



Threading a Fine Twine

A Critical Response to the Art of Megan Hansen-Knarhoi

EDWARD HANFLING

Although the hooked needle remains her favoured tool, Megan Hansen-Knarhoi is no longer a 'crochet artist'. She is a sculptor. Over the last couple of years, advances in the quality of Hansen-Knarhoi's art have been accompanied by critical and curatorial attention. Reviewing the 2003 Wallace Art Award, Jonathon Bywater picked out her *Fourteen Cuddly Toy Jesus Crosses: Cry For Everything Bad That's Ever Happened* as one 'of the most appealing points of the show', noting that it overpowered 'the nearby pompom piece by glitz master Reuben Paterson'.¹

In 2004, Hansen-Knarhoi was selected by former Artspace Director Tobias Berger to represent New Zealand at the Sao Paolo Biennale, where her crocheted doll, *Topsy Turvy*, accompanied works by esteemed New Zealand artists like Billy Apple, Judy Darragh, Richard Killeen, Michael Parekowhai, Yuk King Tan and Francis Upritchard. At her best, Hansen-Knarhoi has an edge over all of these artists.²

However, the attention that has been paid to her work has been for the wrong reasons. It is wrong to pigeon-hole Hansen-Knarhoi as one of a glut of mainly young artists seeking to 'resurrect', 'elevate',

'reconsider' or 're-evaluate' formerly craft-based techniques. There is this tendency in New Zealand art criticism to subject contemporary artworks to facile art historical classification, rather than to a direct critical response. Only lazy and uncritical thinking allows Hansen-Knarhoi's work to be slotted in with that of Emily Siddell, Jacquelyn Greenbank, Marie Shannon, Malcolm Harrison, Shelley Norton, et al.

Certainly the crochet technique is something she has in common with, for example, Greenbank. Hansen-Knarhoi's *Henrietta* (2003), a woollen simulation of a roast chicken, seems to be of the same ilk as Greenbank's *Tea Party* (2005). In Greenbank's work, the fact that the trappings of the tea party are made of wool is beguiling and amusing. However, it plays on the ordinary associations of the material – its ability to invoke nostalgia and the spectre of archaic domesticity. Greenbank uses wool for what it is in the everyday world, importing it to the realm of art like a found object, and utilising its pre-existing connotations rather than transforming it aesthetically. It means what it already means.

There's nothing wrong with this, but it has limitations. How many times can an artist draw on those particular meanings – the associations people have with wool – before her viewers cotton on to this gambit and the yarn becomes a yawn? Now a teapot, now a bicycle (Greenbank's *The Royal Raleigh Watchers*), now what? How many objects can be wrapped in wool before it becomes obvious – that a bicycle wrapped in wool and a teapot wrapped in wool differ only insofar as one is a bicycle and one is a teapot? After a while, the wool no longer adds anything, and the effect is simply a woolly simulacrum of things we're already familiar with.

Selectivity when it comes to subject matter works to Hansen-Knarhoi's advantage. Not only is her roast chicken chortle-worthy, but it is a one-off, aesthetically pleasing object in its own right. There is an interest



here in the 'look' and 'feeling' – the corporeal effect of wool in conjunction with chicken, rather than mere associations. Henrietta is really a dumb object. This aligns Hansen-Knarhoi's work with the silliness of, say, Francis Upritchard, rather than modish re-workings of craft traditions and atavistic challenges to art-world hierarchies.

The trick to Upritchard's work is that the end-result is as inane as the materials she starts with. She invites the viewer to look at art in much the same way that they would look at the paraphernalia of the everyday world. There remain those who wish for the alchemical transformation to occur, for this stuff to become 'art'. And so, sophisticated interpretations arise. I maintain, though, that Upritchard makes objects that are stubbornly stupid, and that they implore the viewer to respond in a similarly stupid or philistine way. The same often applies to Hansen-Knarhoi. No amount of art-theoretical awareness is going to make you more capable of appreciating her *Happy Poo* (2003).

Both Hansen-Knarhoi and Upritchard take pleasure in the impotence of objects. Upritchard makes burlesques of ancient cultural artefacts, which give the illusion of performing a ritualistic function. Hansen-Knarhoi's work also refers to ritual, particularly, as the artist puts it, 'domestic and ecclesiastic ritual'. This comes through in her use of the cross form, as in *33 Cuddly Toy Jesus Crosses – Tinsellation Series*, (03/03/03) and *Cry For Everything Bad That's Ever Happened*. Crochet and soft stuffing are used to defile the dignified geometry of the Christian icon. These crosses resemble teddy bears – infantile sources of comfort and security. This is typical of Hansen-Knarhoi's irreverent approach, where a light and fluffy exterior belies the engagement with more pointed ideas and messages.

At the same time (and this is what distinguishes her from most other artists employing crochet), the idea of participating in bogus rituals is bound up in the process she employs, which involves almost mechanical repetition. The point is that the ritual is, in a sense, meaningless, a charade. Hansen-Knarhoi mixes ritual with obsession, and questions the extent to which rituals are taken seriously or construed as profound. And crochet is just as silly as other rituals. An artwork does not acquire deep ideas through being painstakingly crafted.

(opposite above)
Megan Hansen-Knarhoi in her studio, Auckland 2005
Photograph: Stuart Page

(opposite below) MEGAN HANSEN-KNARHOI
33 Cuddly Toy Jesus Crosses - Tinsellation Series 03/03/03
Tinsel wool, dacron & crochet, dimensions variable
Photograph: Megan Hansen-Knarhoi

(above) MEGAN HANSEN-KNARHOI
Cry For Everything Bad That's Ever Happened 2003
Acrylic, wool, cotton yarns, dacron, crochet, dimensions variable
Photograph: Stuart Page

(right) MEGAN HANSEN-KNARHOI
Happy Poo 2003
Acrylic, yarns, dacron & crochet, dimensions variable
Photograph: Megan Hansen-Knarhoi



Yet the ritual of process – of making – seems to be at the heart of that mode of contemporary art referred to as 'object art'. In 2004 Hansen-Knarhoi's *Cry For Everything Bad* was included in a show called *Left at the Members Lounge*. In line with the name of the gallery, *Objectspace*, the catalogue and wall texts repeatedly insisted that the exhibits were examples of 'object art', a kind of overlap between the disciplines formerly known as 'sculpture' and 'craft'. It's a neat concept, but I'm perturbed by its haziness. To slot Hansen-Knarhoi's work into this category is really, merely, to say that she is blurring the boundaries between art and craft, and that's a bit old hat. It's like the 'elevating craft to the level of art' thing, which is just a way of subsuming craft within the more 'elevated' realm of art. Hansen-Knarhoi seems to revel in the craftiness of craft, and to preserve a non-art mode of attention to her work.



Previously, this approach of catering to philistinism dominated her practice. She tended to shrink from putting herself forward, unequivocally, as an artist (and frequently described herself as a singer and a dancer, just to baffle people and divert their attention from herself-as-artist). Simultaneously, she was learning the machinations of the art-world, making work that followed the patterns of contemporary art. Even some recent efforts conform to art-world expectations. *Amihe* offers the kind of clue to interpretation that those involved in the 'game' of contemporary art salivate over. (The clever 'reader' should be revelling in references to McCahon and Parekowhai). Issues and concepts take over. Gina Irish has said of Ani O'Neill, Hansen-Knarhoi and Jacquelyn Greenbank – all artists using crochet – that 'their concerns have moved beyond gender politics to embrace concepts connected to identity, materialism and memory.'⁸ I would suggest that Hansen-Knarhoi has gone further, beyond these vague themes, to art and its aesthetic potential. In this sense, she has also gone further than Upritchard, whose art 'objects' sink back into everyday objects.

As with any artistic achievement, 'beauty' does not fully account for the effect of Hansen-Knarhoi's work. Importantly, she is aware, more than most, of the formal issues of art-making. For instance, she has grasped the aesthetic qualities of Morris Louis' *Unfurled* paintings (1959-61) – the most important and rigorous body of work produced since Jackson Pollock.

Hansen-Knarhoi has long been interested in the complicated and contradictory nature of 'beauty', and its relationship to the aesthetic value of artworks. She once proposed an art history thesis on 'ugliness' (with a special focus on the paintings of Gretchen Albrecht). *Cry For Everything Bad* is a good

example of Hansen-Knarhoi's proclivity to conflate the beautiful and the grotesque. Here, the crosses have stray, stringy strands that rustle up a dramatic, flame-like halo, while also evoking something more misshapen and mundane, like sprouting potatoes.

In confronting *Cry For Everything Bad*, or Hansen-Knarhoi's more recent *Crotchtit* crosses (which include images cropped from pornographic magazines), one alternates between aesthetic and non-art modes of looking – between formal analysis and a philistinism that embraces vulgarity and 'badness'.⁹ Again this excludes these works from any trend on the local art scene. The affinities are with artists overseas. Andres Serrano's treatment of religious icons comes to mind. Like Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) – a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine – Hansen-Knarhoi's crosses often play upon the beauty of unglamorous materials, the undervalued or valueless. This approach is also shared with many of the 'Young British Artists'.¹⁰ Chris Ofili's painting, *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996, now destroyed), depicts a black Mary and incorporates Elephant dung and glitter, amongst a shower of pornographic vignettes. Ofili, though, generates a familiar effect of juxtaposition and displacement, in contrast to the hermetic formal quality of Hansen-Knarhoi's crosses.

This is not to say that there are no loose ends to be addressed, or problems to be overcome. For instance, does size matter? Can the crosses hold their own on this scale, or do they remain susceptible to slipping from the aesthetic to the prosaic? The intimate size of these objects means that they can be grasped and fondled: does this compromise their detachment from everyday objects, despite their aesthetic distinction? On the other hand, the small scale is part of their appeal and their meaning.

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(left)
MEGAN HANSEN-KNARHOI
Henrietta 2003
Wool, dacron & crochet,
dimensions variable
Photograph: Megan Hansen-Knarhoi

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How can the works be developed? Naturally, I'll leave that in the artist's hands. Hitherto, Hansen-Knarhoi has explored the cross motif, demonstrating a consistent formal development alien to most New Zealand artists. There is ambition and intelligence here, and seriousness behind the humour. The use of crochet carries with it risks – the risk of slumping into that style (popular amongst fine art students) whereby crochet or knitting is used as a garnish for some other, unrelated art-form or practice – or the risk, on the other hand, of being labelled a 'crochet artist' rather than, as Hansen-Knarhoi undoubtedly is, one of New Zealand's finest artists.¹¹

1. Jonathon Bywater, 'Auckland', *Art New Zealand* 109, Summer 2003-2004, p. 43.

2. Hansen-Knarhoi's most recently-exhibited series, *Crotchtit* (comprising *Cunt Crosses*, *Cock Crosses* and *Copulation Crosses*), is a major achievement. (See my 'Auckland' review, *Art New Zealand* 117, Summer 2005-2006, pp. 38-39.) The artist's use of the word 'cunt' in titling her works, though it may seem offensive, is intended to be positive and affirming for women. This is in line with recent writers (sometimes referred to as 'post-feminist') who endeavour to 'reclaim' the word from its negative and derogatory use by men and to celebrate female sexuality. (See Inga Muscio, *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, Seal Press, Emeryville, CA, 2002.)

3. Virginia Were remarks that 'hobby or household crafts ... have been reworked in ... extraordinarily inventive ways' by artists like Hansen-Knarhoi, and that such artists 'challenge art hierarchies in the process'. ('Material Witnesses', *Art News (New Zealand)*, Summer, 2004, p. 52.)

4. 'Upritchard's objects invite a mindless response, not a high-falutin one. You're asked to become a philistine. In doing so, you incorporate, within the experience of 'art', the division between "art" and "mass culture", or "high" and "low". This is what "objects" – as distinct from simply "artworks" – do.' (Edward Hanfling, 'Auckland', *Art New Zealand* 115, p. 52.)

5. Megan Hansen-Knarhoi, artist's statement, in *Left at the Members Lounge*, Auckland: Objectspace, 2004, n.p.

6. Curated by Lucy Hammonds, Rachel Gibbons and Sean Duxfield, with assistance from Bronwyn Fletcher.

7. So why not just call it sculpture? The answer may lie in the fact that some of the artists appear to be stuck in 'craft'. Their work is more akin to highly detailed or illusionistic paintings – painstaking renditions of 'the real'. Mark Mitchell makes imitations of inflatable machine guns out of clay. Glen Hayward uses wood to make objects that look uncannily like cardboard boxes. Does this really amount to anything more than cleverness (that is, skill)? I am reminded of Justin Paton's musings on the detailed city-scape paintings of George Balogh: 'At their most complacent ... these glittering, rapt views induce a response not unlike those follies of folk art in which scale models of, say, the Eiffel Tower are arduously crafted from toothpicks. Your gobsmacked "wow!" is pursued before long by "now what?"' (Justin Paton, 'Penance for Popularity', *New Zealand Herald*, 6 March 1997, section B, p. 9.)

8. Gina Irish, 'Woolly World: New Zealand's Crochet Revival', *Object* 47, 2005, p. 34.

9. The *Crotchtit* crosses are sophisticated formal compositions in their handling of shape, form and colour. But appreciating them on this aesthetic level involves inspecting them closely, becoming a voyeur. The eroticism is, for the most part, immediately obvious, whereas the abstract nuances emerge only through prolonged, concentrated viewing.

10. The title of Hansen-Knarhoi's *Cry For Everything Bad That's Ever Happened* has a similar ring to it, and the same suggestion of a kind of self-parodying catharsis, as Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* (1997).

11. Gina Irish refers to Hansen-Knarhoi as 'an emerging crochet artist'. ('Woolly World: New Zealand's Crochet Revival', p. 34.)