

# CRAFTS

THE MAGAZINE FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

## AQUA FRESH

*The undersea  
world of  
Julia Lohmann*

### COLD COMFORT

*Tracey Rowledge  
in the Arctic*

### THE MEAL DEAL

*Ferran Adrià, the  
culinary craftsman*

### MATERIAL GAINS

*Why we like to  
collect stuff*



NO 220  
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2009  
UK: £6.20 | US: \$12.95



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From the stomach of a dead calf to tiny cultures of bryozoans, Julia Lohmann's extraordinary work is entwined with biology.

By Fiona Rattray. Portrait by Nienke Klunder

# ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

There's an image of Julia Lohmann I can't get out of my mind. It's of the German designer leaving an Irish airport, bound for London, with a case stuffed to the gills with fresh seaweed. Another is of her hard at work in a knacker's yard, pouring 60 litres of plaster into a dead calf in order to make a stool. Fortunately, Lohmann's extraordinary dedication to her work always pays off. The objects she makes are powerful and unique, often challenging our responses to the materials and by-products convention tells us to ignore. Memorably, her Royal College of Art graduation show in 2004 included golden-hued lampshades made from draped and dried sheep and cow stomachs.

We meet at the Kentish Town studio Lohmann shares with her graphic designer husband and collaborator in Studio Bec, Gero Grundmann. In person, she has none of the alarming intensity you might expect. Born in 1977, hale and hearty, warm and articulate, Lohmann readily shares the mixture of amusing anecdotes and disciplined research behind what one blogger gleefully termed this 'baaad-ass artist'.

We're surrounded by some of the strange fruit of Lohmann's labours. Behind us hang a clutch of her *Ruminant Bloom* lampshades. As an RCA student she tracked down a taxidermist near Salisbury who taught her the rudiments of preserving dead animals. Lohmann had spent the previous summer, following a graphic design BA at the Surrey Institute, teaching horse-riding in Iceland. She'd come back deeply affected by the Icelanders' close proximity to nature and food production (in a hostile landscape families routinely raise their own animals for slaughter) and full of questions about why we go to such lengths to disguise meat, and why so much of the animal

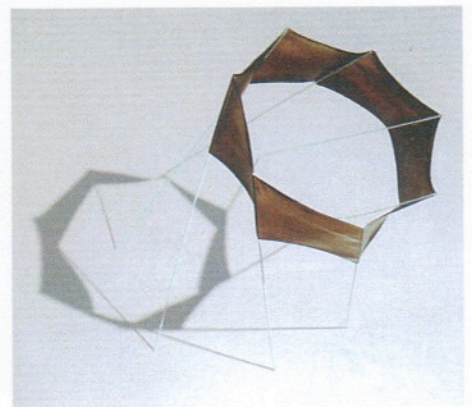
is deemed not to our 'taste'. 'It makes you wake up and realise how desensitised we are,' says Lohmann. She found the taxidermist more than willing to help: 'You're allowed to snoop if you're not a rival,' says Lohmann, who seems to relish the investigative part of her work.

She's clearly good at getting experts onside. In Tooting she found a tripe-selling butcher who could supply her with the intact stomachs she needed for her lampshade experiments. For the finished articles the designer makes little effort to disguise their origins, determined that viewers see the honeycomb-surfaced material for what it is, and learn to love it. She seems momentarily stung when I suggest that she was one of the early crop of recent product design students who seemed to eschew mass production in favour of the one-off or limited-edition output the art world favours. 'It's not a decision I ever made,' she argues. 'It's one the world made more than I did. My work does have strong conceptual messages, but the fact that that is too challenging for companies, I think is wrong.' Working with a manufacturer is still something she'd like to try: 'I'd love it, but I want to do it with the same thought processes, I wouldn't want to lose that.'

Right now though, her work is more firmly rooted in the realm of unique creation than ever. This year Lohmann was one of seven 'contemporary makers' selected by the Jerwood Foundation to share in its £30,000 prize, and take part in this summer's exhibition at the Jerwood Space in Southwark, London. The theme of the show was 'Impact', with makers (who included specialists in textiles, glass and weaving) asked to present work exploring themes including risk and the unknown. Little did Lohmann realise how close







she would come to failing with her unlikely chosen medium, the sea creatures called bryozoans.

As a child, Lohmann and her family were driven mad on beach holidays by their father's predilection for collecting driftwood. The basement of their home in Hildesheim was stuffed full of Herr Lohmann's beach-combings, some destined to be turned into sculptural objects, still more to be saved for another day. Twenty-odd years later, in large plastic baskets beneath her desk and in wooden Japanese fish-roe boxes behind it, sits Lohmann's own collection of flotsam and jetsam: research for *Settlements*, the series of enigmatic sculptures she made for the Jerwood show.

The idea first came to her when she was in Galway in Ireland, searching for seaweed. Ever since a 2007 residency in Hokkaido, Japan, Lohmann had been experimenting with the aesthetic and material properties of the broad, flat *kombu* seaweed used to wrap sushi. Now she wanted to see if there were other types of kelp she could use. On the internet she discovered a place called the Irish Seaweed Centre. As usual, the experts were most helpful. Lohmann made the trip and one of their number offered to dive down to retrieve some samples. 'I spotted this little bit of red weed in his haul and it had this delicate white pattern on the surface, like beautiful embroidery, so I asked "What's this?" and they took me upstairs to see the bryozoans.'

These tiny organisms, just visible to the human eye, live on the surface of plants and objects under the sea. As they grow, they construct elaborate colonies from calcium carbonate, similar to coral. 'They're amazing creatures, very sensitive; just opening the door at the centre made them disappear back inside their holes,'

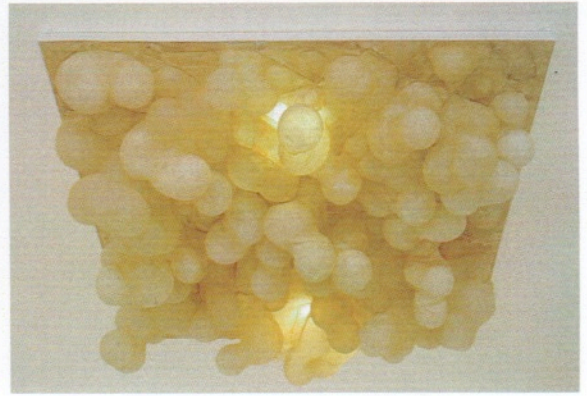
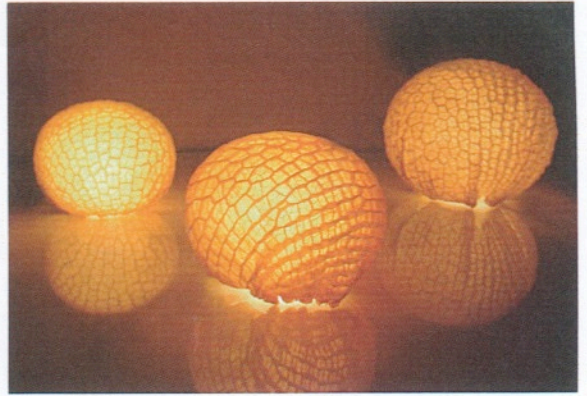
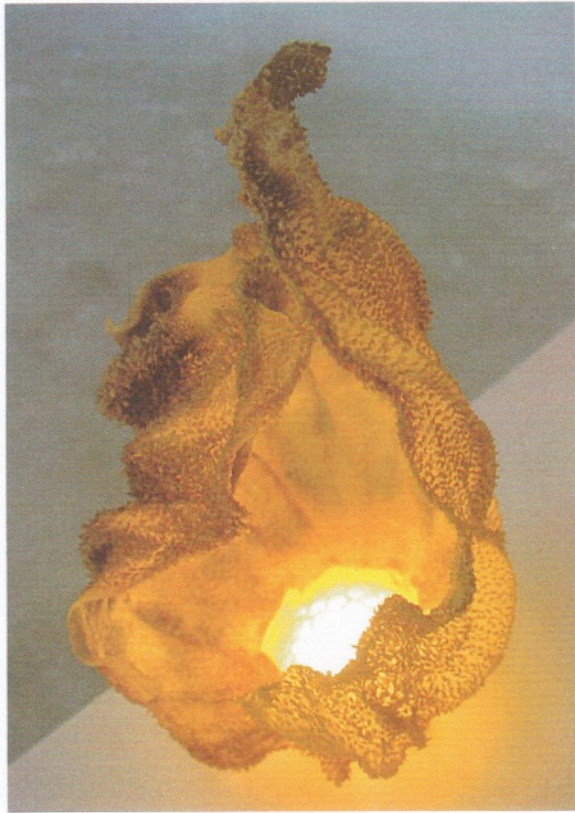
says Lohmann, who discovered that given the right conditions they would thrive on almost any surface. For *Settlements*, Lohmann created new objects by pairing two materials (either bronze, white porcelain or black clay). 'The idea is that they are abstracted - reminiscent of the sea, but not literal. One half, the cleaner half, comes from above the tide line, the other, the more elaborate, from below.' In one piece, what looks like the top of a white plastic bottle nestles in a bed of black bone. Behind Lohmann's desk is the bizarre collection of objects used to create the moulds (sweet liquorice pipes and wooden sticks dipped repeatedly in wax were used to resemble metal corroded over time).

The intention was to dip the finished objects in a tank of seawater and let the bryozoans work their decorative magic. Unfortunately, time was against Lohmann. 'Bryozoans grow at a rate of one centimetre a month maximum, and the seedlings are not easy to come by. We simply didn't have long enough.' Instead she was put in touch with zoologist Dr Joanne Porter at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, who assisted the designer in transferring existing colonies (which look like fern fronds) on to the surface of her sculptures to simulate the desired effect. 'It's a bit like carefully peeling a sticker,' says Lohmann. Whatever the method, the results are superb: a series of riveting man-made objects enhanced by the delicate hand of nature. 'It's very much like it's been taken over by something,' says Lohmann. Time and money permitting she would still like to complete the proposal using 'live' bryozoans.

As with much of her work, Lohmann acknowledges that she couldn't have achieved the

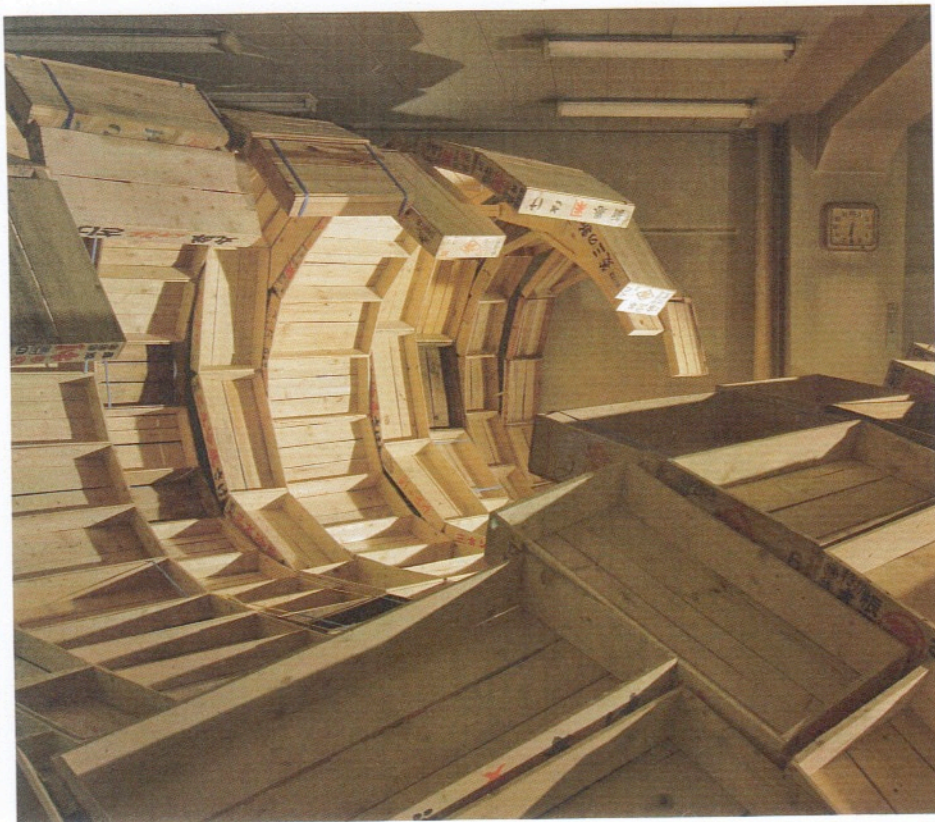
Clockwise from above left: *Cowbenches: Memento Mori* (detail), foam, wood, leather, 2005; *Kelp Constructs*, experiments in seaweed, 2008; *Ruminant Bloom*, lights made from preserved cow stomachs, 2004 (two images); *Flock*, ceiling of 50 sheep stomachs, 2004; *Lasting Void*, resin and fibreglass, 2007; *Erosion*, by Lohmann and Gero Grundmann, cast soap, 2007





Ever since a 2007 residency in Japan, Lohmann has been experimenting with the properties of the broad, flat *kombu* seaweed that's used to wrap sushi





Jerwood exhibit alone. The bronze casting for *Settlements* was carried out by Chris Summerfield, one of Gero's colleagues at Norwich School of Art and Design, the ceramic part by one of Lohmann's own students at the RCA (who also tracked down the unusual grainy black clay from near Bognor Regis). 'The biggest difference between me and craftspeople,' says Lohmann, 'is that I work with so many materials that I could never build the knowledge you build up over all those years.' She considers this both a weakness and a strong point, adding: 'Sometimes, without knowing, you push harder than someone who knows the limits, but you always have to be humble enough to know that somebody knows more.' The one time she was completely defeated, she says, was when she experimented with growing crystals: 'Just too slow for me.'

Nonetheless, Lohmann's dogged approach to the most unpromising of materials shows no sign of abating. Next year as part of her residency at Kingston University's Stanley Picker Gallery she will reveal the outcome of her continued experiments with dried seaweed (a nest of lamps exploring its translucent properties already exists, now she's thinking of using it for lacquerware). It's an approach that occasionally gets her into trouble. In 2007, at Paris's prestigious Galerie Kreo, Lohmann exhibited *Lasting Void*, a resin and fibreglass cast of the space left behind when a calf's internal organs are removed. Lohmann and Grundmann did the work themselves, removing the organs from the animal which had died of natural causes, and was destined to be incinerated. With the imperfections sanded down and finally rendered in a highly polished black surface, the void has a monolithic

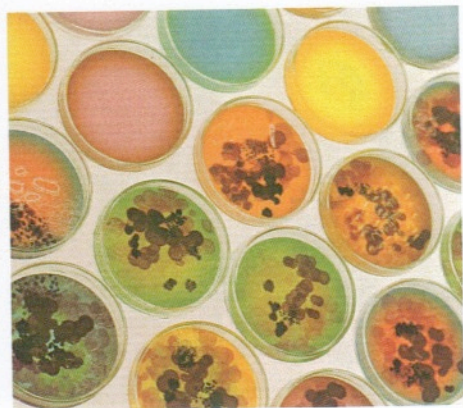
quality far removed from its gory origins. The renowned Italian designer Alessandro Mendini, a fellow exhibitor in the show about stools, wrote an impassioned letter to the gallery owner attacking it in the strongest terms ('cynical' was one of his kinder words). Lohmann wrote back defending herself (the correspondence is published on her website) and finally convinced Mendini that it was anything but insensitive.

Both *Lasting Void* and Lohmann's 2005 *Cowbenches* were in part a response to our desire for using animal skin for furniture provided any resemblance to a living creature (scars for example) is edited out. 'I think we have a responsibility if we are going to use materials like this that whatever it is we make is something good - something worth the sacrifice'. *Cowbenches* are carved foam representations of a prone animal upholstered in leather, the leather fitted exactly as it would have been on the living animal. All are given names and passports, and subtitled *Memento Mori*.

Lohmann seems dead-set on revealing unpalatable truths: if you happen to be passing the Wellcome Trust's windows on London's Euston Road (until January 2010), you can see her *Co-Existence* exhibit made from 9,000 glass petri dishes, exploring the host of non-human bacteria and microbes that go into making a human body.

Two years on, the animal-loving designer is still haunted by her trip to the knacker's yard, and in particular the beautiful colours of the vast piles of ashes lying around. All Lohmann needs now, she says, is to think of a way to use them...

Julia Lohmann's 'Cowbenches' and 'Lasting Void' can be seen at the V&A's 'Telling Tales' exhibition until 18 October 2009. For details, see *Crafts Guide*. [www.julialohmann.co.uk](http://www.julialohmann.co.uk)



Clockwise from left: *The Catch*, installation, 2007; *Co-Existence* (detail), 2009; *Co-Existence*, 9,000 petri dishes with images of bacteria colonies, Perspex, lighting, 2009; three pieces from *Settlements*, 2009





The pieces respond to our desire to use animal skin for furniture, provided any resemblance to a living creature is edited out

