



Will Cruickshank, installation view of "Three Moons," with (center) *Wound Frame No.5*, 2023, yarn, wood, and nails, 193 x 193 x 55 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Exeter Phoenix

Will Cruickshank

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Exeter Phoenix

As Will Cruickshank's current exhibition (on view through April 16, 2023) demonstrates, the dynamics of production are fundamental to his work, determining form, scale, and even potential meanings. Within the broad sculptural parameters that he sets himself, the shape that an object will ultimately assume is not predetermined but almost improvised, emerging from processes that activate material properties. This attitude is reminiscent of "truth to materials," the formalist theory promoted in Britain by artists such as Henry Moore in the 1930s, but Cruickshank arrives at it by hands-on intuition rather than the study of conceptual precedents.

For him, the particular qualities of spun yarn—its durability, tenacity, flexibility, softness, resilience, and color-bearing—become the prime concern, manipulated by the idiosyncrasies of makeshift technology. Cruickshank constructs the machines that conduct key processes in his making—winding, spinning, binding, and carving. Recycling might be added to that list: motors from machines such as cement mixers are repurposed into drive shafts for axles that wind yarn around poles and spindles; and parts culled from a powered chop saw provide cutting edges for the hand-built automatic lathe he uses to carve turned lengths of pine and oak. The wood comes from sustainable plantings harvested by the Forestry Commission, a U.K. public agency, and has unmistakable associations with pre-industrial construction.

The tolerances and capacities of Cruickshank's equipment and materials influence how making proceeds. Since the mill-wheel-like wooden structure of *Wound Frame No.5* (2023) is the widest circumference accommodated by his most powerful drive, weight and area determined the speed at which yarn was wound over the radial spokes into the continuous peripheral "plane" of colored bands. By contrast, a huge amount of material could be rapidly fed onto the pole-like spool around which *Code Stick No.3* (2022) was spun into a cushion-like volume with attributes of warmth and softness that contradict the sculptural expectation of unyielding mass.

"Code Sticks," Cruickshank's name for these wall-mounted, pole-based pieces, contributes to the strands of ambiguity that they accrue. The possibility that their colors might be orchestrated by a rational system seems to carry the same potential in the artist's mind as their visual connection to domestic decoration, such as woven carpets or samplers, craft forms historically placed in competition with industrialized manufacture. Practical parameters also play a role; the "palette" depends on the yarns available from the weaving factories of rural Devon, which supply Cruickshank with their excess stock. If only shades of pink are on offer, the chromatic range is set, thus releasing the artist from aesthetic decisions, though he still selects the order in which colors are introduced into the winding process that produces his polychromatic bands.

The language of titles is part of the shadow play of open meaning that Cruickshank adopts in part, one suspects, to avoid the dulling refinement risked by univocal outcomes. He implicates his work in multivalency—between function and its opposite, between artisanal resonances and machine production, between fine art and craft, and between traditional mediums and contemporary heterogeneity of practice. An eclectic mix of references emerges. Echoes of Greenbergian formalism that seek purity in flatness of surface, shape of the support, and properties of color exist alongside a conflicting, speculative dimension that invites storytelling—imaginings of anthropological artifacts cut adrift from unidentified uses.

When process leads outcome, as it does in Cruickshank's work, such polar positions do not ask to be resolved. *Boulder No.2* (2022), a stripy hybrid object formed by mixing yarn into builders cement (a workable blend of concrete and ash), offers good example of the artist's ethic. Cruickshank ground the surface with powered abrasion and eroded it with jet wash to expose the yarn as fluffy extrusions materially at odds with a stone-like body. But how to describe it? Similarly, *Shape Stick 11* and *Shape Stick 12* (both 2022), wall-mounted wooden poles painted a uniform black, are equally accessible as abstract geometric forms or objects relating to undisclosed uses, such as staffs of office or paraphernalia for a parade. Like *Boulder No.2*, each stick is the record of its own making, carved by a circular saw dropped at intervals on turning wood to create a sequence of grooved profiles.

Generic abstract properties predominate in symmetrical arrangements like *Spectrum Loop Twist No. 2* (2023). Parallel chromatic bands of yarn, previously spooled by machine and carefully removed, are nailed to horizontal rods and mounted on the wall, a maneuver that gives taut, even pictorial form to the otherwise shapeless loop of material to which, of course, it would return if unfastened. The same tense sensation of provisional form characterizes the diagonal weave of yarns in *Colour Field Triangle No.8* (2022). The pattern of two isosceles triangles, one inverted and overlapping the other, again depends on the rods remaining in place. Yet here, the parallel strands suggest the dispassionate facture of a nonobjective painting, as invoked by the title. The piece also alludes to the concept of shaped canvases, advanced in England by Richard Smith in the 1960s, but seen in the round, and the sculptural interface with painting explored by Anthony Caro. Cruickshank's works are neither pure painting nor pure sculpture, as he boldly transgresses the "areas of competence" that Greenberg preferred to leave demarcated.

This willingness to be tangential to several possibilities simultaneously is embodied in the exhibition title—"Three Moons." The role of a moon is to orbit a planet. Some planets have multiple moons interconnected by the gravitational pull and push of the mass they encircle, although each may support a distinct environment. Cruickshank surrounds a single entity with alternative identities without ever defining a core concern and keeps the disparate qualities in imaginative motion.

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