



AFFINITIES

David Gates and Helen Carnac

MESSY MODERNISM

When installing *Affinities* David, Helen and I were talking about the inclusion of *Barn Find 1-3*, a trio of experimental plywood forms, painted white, and standing atop Gates' characteristic angular steel rod supports. Made from material found on site at their west Somerset home-studio, the obfuscation of the wood grain marked something of a departure for Gates; the surface treatment recalling the language of architectural modernism, even with the coloured thread that created neat lines in the work's interior spaces.

The reference to the well-known twentieth century architectural idiom led us to consider the 'modernism' elsewhere in the exhibition. Looking around at the disaggregated cabinets, metal vessels carefully secured to a found plank of wood with lines of thread, we arrived at the idea of messy modernism with specific reference to a photograph of a dilapidated shed near to David and Helen's home-studio displayed on the wall. The shed in question is formed from a variety of readily available mass-produced material of standard lengths that you can buy in any hardware store: panels of timber, standard two-by-two and wavy corrugated iron sheets showing signs of rust at the edges. The materials that make up the shed are barely held together against the elements, with battens, scraps of timber or just the material itself keeping the structure intact, like a dry-stone wall. The shed merges with the landscape but is resolutely not of it, like the many everyday infrastructural structures and objects - whether urban or rural - that so fascinate this duo.

The synthesis of the rural with modern craft is a concern throughout the exhibition and informs Helen and David's selection from the Crafts Study Centre's archives. A deep attachment to the environment is evident in the garden diaries of etcher Robin Tanner, weaver Ethel Mairet's research into the country's different wools, and even the calligrapher Edward Johnston's haphazard diaries. These individuals were among the so-called 'pioneers of modern craft' to use Margot Coatts' Pevsnerian phrase, but they lived in rural settings. Flashes of what Mairet termed the 'forward looking' artist's sensibility that we might see in Mairet's woven experiments or Johnston's designs for the London Underground emerge from labouring within the thickets of green villages, windows of self-built home-workshops hardly distinguishable from the flora surrounding them, where recipes for hand-made apple pulp were integral to a modern way of living.

Helen and David share the deep material and environmental awareness evident in so many of the CSC makers' archives. Helen's work, largely vitreous enamel applied to copper or steel forms, does this in an unexpected way. Less transposition of the

natural processes that surround her in west Somerset, more the emulation of how nature decomposes, eats away and renders materials – metal in particular – friable. To achieve this distinctive output the metal is manipulated and layers of liquid and powdered enamel applied with multiple firings, using techniques far removed from the organic process that constitute an inspiration for the work.

The bucolic romance of the English countryside, often presumed to be at one with narratives of craft, is kept at bay in Helen and David's work. Instead, they have an omnivorous approach to ways of making, a dedication to research, and responsiveness to the complexities of landscape where the organic and synthetic continually overlap.

Stephen Knott