse, and this is evident not only in the languages produced by the female voice of the academy, but so too by those involved in cultural production and those who are reflecting upon the feminine. Nelson is spot on: Koutoulas' *Soap Dishes* are evocative of mammaries, but they seem to get in the way of Nelson doing a decent critique of this young, dedicated and innovative designer's work — he can't keep his eyes off them.

Is Nelson criticising this designer for daring to explore the imagery and symbolism of the feminine because he wishes to silence it, or is he conservative and imprudent enough to believe that only women should articulate the feminine? Nelson is less damning when exploring the symbolism of the masculine, he describes Koutoulas' *Lamp* as '...tough stylish and gentle, seems a cross between an erection and an electric eel.' Nelson's use of language reveals his sweetness for the masculine and his reproduction of the power of male sexuality. When he talks about erections he elicits their strength and style, but when he talks about vaginas and mammaries he is not very happy with them or they get in the way.

Instead of replicating the phallogocentric posturing evident in most discursive fields, indeed in Nelson's critique of the work, Koutoulas explores the boundaries, the borders between what the feminine and what the masculine represent. This is innovative formally, materially and ideologically, precisely because it articulates both genders at the same time. What this suggests to me is the interdependence and symbiotic relationship that is sexual difference, the feminine, the masculine and indeed all binaries that exist in Western thought (that is, Nature vs. Culture, Black vs White), oppositions that exist in relationships of power, where one term dominates the Other. The mechanisms operating in Koutoulas' work clearly explore these relationships of power and I feel to a great extent addresses the imbalances and dynamics inherent in these oppositions.

Tatiana Pentes, Sydney



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