

# Enigmatic Vessels

The leather sculptures of Australian artists Graham and Tanija Carr speak to a wide variety of ancient and modern civilizations and ideas. There is also a sturdiness to their creations that also speaks to the timelessness of art.

By Dr. Dorothy Erickson



Graham and Tanija Carr, **Untitled 2001 No 2**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, gold oil resin paint, 35 x 75 cm. Private collection, USA. Photograph by Victor France. All images: Courtesy of the Artists.

Australian husband and wife team Graham and Tanija Carr are very much in demand in international art circles where they are known for their intricately worked, architectural-scale leather sculptures. These mysterious, ritualistic, and symbolic objects are embellished with evocative ornamentation and subtle coloration. The works have a powerful presence that hint at hidden meaning. Paradoxically they appear, at the same time, both new and old. This is a major part of their appeal.

When asked about their work, the Carrs talk of drawing on the spirit and energy of tribal work and interpreting it in a contemporary way. They say that they aim to evoke total ambiguity so that the viewer does not know when the objects were made (i.e. are they ancient or are they part of the future); what the material is (i.e. metal, wood, or clay); what the purpose is (i.e. ritual, decorative, or utilitarian), and what the markings mean. It could be said that they have succeeded in all of these endeavors. Art critic Judith McGrath wrote on her website, when reviewing their exhibition entitled *Approximations of Then* (2005–2006) at FORM Gallery, Perth, Western Australia: "These extraordinary formed leather works by the Carrs will take your breath away as your mind spins into imagination mode to reach the height of satisfaction. Yes leather! I couldn't believe it either, had to touch one to ascertain it

wasn't carved wood or cast bronze or burnished clay or woven thick fiber."

The Carrs' unique objects have evolved through a considerable gestation period and are the result of intensive experimentation combined with training in various art fields, most notably architecture. Graham Carr, who was born in England in 1945, arrived in Western Australia with his parents in 1949, the year his future partner Tanija Alach was born in Perth. Both trained in architecture at what is now Curtin University before working throughout Australia and abroad. Returning to Perth in 1976 to what was becoming a lively art scene, they took a sabbatical, and never returned to architecture. Graham Carr enrolled at Perth Technical College (now Western Australia School of Art and Design) to learn pottery while Tanija Carr enrolled at what is now Edith Cowan University, where she under-



Graham and Tanija Carr, **Untitled wallpiece**, 1980, exhibited in *Leather and Clay* at Fremantle Arts Center, leather, 35 x 60 x 10 cm. Private collection, Western Australia. Photograph by Kurt Kendressey.

took a diploma in art education and developed craft skills. Graham Carr's mainstay was teapots, which were seen in exhibitions across Australia. Leather-work, a skill Tanija Carr taught herself, soon saw her bags and objects on sale in outlets round Australia. It was the era of the worldwide 'Craft Revival.'

In 1979, when they embarked on a collaborative exhibition, their artistic vision began to be realized. Minimal sketches were used to convey ideas to each other and resulted in spontaneous and relatively quickly realized works. The ceramic component was undertaken by Graham Carr in stoneware; Tanija hand-stitched, wet-formed, and dyed the leather. The results were powerful visual images. Textural treatment was kept to a minimum and color was used sensitively. Some objects were gentle forms, while others were quite aggressive. Of this early work, they said, "We like our work to offer strong feelings.... The worst thing is for people to look at the work and have no response."

The result of their endeavors, the exhibition *Leather and Clay*, was shown in 1980 at the Fremantle Arts Center. At that time, Graham Carr said, "The pieces were an experiment in how the materials could act on each other, how the leather could bind and wrap the clay, how the clay could penetrate the leather. It was an experiment in how we could put clay and leather together and end up with something in



Graham and Tanija Carr, **Untitled bowl form**, exhibited at SOFA, USA, 1995, wet-formed leather, stained, dyed, and incised, 26 x 69 cm. Private collection, USA. Photograph by Victor France.



Graham and Tanija Carr, **Untitled bowl form**, exhibited in *Nature as Object* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1998, wet-formed leather, dyed, and incised with gold oil paint, 52.5 x 79.5 cm. Photograph by Victor France.





**Graham and Tanija Carr, Untitled 2003 No 3**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, acrylic paint, 33 x 56 cm. Photograph by Victor France.



**Graham and Tanija Carr, Untitled platter form 2000 No 7**, leather, 86 x 36 x 14 cm. Photographer by Victor France.

harmony." The sculptural work was striking and the exhibition a critical and financial success. For the artists the concept and the evocative ambience of the work were all important: traits that are still seen in their work today.

After the 1980s, during which there were occasional invitational exhibitions, Tanija Carr decided that she needed to exhibit again, making a body of work from which one strand of their current *oeuvre* is derived. This solo exhibition at Beaver Galleries, Canberra, in 1992 was of intricately tooled caskets, which were a refinement and elaboration on her early work. Wet-forming, layering, piercing sections, and incising gave a three-dimensional character to the surface of the new works, enlarged to the size of chests and elaborated upon, giving them the appearance of aged ritual objects of wood or metal from a variety of civilizations; notably Chinese, Mayan, and Moorish, with a touch of the medieval Christian art evidenced by the inclusion of crosses surrounding some caskets.

After this successful exhibition she was invited to exhibit at the *Chicago International New Art Forms Exposition* (CINAFE) in 1993. This was the forerunner of SOFA, which has become the foremost fair for designed work and objects in the United States. Tanija Carr was the only artist working with leather, exhibiting the caskets with their visual references to Japanese *torii* and studded armor.



**Graham and Tanija Carr, Untitled platter form 2003 No 5**, leather, 24 x 106 x 32 cm. Photograph by Victor France.

Graham Carr, meanwhile, had become frustrated with the problems that occurred with large ceramic vessels. He had taken the teapot about as far as he felt that he could go with it: he wanted to move to a larger format, into more sculptural work. He gave up pottery so he could work in leather together with his partner. From then on the two artists developed an international practice. Immediate changes saw more concentration on the bowl form

as a major vehicle—a form with which Graham Carr was well acquainted. The work created at the time was symmetrical and rhythmic with studded and carved patterns evoking Indonesia—the Spice Islands and objects embellished with cloves.

Each artwork is a collaborative project, from the discussion of the concept to the last intricately placed line. McGrath commented on the 2005–2006 works, "The Carrs' collaboration seems to be quite unique. It appears as though two minds and four hands work as one artist in the conception and construction of these large wall and plinth works." Their creativity is connected, their ideas feed off each other, leading on to the next detail, or the next work, establishing a genealogy.

Working together is not always easy. As they say, "The nature and endurance of the collaboration has been helped by the fact that we are also life partners. We feel we have developed a certain intuitive insight into each other's thinking and are able to become quite confronting in expressing our views, without destroying the working relationship.... The nature of our collaboration does not rely on separate individual skills, for we each undertake all aspects of the design and making of the works."

They share a common 'architectural language.' This, they believe, develops good general problem-solving skills, appreciation of detailing, a sense of monumentality in a small form, and influences their approach to making in that they 'construct' all their works. This process is

often laborious and always intricate.

The Carrs had remarkable success in America. With the demand for their unique objects strong, the artists work away studiously at Boya in the hills behind Perth, the capital of Western Australia, honoring commitments to the market. Many people have come to view their work simply out of curiosity, to see if it is really made of leather. The pieces have continued to increase in size and they are now found in large public collections such as the Australian National Gallery and the Contemporary Museum, Hawaii, as well as major private collections such as that of the designer Donna Karan in New York.

Since their architectonic work is so meticulous and time-consuming, only ten objects are made each year. Those made in the 1990s often featured tooled leather, carved and stained to resemble intricately carved, wood-fired terracotta. The bases of the bowls glowed in contrast to the darker rims. Random lines were incised and overlaid with stained sections creating an image reminiscent of a whimsical Klee drawing. This scribing technique and contrast of colors are also obvious in the more recent platter-like objects *Untitled 2000 No 7* and *Untitled 2003 No 3*, where the dark, carved leather echoes the rhythmic patterning of chip-carving on wooden objects from parts



**Graham and Tanija Carr, Untitled 2006 No 1**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, acrylic paint, 50 x 36 x 52 cm. Photograph by Victor France.



**Graham and Tanija Carr, Untitled 1999 No 10**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, acrylic paint, 90 x 38 cm. Photograph by Victor France.

of Africa or perhaps the carving of the clothing of a Balinese rice goddess figure. *2000 No 7* has a base of cream leather inscribed with deep brown, while *2003 No 3* has a gilded panel. These two raft-like pieces have distant echoes of Southeast Asian or Melanesian vessels with their long prows.

The works exhibited in 1998 in *Nature as Object: The International Craft Triennial* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia were some of the most monumental and have led on to others such as *Untitled 2002 No 4*. The bowl forms exhibited were over one-meter across—'Funerary Urns' for several generations of a family. The precisely ordered ornamentation with its symphonic rhythms imbued the objects with an aura that intrigued and compelled closer inspection. The large bowl or urn forms are perhaps the most seductive of their *oeuvre*. The wide, highly ornamented rims contrast with precise but random patterning of lines and patches lightly incised into gilded or stained interiors.

In recent years, the works have become deliberately asymmetric with pattern upon pattern upon pattern building to a crescendo. Mary Stewart wrote in *Launching the Imagination: A Comprehensive Guide to Basic Design* that the ornamentation on the object *Untitled 2001 No 2* was



**Graham and Tanija Carr, Untitled 2002 No 4**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, gold oil resin paint, 54 x 51 cm. Photograph by Victor France.





Graham and Tanija Carr, **Untitled 2006 No 3**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, acrylic paint, 45 x 41 cm. Private collection, USA. Photograph by Victor France.

“Like a complex musical piece, three types of rhythm have been woven together.” In their irregular complexity the works also elicit connotations of computer-aided design. *Untitled 2001 No 2*, *Untitled 2005 No 2*, are two examples that are particularly satisfying but remain enigmatic. When discussing their preferences in other art forms Tanija and Graham Carr say, “Generally, we are drawn to the more moody, richly textured works, very much in contrast to current slick, minimalist offerings, the aim being to produce objects of ‘substance’ with a high level of workmanship and detail, which initially produce in the viewer, a visceral reaction.”

*Untitled 2008 No 3* and *Untitled 2003 No 3* call to mind the ‘fox box’ and ‘ring’ ceramic works of British artist Ian Godfrey inspired by the Chinese funerary ceramics in the collection of the British Museum. These are also circular forms, standing on sturdy legs with an embellished superstructure—in Godfrey’s case small villages and in the Carrs’ curved architectural forms. Both utilize textured surfaces to embellish their works, which resemble treasured artifacts from some other civilization. The Carrs have been captivated by the notion put by a fellow artist that the work is “future archaeology.” Curiously, and with some symmetry, Godfrey is an amateur archaeologist of long standing who carves his ceramics with a penknife.

Another group of works, from 2006, suggests West African inspirations and their lineage in the Carrs’ stable is not immediately obvious and explanations are not forthcoming. Of these and other artworks the artists say, “Having worked to establish uncertainty and ambiguity in the work, we do not wish to undermine this by providing a definitive explanation.” As the late John Stringer (curator of the Kerry Stokes Collection) said, when opening their exhibition in 2005, they “like to disappear behind their work.” Stringer described the artworks as “primitive but sophisticated ... fragile but brutal.” This certainly describes the ‘stool/throne’ pieces such as *Untitled 2006 No 1*, *Untitled 2006 No 3*, and an earlier piece *Untitled 1999 No 10*, which induces vague memories of tribal thrones of the Ashanti and the rhythmic patterning of Dogon ritual containers or Benin bronzes.

In an effort to reach a wider public and perchance to take advantage of outdoor sculp-



Graham and Tanija Carr, **Cobalt Sink wall piece 2005 No 4**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, acrylic paint, 102 x 154 x 18 cm. Photograph by Victor France.

tural possibilities, the Carrs have branched out, having an elegant symmetrical bowl cast in bronze. With computer scanning and mold-making technology highly advanced an opportunity presents itself to make editions, to enlarge individual works for a public space, or miniaturize them for a different type of collector. It would also allow the artists another avenue for intel-



Graham and Tanija Carr, **Terre sangre wall piece, 2004 No 1**, wet-formed, dyed, and incised leather, acrylic paint, 160 x 102 x 25 cm. Private collection, USA. Photograph by Victor France.

lectual exploration. The palette available via patination is subtle and the chemical knowledge not unlike that needed for glazing a pot. It will be interesting to see how far they pursue this path.

The wall pieces of the 21st century are completely different to other works. There is a sharpness and a hard edge to the forms, implying underlying conflict and yet the very confrontational impact of the 1980s work is missing. There is, however, a duality that was not evident in the early work. These newer pieces can be gentle, if read in one way, or a harsh evocation of civilization lost, if read in another. Art critic Judith McGrath discussing this work considered, “The large wall works appear more futuristic as they suggest what might constitute art in some ‘post apocalyptic’ age.” With a ‘ladder’ element incorporated into each there is perhaps the suggestion of escape or a pathway to salvation.

In a world where the disposable and the novel appear to dominate, and the hard-won skills needed to bring complex ideas to fulfillment are discounted, Graham and Tanija Carr strive to make something of enduring significance. They have just ventured into the Asian art market where their ‘mysteries of tomorrow’ should reach out to a sympathetic public. Suspended between the future and the past the inscrutable objects are set to tantalize yet another audience. Δ

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