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Truly, madly, deeply: Strategic entrepreneuring and the aesthetic practices of craft entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Research Summary: Strategic entrepreneurship research has long focused on high growth and wealth maximization in the creation of primarily economic value. As such, it has largely overlooked craft entrepreneurs, who prioritize skill, materiality, and immersive action in creating broader forms of value. Deep engagement with materials, alongside daily aesthetic (sensory, tacit, embodied) practices are key to how craft entrepreneurs create unique value and strengthen competitive distinction. Drawing on ethnographic data from two craft-based settings, we abductively generated three dimensions and associated tensions by which craft entrepreneurs leverage aesthetics for strategic entrepreneuring: *materializing*, *enchancing*, *empathizing*. Our key contribution is to unpack the embodied—and very human—processes by which craft entrepreneurs imagine and give life to unique offerings while creating distinctive value for both themselves and their stakeholders.

Managerial Summary: The focus of strategic entrepreneurship research is often on economic value creation, along with high growth and wealth maximization. By exploring the everyday practices of craft entrepreneurs, we unpack how

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creating broader forms of value (e.g., symbolic, artistic, social, cultural) through immersive and embodied actions contributes to stylistic and competitive distinction. For the craft entrepreneurs in our study, remaining competitive is about engaging in sensuous practices that result in meaningful and authentic offerings, for both themselves and their stakeholders. By capturing and exploring these daily practices, along with the tensions that undergird real-time exchanges with stakeholders, we provide fresh insights into how craft entrepreneurs create unique value while delicately balancing tradition with innovation to strengthen competitive distinction.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics, craft, practice theory, strategic entrepreneurship, value creation

1 | INTRODUCTION

The study of strategic entrepreneurship, which integrates strategic management (competitive advantage-seeking actions) and entrepreneurship (opportunity-seeking actions), has long centered on growth and profitability to drive economic value creation (Ireland et al., 2023; Mazzei, 2018). The focus is often on how resources are leveraged over time to enable the exploitation of current advantages and exploration of future opportunities, all with the aim of sustaining competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 2011; Ireland & Webb, 2007). Importantly, driving such value creation efforts is often presumed to be an agentic entrepreneur who is decisive, rational, and confidently driven by heroic scripts that give them almost superhuman—and to a point, disembodied—qualities (Bill et al., 2010; Calás et al., 2009; Dodd et al., 2023; Pettersson et al., 2017). This “entrepreneur as hero” myth is problematic because it perpetuates a sky-is-the-limit view of entrepreneurial scalability that is generally unsustainable, while paradoxically overlooking small and low-growth ventures that are considerably more representative of entrepreneurship and ultimately more impactful in the business world (Anderson & Ullah, 2014; Dodd et al., 2023). Furthermore, the dominant focus on economic value creation and maximization signals an unsettling disconnect between the theorizing of strategic entrepreneurship and the actual, everyday practices of entrepreneurs in organizations of any size and growth aims, or strategic *entrepreneurship*, which may be driven by broader motivations and logics (Achtenhagen et al., 2010; Anderson, 2015; Dimov et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2023; Hjorth, 2014; Moroz & Hindle, 2012).

Craft entrepreneurship (also referred to as artisan entrepreneurship; see Pret & Cogan, 2019) provides one context where the focus is predominantly on the creation of broader forms of value (e.g., symbolic, artistic, social, cultural) that go beyond a sole focus on monetary value, especially when considering small-scale craft-based ventures (Khaire, 2019; Ranganathan, 2018; also see Bell et al., 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019). Often associated with the distinctive mastery of skills and embodied expertise, craft refers to a “fundamental alternative approach to learning, working, producing and consuming that prioritizes materiality and skillful human engagement” (Sirmon et al., 2022, p. 2) and is key for understanding the interplay between tradition, community, and innovation (Dacin & Dacin, 2019; Kroezen et al., 2020; Sennett, 2008; Toraldo et al., 2019; Waehning et al., 2018). Craft entrepreneurs, much like what Becker (1978) terms “artist-craftsman,” leverage the ideals of utility, skillful virtuosity, and beauty to create meaningful and deeply personal offerings, using their body as a source of both knowledge and inspiration

(Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Chiles et al., 2021; Kroezen et al., 2020). These offerings are typically developed within the constraints of a particular geographical context and target audience (Solomon & Mathias, 2019), which ultimately appreciates the craft entrepreneur's imaginativeness, innovativeness, and general artistic ambition (Ranganathan, 2018; Rattan, 2022). Significantly, the strategic efforts of craft entrepreneurs are often rooted in an attitude of devotion toward the pursuit of passion, creativity, and authenticity to skillfully create unique offerings that provoke deep connections and emotional reactions in users and broader communities (Cnossen et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2018; Kroezen et al., 2020; Pret & Cogan, 2019), while still capitalizing on “a distinctive and marketable individuality” (Bain, 2005, p. 29). Thus, strategic entrepreneurship, with its “logic of economic rationality” (Calás et al., 2009, p. 553), becomes reframed in the context of craft entrepreneuring, which, borne through and by the body, entails a delicate balance between artistic and economic logics (Bain, 2005; Becker, 1978; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). In this context, the process of creating distinctive value is achieved through deep immersion and embodied expertise, resulting in stylistic—and importantly—competitive distinction (Cattani et al., 2020; Kroezen et al., 2020).

The immersive nature of craft entrepreneuring, along with the stylistic and value judgments that are typical of this context, foregrounds the importance of aesthetics, and thus the body, in creating these meaningful offerings (Cattani et al., 2017, 2020). Aesthetics broadly relates to “knowledge that is created from our sensory experiences” (Taylor & Hansen, 2005, p. 1212) and the ongoing conversation between experience, thoughts, feelings, imaginings, and judgments that are based on particular aesthetic categories (Gherardi, 2009; Strati, 1999). With its sensory, tacit, and embodied elements, aesthetics is at the core of how individuals relate with various worlds—for example, inner and outer, social and material (Baldessarelli et al., 2022; Barrett, 2000; Strati, 2007; Taylor & Hansen, 2005). These elements are particularly important for craft entrepreneurs who rely, for instance, on their hands to give shape to materials by means of intimate bodily contact (Bell et al., 2019), a doing that is facilitated by reflection on sensory experience and the affective reactions and aesthetic judgments that an evolving product may evoke in one's body (Elias et al., 2018). Craft entrepreneuring therefore requires using the body, in all its complexity, to trigger aesthetic reactions, in an “entanglement of knowing and doing” (Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014, p. 135), while engaging in situated practices that go beyond economic rationalizations and cognitive analyses of materials or works-in-progress. A practice perspective, and specifically a focus on aesthetic practice (Gherardi, 2009; Reckwitz, 2017; Strati, 2012), is important because it enables us to explore the enmeshing of the social and material worlds, of knowing and doing, while recognizing that craft entrepreneuring is a form of relating *with* others that is embedded in situated, expressive, mundane, bodily, everyday interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014; Marins et al., 2023; Shotter, 2014). To explore these interactions and related value creation process, aesthetics becomes key in understanding how craft entrepreneurs make stylistic, embodied decisions that enable them to achieve the particular distinctiveness that sets them apart from competitors (i.e., a competitive distinction) and, ultimately, to become successful in creating unique value and survive—if not excel in—the marketplace (Cattani et al., 2020).

In our study, we are primarily interested in investigating how craft entrepreneurs create unique value and develop a competitive distinction through engagement with materials and, importantly, aesthetic practices. Specifically, we ask: *How do craft entrepreneurs leverage aesthetics for strategic entrepreneuring?* We address this question with comparative field research (Bechky & O'Mahony, 2015), bridging ethnographic data from two distinct studies to unpack how two different craft entrepreneurs rely on aesthetic practices to create memorable and meaningful offerings. Specifically, each craft entrepreneur develops different products and services (musical instruments, musical performances) in two different geographical areas (North America, Western Europe). This nuance in geography is important because while Europe is recognized for its historically longer cultural tradition in handmade musical instruments, North America is generally known for its countercultural and faster-developing tradition (Dudley, 2014). Additionally, Europe's tendency is to rely on closed—secretive, even—ways of passing on techniques aimed at avoiding competition and controlling market access by means of guilds and limited apprenticeships, whereas North America is rooted in an open system guild that leverages social networks and free information sharing to generally achieve, through noncompetition, harmony and interconnectedness in the world (Dudley, 2014). Uniting these two entrepreneurs and their distinctive offerings, aimed at different audiences, we parse through immediate differences to

illuminate shared aesthetic practices and their implications for strategic entrepreneurship (Nicolini, 2009; Strati, 2000). Doing so, we answer Mazzei's (2018) call for more process-based, longitudinal, and immersive investigations of strategic entrepreneurship across firms and in diverse industries. When possible, we complement participants' accounts with visual representations of their aesthetic practices—a useful and powerful way of capturing and conveying sensory, tacit, and embodied experiences (Bell et al., 2019). Of note, we explore the linkages between strategic entrepreneurship and aesthetic practices, specifically focusing on how craft entrepreneurs create unique value and strengthen competitive distinction. Overall, our philosophical position is ontologically relational (viewing phenomena as emergent, situated, and distributed, “existing ‘in-between’ people, objects and places”; Thompson, 2018, p. 230) and epistemologically interpretivist (recognizing researchers as constructing interpretations through subjective experience and sensemaking; Hansen et al., 2023).

Our work offers two primary contributions. First, we contribute to the strategic entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Hitt et al., 2017; Ireland et al., 2003; Ireland et al., 2023; Mathias et al., 2018; Mazzei, 2018), connecting it to the nascent lens of aesthetic practice (e.g., Gherardi, 2009; Reckwitz, 2017; Strati, 2012), which is vital in understanding how sensory, tacit, and embodied elements shape the creation of distinctive value through unique offerings. Through this foray into aesthetics to understand how strategic entrepreneurship unfolds for craft entrepreneurs, we highlight the very human processes driving the micro (inter)actions that enable survival in the marketplace (Foss & Lyngsie, 2011; Ringvold et al., 2023)—attuning to aesthetic reactions (one's own, as well as those of others) and processing potentially differing preferences, engaging in intimate contact with materials and reflecting deeply on those experiences, all while reconciling experimentation with an embodied sense of authenticity in developing a distinctive aesthetic signature. Secondly, we contribute to the burgeoning literature on craft and craft entrepreneurship (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Khaire, 2019; Kroezen et al., 2020; Pret & Cogan, 2019; Ranganathan, 2018) by unpacking how the craft entrepreneur's body—not only the hand, but also other body parts: brain, limbs, heart, and all in between—enmeshes with material and social elements to create a unique offering across different time horizons (past, present, future). We spotlight the tensions undergirding the efforts of craft entrepreneurs as they leverage real-time exchanges with various stakeholders (e.g., customers, audience, peers, competitors) and material surroundings, navigating differing perceptions of value between them while developing a reputation and seeking inspiration, all while delicately balancing tradition with innovation to strengthen competitive distinction.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Aesthetic practices in strategic entrepreneurship

Strategic entrepreneurship is widely recognized as entailing the creation of competitive offerings and value through strategic and entrepreneurial efforts (Hitt et al., 2011; Ireland et al., 2023; Sirmon et al., 2022; Wright & Hitt, 2017). However, how it is constructed and performed needs further inquiry, to gain a broader understanding of the dynamic, ongoing, and situated process of strategic *entrepreneurship* that occurs not only as entrepreneurs start new ventures, but as they engage in strategic entrepreneurial practices in existing organizations (Hjorth, 2014; Schendel & Hitt, 2007; Steyaert, 2007). Scholars have shown that entrepreneurship is key to practices such as strategizing (Antonacopoulou & Fuller, 2020) and that it involves specific behaviors such as risk-taking (Deligonul et al., 2008). However, what remains to be clarified is the role of the body in creating unique value (e.g., spiritual, aesthetic, social; Chiles et al., 2021; Elias et al., 2018; Khaire, 2019) and developing a competitive distinction through everyday, seemingly mundane interactions and aesthetic practices (Dodd et al., 2023; Kroezen et al., 2020; Steyaert, 2007). We suggest that aesthetic practices are particularly pertinent in craft ventures, where these very human experiences—which are key to entrepreneurship (Koch et al., 2018)—take center stage (Kroezen et al., 2020).

Aesthetics is at the root of how craft entrepreneurs make stylistic decisions, enabling them to distinguish themselves, along with their offerings, from competitors (i.e., gain a competitive distinction) while creating unique value



and surviving, perhaps even excelling in, the marketplace (Cattani et al., 2020). In general terms, aesthetics relates to knowing that emerges from sensory experiences and the ongoing exchange between experience, thoughts, feelings, hunches, imaginings, and judgments that are based on particular aesthetic categories, such as beauty, ugliness, the comic, the sublime, the tragic, and the sacred (Gherardi, 2009; Strati, 2000; Taylor & Hansen, 2005). With its sensory, tacit, and embodied elements, aesthetics provides an important lens for exploring the interplay between body and mind, along with sensory, situated experience (Strati, 1999). At the core of aesthetics is the notion of connection, of interaction and relationality, in which phenomena are interrelated, rather than independent (Taylor & Hansen, 2005). This enmeshing of phenomena, which include both human and material elements, is quite evident in craft (Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014). For example, craft entrepreneurs rely on their bodies to develop skillful knowledge while giving shape to materials, a process that is tacit and immersive in nature and, for this reason, may only be communicated through the “feel” materials incite in one’s body (Baldessarelli et al., 2022; Thurnell-Read, 2021; Yanow, 2000). Such “silent” and physically intimate “conversations with materials” (Klemmer et al., 2006, p. 142; also see Elias et al., 2018), are made possible through the entanglement of human and material elements (Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014), and deep reflection on “what a material can do,” rather than “what it is” (Bell & Vachhani, 2020, p. 682). As such, there is a force—indeed, a vitality—to material elements that enables them to influence, inspire, and even disrupt engagement in craft (Bell & Vachhani, 2020). Although this vitality of matter has been recognized as crucial for organization studies, the processes by which it influences organizational members, including entrepreneurs, remain insufficiently understood (Bell & Vachhani, 2020). In other words, there is a need to continue exploring how human and material elements shape one another in an ongoing process of discovery that enables the creation of distinctive offerings and value while succeeding in the marketplace.

Embodied encounters are thus central to aesthetic practices, which affect not only those creating unique offerings through craft (craft entrepreneurs), but also those who interact with the offerings (stakeholders, such as customers, audiences, peers, competitors) (Cattani et al., 2020; Hill, 2021). Craft entrepreneurs engage in a form of doing that deeply relies on sensory—often tacit—experience, embodied knowledge, and aesthetic judgment (Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014; Strati, 1999). Recent research on craft has highlighted the role of embodied encounters and sensibilities in a number of doings, from the making of products such as beer (Rydzik & Ellis-Vowles, 2019), sushi (Holt & Yamauchi, 2019), shoes, bicycles, and pottery (Bell & Vachhani, 2020), to the providing of services such as barbering, butchering, and bartending (Ocejo, 2017). These offerings’ success would not be possible without the embodied efforts and aesthetic practices of a craftsperson, along with their passion, dedication, desire for authenticity, and the expressive nature of their efforts (Bell et al., 2021; Kroezen et al., 2020; Mohr et al., 2021). But neither would it be possible without stakeholders, along with their own sensory and embodied experiences of the offering, as well as the aesthetic reactions that emerge in the process (Cattani et al., 2020). Indeed, these are what enable stakeholders to emotionally connect (or not) with an offering and eventually decide whether they will (continue to) consume it—which can result in powerful bonds and devotion between entrepreneur and stakeholder, and is key for survival and success in the marketplace (Cattani et al., 2020; Caves, 2000; Elias et al., 2018). As a result, broader forms of value (beyond primarily economic) are created for *both* entrepreneur, who gains satisfaction in expressing individuality through a meaningful product or innovative technique, *and* stakeholder, who may engage with an offering due to its, for example, social, spiritual, symbolic, cultural, or aesthetic benefits, which in turn provide stakeholders with distinctiveness for themselves (Bell et al., 2019; Caves, 2000; Elias et al., 2018; Khaire, 2019; Kroezen et al., 2020). An investigation of aesthetic practices thus deepens understandings of how craft entrepreneurs create distinctive value through unique offerings, in turn helping us (re)imagine what it means to create value (and for whom) as part of strategic entrepreneurship.

The senses, along with aesthetic judgments, are key to the strategic efforts of craft entrepreneurs. For example, scholars exploring creative processes have highlighted the role of sight and smell in perfume-making and scent innovation (Islam et al., 2016), and the importance of taste (Louisgrand & Islam, 2021) and the interplay of all five senses and emotions (Svejenova et al., 2007) in haute cuisine. Special attention has also been paid to the fundamental role of touch, particularly *the hand*, as a jumping off point for improvisational practices in craft because it enables a

connection between surfaces (skin and artifacts) that, aided by tacit knowledge, guides actions that are neither completely predefined nor fully foreknown (Bell et al., 2019; Bell & Vachhani, 2020). In our study, we focus on the role of not only the hand, but also *the eye* and *the ear*, or how touching intertwines with seeing and hearing to fuel aesthetic practices, in turn shaping how craft entrepreneurs create unique offerings and value for themselves and their stakeholders, and ultimately a competitive distinction.

3 | RESEARCH APPROACH

3.1 | Research context and data generation

We explore how two craft entrepreneurs rely on aesthetic practices to create distinctive value through unique and meaningful offerings (both products and services). Our focus on craft entrepreneurs is relevant because, first, they rely deeply on their senses to give shape to materials by means of intimate bodily, and imaginative, contact (Bell et al., 2019) and, second, they are “trained to reflect on, bring into awareness, and verbalize the imaginative, often ineffable processes that undergird novelty generation” (Elias et al., 2022, p. 207). Using a comparative field research design (Bechky & O'Mahony, 2015) and a bricolage approach (deGama et al., 2012; Pratt et al., 2022), we bridge two related yet independent studies¹ in order to unpack the aesthetic practices of two entrepreneurs (one from each setting) that are active in the same general industry (i.e., music), enabling us to explore various senses (touching, seeing, and, importantly, hearing) across the two. Significantly, these two entrepreneurs have different occupations and specializations (master luthier, professional musician), contrasting venture configurations (solo, team), diverse gender identities (male, female), and are located in—and thus cater to—distinct geographical contexts (North America, Western Europe). Despite these differences, these craft entrepreneurs have a common goal: to develop a unique aesthetic signature while strengthening competitive distinction and surviving in the marketplace. Yet, the topic of how they leverage aesthetics for strategic entrepreneurship was not the focus of original analyses. Recognizing the need to address recent calls in the craft and strategic entrepreneurship literatures (e.g., Mazzei, 2018; Sirmon et al., 2022), we decided to match this pair of craft entrepreneurs to delve deeper into the existing empirical material (Bechky & O'Mahony, 2015). This enabled us to zoom in and out of their settings to illuminate the creation of unique products *and* services (i.e., musical instruments and musical performances), in turn leveraging contextual variation for robust theorization (Bechky & O'Mahony, 2015; Nicolini, 2009). Given our focus on aesthetic practices and their immersive nature, along with the need to explore interactions with material and social elements, we focused our analysis on the existing ethnographic material relating to each craft entrepreneur. Following Stigliani and Ravasi (2012), Table 1 summarizes the different sources and types of data leveraged for our study, along with their use in analysis. Of note, even though these entrepreneurs did not explicitly identify as “craft entrepreneur” (Pret & Cogan, 2019) or “artist-craftsman” (Becker, 1978), their practices when developing unique offerings are very much aligned with these labels and associated ideals of utility, skillful virtuosity, and beauty, as explained in the literature (also see Bell et al., 2019; Kroezen et al., 2020).

One of the two craft entrepreneurs in our study is Sasha Radicic, a master luthier and refugee from Sarajevo, former Yugoslavia and a solo entrepreneur in the Midwestern United States (St. Louis, Missouri). Based on decades of experience and embodied knowledge, Sasha builds high-end stringed instruments, such as classical and electric guitars, electric bases, and zithers. The first author, who gathered all the data used in our study, learned of Sasha through a systematic search for craft entrepreneurs in Missouri, with Sasha standing out due to his personal and entrepreneurial journey in the music industry. Access was gained after cold-calling (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016) him and discussing his experience with—and willingness to—articulate aesthetic practices (he taught various apprentices over the years). Ethnographic material was generated for 11 months through “spect-acting” (Gill, 2011), which entailed active participation in fieldwork, long interviews (Crawford et al., 2021), which ranged from 4 h to several days and leveraged material artifacts to elicit rich narratives, detailed ethnographic field notes (Emerson et al., 2011),

TABLE 1 Summary of sources and types of data and their use in analysis.

Source of data	Type of data	Use in analysis
Immersive fieldwork (11 months with Sasha Radicic; 25 months with Ana Elias)	<i>Field notes and memos:</i> Detailed accounts of entrepreneurial practices and interactions with material and social elements. With Sasha, this included reflexive notes from active participation in fieldwork and informal conversations with stakeholders (see below). With Ana, this included a reflexive narrative of field experiences and informal conversations with stakeholders (see below).	Producing subthemes, main themes, dimensions and associated tensions resulting from specific analytical moves
	<i>Video and photographic data:</i> Visual records taken by the first author to document (non-)verbal data and interactions with material and social elements. With Sasha, this included embodied exchanges with raw materials, tools, and instruments-in-progress, as well as stakeholders. With Ana, this included embodied exchanges with musical instruments and stakeholders, during and in preparation for performances.	Gaining a deep understanding of the specific aesthetic practices of Sasha and Ana; supporting analytical moves through interaction analysis (Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009) of human and material elements, including (non) verbal behaviors
Interviews and conversations	<i>Formal interviews:</i> Planned exchanges with Sasha and some of his clients, as well as with Ana. With Sasha, this entailed long interviews with him in his studio (Crawford et al., 2021), ranging from 4 h to several days and incorporating material artifacts into the dialogue to elicit rich narratives about how he collaborates with stakeholders to create unique products; interviews with his clients were conducted in their place of work. With Ana, this entailed in-depth interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Cope, 2005) with her in her studio and home, unfolding over 2 weeks and going from open-ended to semistructured questions about her entrepreneurial journey over time in imagining and creating unique projects and performances; follow-up interviews were also conducted online with Ana to capture real-time reflections on ongoing entrepreneurial efforts.	Producing subthemes, main themes, dimensions and associated tensions resulting from specific analytical moves
	<i>Informal conversations:</i> Unplanned exchanges with various stakeholders in participants' studios and homes, in stakeholders' place of work, and during performances (as part of fieldwork). With Sasha, stakeholders included clients, previous apprentices, and audience members during performances featuring his guitars. With Ana, stakeholders included students, audiences, peers, and public officials.	Contextualizing and deepening understanding of the specific aesthetic practices of Sasha and Ana
Secondary empirical material	<i>Entrepreneur-specific data:</i> Websites, including participants' and those mentioning participants (e.g., online newspapers), and social media posts, including by participants themselves and by others about the participants. With Sasha, the first author also discussed photographs and videos taken by him but did not collect these. With Ana, the first author collected documents from the archives of Ana's venture, including booklets, programs, media coverage, and photographs and videos of performances.	Contextualizing the specific aesthetic practices of Sasha and Ana
	<i>Community-of-practice-specific data:</i> Books, websites, and social media relating to the participants' specific communities of practice.	Gaining an understanding of the specific communities of practice in which Sasha and Ana are embedded

and secondary sources (e.g., books, websites, social media posts). For the most part, ethnographic material, which included photographs and audio- and video-recordings of the many hours spent in the field, was generated in Sasha's studio, but also included attending performances featuring Sasha's guitars in concert halls and interviewing his clients in their place of work.

The other craft entrepreneur is Ana Elias, a professional musician in Western Europe (Constância, Portugal) and the only entrepreneur in her team-based venture (Associação CICO—International Center for the Carillon and the Organ, of which she is currently the president) that engages in daily aesthetic practices to develop new musical performances (the others primarily engage in technical and managerial practices). The first author, who is a practicing entrepreneur and part of this venture team, gained access as a researcher after a candid conversation (McCurdy et al., 2005) about the need to enactively explore (Johannisson, 2011) a particularly innovative project that this team was in the process of actualizing. Research material was gathered over 25 months and comprised in-depth interviews (phenomenological interviewing, Cope, 2005, and inter-viewing, Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), both in situ and online, immersive fieldwork, which was captured through ethnographic field notes and memos, photographs and audio- and video-recordings when possible, and secondary sources (e.g., websites, books, documents from the venture's archives). Ethnographic material arising from the immersive fieldwork with Ana was generated in her studio and in her home and focused on understanding her entrepreneurial journey over time, both solo and in a team, in imagining and creating new, memorable projects and performances. To gather this material, the first author also attended rehearsals and concerts featuring Ana's new performances, as well as observed and participated in conversations with a number of stakeholders (e.g., students, audiences, peers, public officials) during these events or in their place of work.

3.2 | Data analysis

Our analysis of ethnographic data focused on how Sasha and Ana leveraged aesthetic practices in the creation of unique products and services, ultimately strengthening their competitive distinction. Inspired by similar methodological approaches (e.g., Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011; deGama et al., 2012), we focused on comparing and contrasting themes that addressed the research question guiding the current study. By taking this approach, we underscore our analytical trustworthiness and transferability given the recurrence of prominent themes across craft contexts and geographies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Pratt et al., 2020). Our analytic approach involved all members of our authorial team, with the second and third authors being crucial for bringing fresh insights and interpretations. We used a non-reductive technique (Pratt et al., 2022) comprising analytical moves aimed at surfacing and processing data patterns in context. At the root of this process were our research team's interpretive repertoires (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) and philosophical positioning, which reflect our own distinctive disciplinary backgrounds (entrepreneurship, human resources management, organizational aesthetics), professional contexts (United States, Canada, Western Europe, Middle East), and epistemological perspectives (relational, processual, intersubjective, reflexive). Based on this, we listened to audio- and watched video-recordings of field research, read transcriptions and field notes, and analyzed emerging themes by paying attention to their repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Inspired by post-coding analysis (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), we iteratively moved between data, theory, and analysis, writing memos that helped us track, discuss, and flesh out emerging themes.

Our first analytical move was to analyze data from each entrepreneur, separately, conducting an independent thematic analysis that entailed making note of and labeling significant instances, as well as recurrent patterns in the data. The second analytical move was to engage in a collective discussion rooted in surprise, doubt, and reflexivity as a means to challenge assumptions and to consider alternative understandings about the empirical material (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Locke et al., 2008). For example, in the data about Sasha, we noticed similar themes pertaining to identity, possible and feared future selves, and identity play (see Stanko et al., 2022) that we felt were important in addressing our research question. But our third move changed this perception: When comparing and



contrasting themes across Sasha and Ana, to our surprise, we concluded that identity-related themes were not prominent enough to warrant inclusion in subsequent theorizing. To support these analytical moves, when video and photographic data were available, we conducted interaction analysis, focusing on relational and embodied processes and, in particular, on the interactions between human and material elements (Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009). This entailed identifying specific moments (or sequences of moments) that addressed our research question and then zooming in on both verbal and nonverbal behaviors, as well as interactions (Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009). Given the importance of visual representations of craft as powerful ways of capturing and conveying aesthetic practices (Bell et al., 2019), as well as our study's focus on sensory, tacit, and embodied elements, we analyzed video and photographic data before transcribing relevant verbal descriptions, to ensure we did not privilege verbal data over (and thus blinding ourselves to) nonverbal and visual data (Hansen et al., 2023; Jones & LeBaron, 2002).

A fourth analytical move entailed examining connections between themes and organizing what we came to understand as related subthemes, grouping them by main themes and, subsequently, refining these main themes into the three major dimensions—*materializing*, *enchancing*, and *empathizing*—by which craft entrepreneurs leverage aesthetic practices for strategic entrepreneurship. Table 2 provides a listing of these themes and related subthemes, along with a summary of the dimensions. *Materializing* focuses on how the body is leveraged to create distinctive value while developing a unique aesthetic signature, showcasing a subtle link between internal sensibility and external recognition that fuels aesthetic practices and the perceived reputation gained and sustained with and through an offering; its distinctive features are impacted by how craft entrepreneurs feel about themselves and the developing offering, as well as interactions with stakeholders, with the body signaling this affectivity. *Enchanting* embraces the mysterious, the imagined, and the magical as entwined with rational thought and automatic cognitive routines—a process of inspiration that is as methodical as it is undetermined; it involves craft entrepreneurs tuning into their senses and surroundings and engaging in intimate, bodily interactions with materials. *Empathizing* concerns how craft entrepreneurs leverage the body to become sensitively attuned to both themselves and their stakeholders while utilizing the temporal play of past, present, and future to create unique offerings that incorporate meaningful past experiences and present conditions, ultimately resulting in a recognizable aesthetic and a sustained reputation into the future.

As a final analytical move, we delved deeper into the role of each dimension and relationships between them because we noticed that they were interrelated, continually and iteratively informing one another. Deepening the analysis, we realized that the three dimensions struck a sort of balance by means of tensions (see Table 2).² In contrast to traditional conceptualizations of tensions, typically understood as contradictory or oppositional, participants showed that they held two points of the duality within the tension together, deriving equal energy from them (Putnam et al., 2014). Within materializing, there was a reputation tension, entailing a pivot between internal sensibility and external recognition. Enchanting comprised an inspiration tension characterized by a back-and-forth between intuition and rationality. Empathizing fueled the aesthetic practices of craft entrepreneurs as they created distinctive value for strategic entrepreneurship, balancing differing perceptions of value between themselves and stakeholders, along with reputation and inspiration tensions. In all three tensions, the salience of both ends was honored, with their uniqueness, respective, and equal value being preserved, synergistically (Putnam et al., 2014).

4 | ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Here, we enliven the aforementioned dimensions of materializing, enchanting, and empathizing along with associated tensions, presenting our interpretations along a combination of textual and visual data that illustrate the multifaceted aesthetic (sensory, tacit, embodied) practices in which participants engaged for strategic entrepreneurship as they created distinctive value.

TABLE 2 Summary of major dimensions and associated tensions, and respective main themes and subthemes.

Subthemes	Main themes	Major dimensions	Tensions	Description
Audience interaction, risk-taking, innovation, active listening, trust, excitement, seeing and hearing, verbal and nonverbal communication	Communicative materialization	Materializing	External recognition	Materializing focuses on how the body is leveraged to create distinctive value while developing a unique aesthetic signature, showcasing a subtle link between internal sensibility and external recognition that fuels aesthetic practices and the perceived reputation gained with and through an offering. Distinctive features become manifested in the offering, which is affected by how craft entrepreneurs feel about themselves, the developing offering, and interactions with stakeholders, with the body signaling this affectivity. Distinctive value is created through an embodied to-and-fro between craft entrepreneur and stakeholders (communicative materialization) and is perceived through aesthetic experience of the distinctive features embedded in the offering (a manifestation of the maker's unique sensibility).
Evolution of aesthetic style and offering, design, experience, detail-orientation, improved functionality, visual and sonorous and tactile elements	Offerings as manifestation of the maker's unique sensibility		Reputation Tension	
Sensory experiences, reflection, reflexivity, embodied feeling, experimentation, magic	Intuition, imagination, gut feelings	Enchanting	Intuition	Enchantment embraces the mysterious, the imagined, and the magical as entwined with rational thought and automatic cognitive routines—A process of inspiration that is as methodical as it is undetermined; it involves craft entrepreneurs becoming attuned to their senses and surroundings and engaging in physically intimate interactions with materials. Craft entrepreneurs create meaningful offerings and distinctive value by leveraging aesthetic sources of insight that go beyond rational and cognitive processes (intuition, imagination, gut feelings) while becoming one with material artifacts via physically intimate, embodied interactions (enmeshing of both human and material elements).
Embodied connection and practice, engagement, bodily recognition, surrender	Oneness—enmeshing of both human and material elements		Inspiration Tension	
Acknowledging others' needs, remembering, pivoting, adapting, authenticity, imagining, expectations	Interplay between past, present, and future	Empathizing	Craft entrepreneur	Empathizing concerns how craft entrepreneurs become sensitively attuned to both themselves and stakeholders while utilizing the temporal play of past, present, and future to create unique offerings that balance differing perceptions of value between craft entrepreneur and stakeholder, ultimately resulting in a recognizable aesthetic and a sustained reputation over time. Craft entrepreneurs create distinctive value by incorporating one's meaningful past experiences and present, situated conditions into the creation of a unique future offering (interplay between past, present, and future) while considering future aesthetic reactions to an offering and how these affect one's stature (empathizing with one's future unique sensibility).
Experimentation, caution, fears, personal standards, embodied reputation	Empathizing with one's future unique sensibility		Value Perception Tension	
			Stakeholder	



4.1 | Materializing

Craft entrepreneurs engage in strategic entrepreneuring through a variety of aesthetic practices that materialize in their unique offerings. This entails a process of *communicative materialization* (an embodied to-and-fro between craft entrepreneur and stakeholders) and the *offering as a manifestation of the maker's unique sensibility* (an embedding of a craft entrepreneur's distinctive features into the offering, perceived through aesthetic experience), which unfold through a *reputation tension* (between internal sensibility and external recognition). Materializing enables craft entrepreneurs to build a unique and recognizable offering (and, arguably, a competitive distinction over other offerings in the market) that is not only meaningful to the entrepreneur, but also perceived as reputable by stakeholders (e.g., customers, audience, peers, competitors) (see Bain, 2005). They do so through communicative materialization (Cooren, 2020) in and through their offering, by means of how it is given shape, what it looks like, how it sounds, feels, smells, or tastes, and how (and how much) it is talked about. The more a meaningful offering is communicated, the more its unique features materialize and come into being (Cooren, 2020), along with the competitive distinction of the entrepreneur who created it. Importantly, this communicative materialization may unfold through nonverbal means. Ana stated the following when describing a musical performance she was developing, which, unlike the traditional classical music concerts that she usually plays, entails incorporating prerecorded digital soundtracks with storytelling and a live performance:

This performance is built like a story. I don't present the songs formally, but instead I incorporate part of their lyrics into the storytelling or I explain what the song is about, without explicitly disclosing which song it is, to capture people's attention, and then the song starts, sometimes while I'm still telling the story...and you should have seen it, I mean, during rehearsals, and the sound quality was still bad, we're still working on it, but still, when I saw the people dancing, really living the thing, I was really excited! The more I saw it, the more excited I got!

For this new project, Ana was developing a unique performance, about which she was very passionate, creating something unique that captured the audience's attention while striving to sustain her reputation as a professional musician, which was of great importance to her. However, as evident in Ana's words, her perceptions of the value she was delivering were misaligned with those of her audience; that is, while she recognized that "the sound quality was still bad," assessed through her high-quality standards, the audience responded in a way that demonstrated, much to her surprise, that value was already materializing for them, shown through "dancing, really living the thing," despite it still being a work-in-progress. This reveals a reputation tension: Ana maintaining the high-quality standards she set for her offering and her understanding of the value created (internal sensibility) while considering reactions from her audience (external recognition), both fueling Ana's sensory, emotional, and embodied experiences as she continued to develop this performance.

Further, as Ana explained, external recognition was in itself a balancing act that entailed considering what an audience may want, like, or accept and what her peers (fellow musicians) may recognize as reputable, though the preferences of both stakeholders may differ. The quote above shows how acceptance of the thoughtfully developed soundscape is transmitted to Ana, through the communicative materialization that unfolded through dancing, rather than verbalized enjoyment. Akin to the process of attunement in jazz improvisation, which Barrett (2000) explains as the aesthetic, ongoing process of social negotiation and "actively listening and responding to one another" (Barrett, 2000, p. 240), the more Ana saw the audience dancing, the more the performance materialized, with value creation unfolding in this ongoing, embodied, undulating, and open-ended flow, where cues were (re)interpreted and ideas collaboratively merged onto a coherent whole. In turn, this intimate exchange of nonverbal—yet harmonious—"conversation" between audience and performer, in and through their bodies, reassured Ana that this new, unconventional soundscape was meaningful and impactful, thus creating an embodied feedback loop between her and the audience. This reassurance was reinforced when, during the premiere, a fellow musician, regarded as a top virtuoso

in this music community, was nodding and smiling throughout the performance, later stating to Ana that “even though this is not my type of music, I enjoyed it very much,” expressing appreciation for Ana’s effort and the performance’s success. The reputation tension is evident here too, with Ana recognizing the value of her craft (internal sensibility) and offering (a unique performance that weaves storytelling, lights synchronized to music, disco songs, and classical music and technique, in a creative and innovative manner that set her apart from other offerings) yet also knowing that despite its high-quality, her music community might not view it as reputable (lack of external recognition) due to its eclectic nature (she told us of various instances when this had happened with other musicians and performances). Through hard-work, passion, and resilience, her initial concerns eventually dissipated, leading to acceptance by both audience and peers (external recognition) and confirmation that distinctive value had materialized for all parties involved, even if so differently.

Relatedly, in processes of materializing unique and distinctive features, the offering itself (e.g., musical performance, musical instrument) becomes a manifestation of the maker’s unique sensibility, as a key component of how craft entrepreneurs create distinctive value. For example, when Sasha started imagining, thinking through, and developing the sound, feel, and look of his guitars, he knew that it would be important for stakeholders (e.g., customers, audience members during a performance) to automatically recognize, even if not fully consciously, his high-end instruments as a “Radicic guitar.” He explained,

In terms of aesthetics, this is the guitar that I designed [Sasha shows a newly finished guitar, describing its characteristics]. Doing those aesthetics, I had to come up with something that is different from everybody else: I have my own [headstock and label design]. When [people] see this, they know it's me,...nobody else has this, that's my aesthetic, that's my mark. So, what makes this a Radicic guitar is, #1, the sound that I get through the years, and I can't describe [in words] what it is, you know when you hear it. Then, when you look at the guitar, it's the headstock, and, more or less [the shape of the guitar] and the label inside.

While explaining the visual and sonorous elements of a Radicic guitar, and how these materialize into distinct value, Sasha discussed the careful thought behind his labels and headstocks, along with the sound of his musical instruments, as manifestations of his unique sensibility. These become distinctive identifiers of the product a stakeholder experiences—seeing, touching, hearing an instrument as unique and embedded with a deep, meaningful aesthetic. Labels portray and account for his migration history as a refugee, or as he called it, his “movement through the world.” They are artfully handwritten, hand-drawn, and hand-signed; they include a unique serial number, and the edges of the acid-free paper that Sasha uses are carefully burned, to give it an “antique aesthetic,” as he described. Labels are then gently glued to the inside of the back of the guitar-in-progress, before it is closed up. The headstock design is based on the shape of Byzantine steeples of churches in Dalmatia, which he misses dearly, and the unique sound of his guitars blend his journey and learnings over time and different geographies (former Yugoslavia, Germany, United States). Sasha disclosed that, gradually, he has slightly tweaked his headstock design (Figure 1) because “after a while, it can be boring,” but he emphasized that its essence “still stays the same...it's just a little detail” that has changed. Much like Ana, Sasha is attuned to—and draws inspiration from—both internal sensibility and external recognition: Although he allows himself to grow and evolve as a luthier, developing and innovating designs along the way, he does so within the bounds of his offerings being aesthetically recognized by stakeholders as manifestations of his unique “mark.” Subtle aesthetic choices that enable value to materialize through Sasha’s offerings thus emphasize the importance of alignment between not only luthier (unique sensibility) and guitar (manifestation of unique sensibility), but also internal sensibility and external recognition.

Taken together, participants’ accounts illustrate how, within materializing, the body—along with the aesthetic practices that it enables—drives the materialization of entrepreneurs’ distinctive features and sensibilities into a meaningful offering imbued with unique value. This materialization is communicative, an embodied to-and-fro that undergirds a reputation tension. Both ends—internal sensibility and external recognition—are quite prominent in, and



FIGURE 1 Detail of the headstock of two Radicic guitars, showing a slightly changed design, from more recent (left) to less recent (right).

indeed invigorate, Ana's and Sasha's aesthetic practices: Both draw from their perceptions of sensory experience, emotional reactions, and nonverbal cues (both their own and those expressed by stakeholders) to create distinctive value, even when value perceptions differ for entrepreneurs and stakeholders. Embodied reactions (e.g., dancing, feeling excitement, playing and interacting with a musical instrument heartfully) are key, not only in communicating to Ana the value that the audience might already be experiencing, before she even feels that the offering is “ready” for their ears and hearts, but also to enable Sasha to develop and convey the aesthetic of a Radicic guitar to stakeholders who recognize it with their bodies, through touching, seeing, and hearing them. Their offerings work as manifestations of their sensibilities, which in turn are deeply entrenched in how craft entrepreneurs feel about the aesthetic signature they aim to convey, with their body signaling this affectivity.

4.2 | Enchanting

Strategic entrepreneurship in a craft context also entails a process of enchantment, which enables entrepreneurs to create unique offerings by leveraging *intuition, imagination, and gut feelings* (aesthetic sources of insight that go beyond cognitive and rational processes in value creation) while experiencing an *enmeshing of both human and material elements* (the entangling of craft entrepreneurs and artifacts via physically intimate, embodied interactions), accomplished through an *inspiration tension* (between intuition and rationality). Enchantment, a view of work and organization, contrasts sharply with mechanistic perspectives, which are rooted in rationality (Suddaby et al., 2017). It embraces the mysterious, the imagined, and the magical by including experiences that go beyond what is visible and explainable (Taylor & Bell, 2011). In keeping with Bain (2005), however, we are mindful of not overromanticizing the creative process, which unfolds as part of everyday activities, in a continual entanglement of unpredictable imaginative activities and automatic cognitive routines. While navigating this inspiration tension, craft entrepreneurs leverage intuition, imagination, and gut feelings along with reflection on sensory experience, which

intersects with rational thought to skillfully develop a particular offering. Importantly, the body drives and facilitates such practices. For example, when Sasha was giving shape to the braces on the back of one of his guitars, by continually scraping them, he leveraged his body, in all its tangible (flesh, limbs) and intangible (imaginings, thoughts) complexity, keeping in mind the particular hoped-for, envisioned sound that customers recognized in a Radicic guitar (i.e., a specific sound distinctiveness that, along with other aesthetic aspects such as shape and feel, distinguished his guitars from others' in the market). Sasha explained how he achieved this specific sound:

Feeling is number one!...and I believe it's learned through the years. Science doesn't do anything for me [when tuning braces]. Don't ask me for a formula,...your guts will tell you what to do, you should listen to this stuff first [Sasha points at his heart and gut]. It's also some small percentage of surprise, I kinda know what this [is] going to sound like, roughly, but I don't know exactly, so that keeps the thrill. Most of us [luthiers], we're just experimenting, you know? Because it's a darkness, it's just intuition, that's all.

As Sasha described, he stopped scraping solely based on his sensory experience of the brace he was shaping, without using formulas or scientific measurements, simply utilizing a small metal plane to scrape wood, his touch to feel the unfolding brace, and his sight to visually assess progress (Figure 2).³ Although Sasha's account explicitly speaks to the salience of feel, intuition, and subjective judgment in tuning braces, he also relied on scientific formulas, rational thought, and objective measurements to give shape to other components of his guitars. This represents an inspiration tension, enabling sense- and decision-making, vis-a-vis experimentation, based on both instinct and cognition. The tacit knowledge he accumulated over time while building guitars and developing his craft enabled him to “know” that continuing to scrape would completely ruin the sound of the final product, resulting in an instrument that would not match the high-end features for which he is known. One of Sasha's clients, a professional guitarist, who closely collaborated with Sasha in developing a custom guitar, further explained this process:

It's mystical science, and that's all Sasha; he uses a lot of intuition, a process that I don't understand, and I don't think he can explain...It's magic! I know it sounds strange, but it's true! It's a lot of magic...And it involves all the senses: Tapping the woods, listening to them, looking at them; but verbalizing this process is impossible.

What the client described as “mystical science” and “magic” is a process of enchantment that entails intimate bodily contact with materials (e.g., back of the guitar, braces, tools) and a deep, silent conversation with those materials (Bell et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2018; Klemmer et al., 2006), illustrating how creating a unique product entails an enmeshing of both human and material elements (Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014). In turn, these conversations, along with reflection on the sensations and the “feel” that these materials provoke in one's body (Yanow, 2000), spark deep imaginings and affective reactions that are critical for developing distinctive offerings (Cornelissen, 2013) through aesthetic practices (Elias et al., 2018; Strati, 1999). Both rationality and intuition fuel this process of experimentation and discovery, about both the offering and the entrepreneurs' own sensibility, unfolding in a conversation between reality and fantasy (Stanko et al., 2022). Sasha described this process as “thrilling,” accompanied by feelings of excitement and enjoyment, not only when he first heard the finished product and realized that it met his high expectations, but also when he delivered it to a client and together they reflected on their reactions and interactions with the finished instrument, including alignment of value perception (or lack thereof) with each other. This demonstrates that the process of creating value is very much human, with the body enabling a variety of materially and socially embedded experiences.

This was also very much the case with Ana who, while explaining the process of developing and practicing for a performance, spoke to becoming “one” with the instrument and the music that emerges through practice; when



FIGURE 2 Sasha scraping the sides of a guitar-in-progress, aided by a metal plane and guided by his sight, touch, and intuition.

explaining how she knows that a particular concert is ready, she used the expression “you feel that the music is in the hands.” She then elaborated:

That's how the expression goes [for musicians], it's in the hands, but it's also in the feet, because you play with both your hands and feet, but also in the head or mind, because your brain learned the music, but also in your body, because you also feel it. So it's really in you....That's when you become “one” with the instrument, [and] if you play a wrong note, your body just remembers what to do, and it's like there is a magnet that helps correct the course by bringing you back to what you should be playing. And you only get to that point by practicing, practicing, practicing.

Here, Ana highlights the need for the brain to first learn the music through a mechanical—and inherently cognitive, rational—process, enabling, in turn, an aesthetic, intuitive process to unfold. Once Ana reaches a state of oneness, she “knows” that, come concert day, she is ready to perform not only the correct notes with the right technique, but to get into a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) that enables her to have the aesthetic impact that she desires on the audience, thus matching—hopefully even exceeding—their value expectation. To provide the audience with a meaningful and enjoyable performance, Ana spoke to the importance of the unique interpretation that every musician has, and how inspiration, in turn, becomes part of this interpretive process:

It's like Johann Sebastian Bach used to say: “I play the notes as they are written, but it is God who makes the music.” I am not religious but to me this means that I play the notes, because I am reading them and learned to play them, but then it's inspiration and feeling, meaning interpretation, that makes the music, because if you are just mechanically playing the notes exactly as written, a computer can do that, even better than you, really, but that's not music....For me, God is inspiration, feeling, interpretation, it is what's in between the written notes.

Similar to Sasha's case, these two quotes show the importance of paying attention to how the body feels in interaction with the musical instrument and the emerging offering (in this case, a musical performance) while embracing a maker's unique potential as embodied and human. Of note in Ana's words is the description of a musician not as a machine or doing what "a computer can do." As she explained, even though one starts by mechanically and rationally reading and learning every written note, like a machine, the ultimate goal is to become so skilled as to enable a state of reading what is not written—the "God...in between" written notes, which every musician, unlike a machine, intuitively interprets in a unique and distinctive way. As Ana explains, this enchantment process works like a magnet that unconsciously guides one's body during a performance—or what Argyris (2004) explained as skillful actions that are often tacit and seem effortless because they become automatic over time. These skillful actions are crucial for craft entrepreneurs to, in all their human complexity, create something so unique that no machine could ever do (Kroezen et al., 2020).

Overall, enchanting is at the root of how craft entrepreneurs engage in strategic entrepreneurship, where intuition, imagination, and gut feelings are accepted—celebrated, even—as key to developing distinctive value, which entails an enmeshing of human and material elements. As participants noted, this entails an inspiration tension, with both ends—intuition and rationality—interdependently contributing to it (Putnam et al., 2014). Ana explained that craft entrepreneurs start very much like a machine, rationally developing their craft, but once they master the mechanical part, the stage is set for the human element to come in, connect to God, or the ineffable, and intuitively create distinctive value. The process is as methodical as it is unpredictable and undetermined (Bain, 2005; Becker, 1978). In Sasha's words, it is "a darkness" that enables craft entrepreneurs to experiment by going beyond the scientific formulas and objective measurements that are readily available to anyone, and thus to develop a distinctive aesthetic signature. For both Ana and Sasha, the body is critical for this inspiration tension, leveraging the power of the present, with brain, limbs, heart, and all in between entangling with both material and social elements to achieve oneness, the whole in complex harmony with all the parts.

4.3 | Empathizing

While seeking inspiration to develop unique, yet reputable offerings, craft entrepreneurs also engage in empathizing, which entails an *interplay between past, present, and future* (incorporating one's meaningful past experiences and present, situated conditions to create a distinctive future offering) and *empathizing with one's future unique sensibility* (considering future aesthetic reactions to an offering and how these affect one's reputation), which as shown in materializing and enchanting may involve a *value perception tension* (between craft entrepreneur and stakeholder). Empathizing unfolds through play and discovery, between difference and similarity, recognizing one's own internal sensibility "with the other while at the same time retaining one's sense of self" (Modell, 2003, p. 118). Past, present, and future all contribute to this (Chiles et al., 2010; Elias et al., 2022), with craft entrepreneurs creating a particular offering in the present (e.g., giving shape to a guitar, choosing a theme for a musical performance), influenced by their past (e.g., background, childhood experiences), while devising ways to create unique future value. While considering the future, craft entrepreneurs also empathize with past and present stakeholders (e.g., reflecting on (non)verbal feedback) to imagine the preferences and reactions of future stakeholders, navigating a reputation tension between maintaining internal sensibility and external recognition (see materializing). Here, too, the body (of both craft entrepreneurs and stakeholders) is key in communicating and processing aesthetic reactions in the present, bringing past memories and future imaginings to the fore while interacting with a presently evolving offering (Chiles et al., 2021; Elias et al., 2018). This temporal interplay is seen in the careful designs of Sasha's guitar headstocks and labels (see materializing), which are suffused with symbolic representations of his native country and learnings throughout the years, resulting in manifestations of his unique sensibility, all while considering continued expectations and imaginings of what a Radicic guitar should look, feel, and sound like. Similarly, Ana explained how her past experience as a student in Belgium influenced how she developed a Christmas program for a Western European audience:



In Belgium, when December arrives, you hear Christmas songs all the time...I was there alone but Christmas was really nice because they had those markets selling artisan candles, warm mulled wine, chocolates, they had such a nice atmosphere, it was really beautiful! So, I thought, "I'm being asked to play a Christmas carillon concert in Portugal, so let's play all those songs that I remember," and I did. It was a 1-hour concert full of Christmas songs...but, everyone already heard those and what I noticed is that it was boring for that audience because people were coming to see the carillon [an instrument they don't know], so after 20 minutes of Christmas songs, they lose attention. So, I now do a mix of songs that everyone knows and likes that [loosely] relate to the time of year. And that works...You learn every time you play and read your audience; when I build a program, I include a little bit of everything for everyone but also things that I like.

This quote demonstrates the importance of reading an audience in the present when improving a particular offering (see materializing), which is inherently rooted in one's past. Specifically, it shows how Ana actively responds to and empathizes with the aesthetic reactions she continually receives from an audience, by speaking with its members after a performance or reading them in real-time during a concert (see materializing), looking for nonverbal signs of enjoyment, or lack thereof (see Figure 3). She then reflects (based on her past experience) on the reasons why those reactions might differ from what she expected, finally adapting her offerings to better meet the preferences of a future audience—one that is not bored, but engaged and enjoying the performance. Doing so, she also navigates an inspiration tension (see enchanting), suffusing rational thinking with intuitive imagining. Yet, as Ana noted, although the audience has a say in this iterative process, it is in combination with her own preferences, enabling her to preserve her own unique, authentic sensibility while strengthening external recognition (see materializing; reputation tension). It is a process of co-creation between entrepreneur and stakeholder (Elias et al., 2018), of balancing differing perceptions of value between them, even if customization requests are not actively verbalized.

Beyond empathizing with others (e.g., past, present, and future stakeholders), craft entrepreneurs also empathize with their future unique sensibility. Specifically, they consider how they will feel, in the future, about a finished offering, juggling a reputation tension (see materializing) between their expectations for a future sensibility and concerns around what might limit—hurt, even—external recognition of their offering's distinctive value. Much like Ana with her performances, Sasha was always devising ways to improve his instruments, considering not only future stakeholders' reactions, but also his own. When explaining a new process that he was developing to build guitars, which was at the time in its early stages, Sasha explained:

I don't have a client in mind for this guitar yet....It is kind of experiment...with the particular type of braces I'm using...so I wanna see what results I get from that first. I don't wanna show it to anybody before I know what to expect...I cannot afford to make a bad sound. It is my name in there.

As explained in enchanting, Sasha developed this innovative process through experimentation, which entailed navigating an inspiration tension. While empathizing, this comprised balancing scientific and rational analyses in the present (also learned in the past) with instinctive and aesthetic judgments of the future offering and whether it would embody a manifestation of Sasha's sensibility. While doing so, Sasha explained his concerns with developing an instrument that he feared met neither his high expectations for the instrument that literally had his name "in" it (i.e., in the unique label inside the guitar) nor the superior craft that his clients recognized in the look, sound, and feel of his guitars (see materializing; reputation tension). Sasha expressed similar concerns with the iterative process of binding,⁴ which has an important impact on the look of his guitars:

Now it's beginning to look right! Binding takes forever...People don't realize how much work goes into it, it takes a long time. And if you don't do it properly, it creates a bad aesthetic, it looks like [a] beginner [did it]!



FIGURE 3 Ana performing a carillon concert with a folk group, leaning forward to capture audience reactions (upper); various audience reactions to a unique disco themed performance incorporating prerecorded digital soundtracks, storytelling, and live carillon music (lower), from quietly listening to hugging to dancing.

Sasha articulates this reputation tension (see materializing) in the context of developing an innovative, high-end instrument, which he kept in secrecy until he knew that it matched the meaning of the label inside the guitar (i.e., Radicic), or the value his stakeholders would expect from this instrument. The body was fundamental in this experimentation process, with years of experience accumulated in his fingers, ears, and eyes guiding him toward an ideal imagined feel, sound, and look, while steering him away from what would make for a “bad aesthetic.” Throughout this process, he carefully reflected on his unfolding perceptions of the future value that could result from the innovative process he was developing, which was iteratively honed by drawing from an inspiration tension (see enchanting) while keeping in mind imagined perceptions of future stakeholders, as well as his own. Every time Sasha builds a guitar, be it one that incorporates innovative elements, or a traditional one, he thinks deeply about the aesthetic implications of his practices, knowing that years later, the label with his name will continue to live on—and in—the guitars he builds. Most importantly, as he reflects on current practices and possible innovations, he considers and imagines how comfortable he will feel in the future with a particular instrument, as either having been created by a noticeable beginner or a recognizable expert. Imagined, experienced, and felt aesthetic reactions are key to how craft entrepreneurs process such emotions and thoughts, in and through their bodies, as well as to considering whether their own perceptions align (or not) with those of stakeholders (Chiles et al., 2010, 2021; Elias et al., 2018).



In sum, empathizing fuels the aesthetic practices of craft entrepreneurs as they leverage their bodies to develop a unique, reputable signature that materializes in their offerings (see materializing) by embracing different sources of inspiration and becoming attuned to what surrounds them (see enchanting), all while imagining ways (past, present, future) to develop an aesthetic signature that is recognized and sustained over time. Distinctive value is created throughout this process, which entails a balancing of potentially differing perceptions between craft entrepreneur and stakeholder, as noted in our explanation of the three dimensions. Both Ana and Sasha demonstrated the temporal play of past, present, and future while balancing these differing perceptions and considering how these might affect their sensibilities and reputations over time. They adapted future offerings based on present feedback (arising from both stakeholders' and their own aesthetic reactions) and past experiences and knowledge accumulated over the years.

5 | DISCUSSION

This article explores the sensory, tacit, and embodied elements that contribute to how craft entrepreneurs leverage aesthetics for strategic entrepreneuring. Using comparative field research (Bechky & O'Mahony, 2015) to bridge ethnographic data from two studies and deepen understanding of two different craft entrepreneurs and offerings in distinct geographical contexts, we illuminate their aesthetic practices as they engage in experimentation and discovery to actively imagine, explore, and develop ways to create unique value and strengthen competitive distinction. Doing so, we provide a fresh look at what it means to remain competitive, with a particular focus on the everyday efforts that go into creating a unique aesthetic signature and related distinctive value. Remaining competitive, for the craft entrepreneurs in our study, is less about growth and wealth maximization, but rather a sensuous experience that enables the creation of meaningful and authentic offerings, for both themselves and their stakeholders. Their embodied—and very human—everyday activities for strategic entrepreneuring, which include becoming attuned to one's senses and surroundings and engaging in intimate interactions with materials, are key for considerations of imagined offerings that are memorable. In turn, such offerings enable them as craft entrepreneurs to stand out from others in the marketplace (Cattani et al., 2020). As our study shows, craft entrepreneurs continually and iteratively balance tensions associated with three major interrelated dimensions—materializing, enchanting, and empathizing—that denote the essence of aesthetic practices as unfolding in a *truly*, *madly*, and *deeply* way in their everyday strategic efforts.

Materializing relates to how craft entrepreneurs create distinctive offerings while balancing a reputation tension, continually reconciling external recognition while remaining *truly* committed to their internal sensibility and craft. Indeed, their aesthetic practices highlight the continual reconstruction of artistic and economic logics, recognizing that solely creating “art for art's sake” is not an option due to external pressures and expectations for their offerings (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; also see Bain, 2005; Becker, 1978). While navigating this tension and taking risks through creation, the body, as a fundamental source of passion and creative action (Hjorth, 2015), serves as an affective receptor, surfacing and processing feedback through (non)verbal exchanges with stakeholders. As such, value materializes through and around the offerings, accomplished not only through *the hand* of the entrepreneur (e.g., to write and play a musical performance, to design and shape a musical instrument), but also *the eye* and *the ear* of both entrepreneur *and* stakeholders. It is through these body parts, and their continual interaction with one another and the surrounding environment, that embodied reactions emerge (e.g., dancing in response to enjoying a particular performance, feeling excitement due to seeing the audience dancing during a performance, implicitly knowing and recognizing a luthier based solely on the instrument's visual and sonorous elements). Such embodied and socially embedded reactions (communicative materialization) are key to how craft entrepreneurs imagine and reflect on the creation of distinctive offerings, which represent and are imbued with meaningful life experiences and decades of perfecting craft and developing distinctiveness (a manifestation of the maker's unique sensibility), along with the potential for continuing incorporating new aesthetic practices into the future.

Enchanting dovetails into the magic and mystery that are involved in unpredictably—and in a way, even *madly*—stitching these sensory, tacit, and embodied elements together, often incorporating what is visible and explainable with that which is subtle and unpredictable (Bain, 2005; Taylor & Bell, 2011). Enchanting captures an inspiration tension that entails an ongoing delicate scuffle between intuition and rationality, a process that is intensely felt in the body as craft entrepreneurs surface and process both instinctive, aesthetic judgments and scientific, cognitive analyses, sometimes unconsciously (Diamond, 2014). Against the backdrop of mystery, intuition, “darkness,” or “the God...in between,” as participants put it, distinctive value is created through both individual and collective reflection. Indeed, craft entrepreneurs leverage the uniqueness of their human experience and craft to have a multitude of conversations: Spoken conversations with stakeholders that enable them to consider and reflect on the alignment (or lack thereof) of value perception, and silent conversations with their own bodies (intuition, imagination, gut feelings), as well as with materials (enmeshing of both human and material elements), that are critical to surface and process aesthetic reactions. It is in this relational “space between” (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Gagliardi, 2006) that authentic work unfolds and distinctive value can be (re)imagined.

Empathizing reveals a value perception tension through which craft entrepreneurs feel and respond *deeply* to the other, as well as to their own imagined, future unique sensibility, in a process that is both embodied and socially embedded (Hill, 2021; Steyaert, 2007). Empathizing highlights the need for—and the power of—craft entrepreneurs' imaginations in creating unique future offerings that leverage meaningful past experiences and present, situated conditions (interplay between past, present, and future), such as stakeholders' responses (Chiles et al., 2010; Elias et al., 2022; Thompson, 2018; Thompson & Byrne, 2022). As with materializing, imagining, creating and experiencing distinctive value, for both entrepreneur and stakeholder, unfolds through the delicate balance between artistic and economic logics along internal and external pressures (Bain, 2005; Becker, 1978; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; Menger, 1999); and, as with enchanting, between methodical and undetermined activities along intuitive and rational insights (Bain, 2005; Becker, 1978). However, meeting customer demands is tempered with concerns for embodied future reputation (empathizing with one's future unique sensibility), resulting in a deep—even if nonverbal—collaboration between craft entrepreneur and stakeholders (Elias et al., 2018). The result is an offering that does more than fulfill a utility-based, rational, customer need; rather, it provides both entrepreneur and stakeholder with distinctive value, materialized not only in the offering itself, but in experiences of enjoyment, contemplation, fulfillment, authenticity, and at times, even a little mystery.

5.1 | Implications, limitations, and future research

This article has two main implications for entrepreneurship and organization studies, along with associated limitations and venues for future research. First, following in the footsteps of other scholars (e.g., Anderson, 2015; Calás et al., 2009; Dodd et al., 2023; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006; Verduyn et al., 2017), our study problematizes dominant approaches to strategic entrepreneurship that predominantly assume rationality, growth, wealth maximization, and economic value creation as undergirding entrepreneurial efforts (Hitt et al., 2011; Ireland et al., 2023; Mazzei, 2018), instead providing a holistic perspective that incorporates the sensory, tacit, and embodied elements that shape the creation of broader forms of value. Accordingly, we spotlight the nascent lens of aesthetic practice (e.g., Gherardi, 2009; Reckwitz, 2017; Strati, 2012) to explore how craft entrepreneurs strengthen competitive distinction through unique value creation. Building on the work of Antonacopoulou and Fuller (2020), our study extends current understandings of strategic entrepreneurship as a process that is not only deeply sensuous, but also profoundly connected with entrepreneurs' perceived, empathetic, and embodied reactions. In this way, we provide fresh insights into the micro-foundations of strategic entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial action (Dimov, 2011; Foss & Lyngsie, 2011), spotlighting not just cognitive processes, but the entire body and all the very human processes that drive the everyday, strategic efforts that enable creating a distinctive aesthetic signature. By delving deep into—and celebrating—the humanness, situatedness, and complexity of craft entrepreneurs, we unpack the micro (inter)actions

and entrepreneurial skills (embodied, social, material) that are key in understanding, more holistically, the emergence, survival, and evolution of not only entrepreneurial ventures but also communities of devoted stakeholders and sustainable ecosystems (Elias et al., 2018; Foss & Lyngsie, 2011; Ringvold et al., 2023).

Despite this first contribution, we note that our study is very much focused on the context and efforts of small-scale craft entrepreneurs. This focus proved quite useful because the aesthetic practices of craft entrepreneurs as they create meaningful and authentic offerings comprise elements that are not easily verbalized, yet these entrepreneurs are often trained to reflect upon and explain them (see Elias et al., 2018, 2022). As a result, we were able to explore how these entrepreneurs prioritize skill, materiality, and immersive action for strategic entrepreneuring while giving life and voice (Dudley, 2014) to the ineffable elements of both humans and materials, with the body driving such efforts (Chiles et al., 2021). Yet, more work is needed to further explore how the three dimensions and associated tensions that we unpack in this article apply (or not) to the strategic moves of larger-scale craft ventures, such as the pursuit of differentiation by sticking with a strategic path instead of changing with the competition in craft piano making (Cattani et al., 2017), the development of innovations through the rediscovery and reinvention of both making and playing acoustic guitars (Smith, 2023), or the implementation of progressive approaches aimed at challenging and changing traditional patriarchal strategies in the craft brewing industry (Land et al., 2019). We suggest using our work as a springboard to continue investigating such strategic moves, focusing on real-time exchanges (both verbal and nonverbal; Cornelissen et al., 2012) between craft entrepreneurs and their surroundings (including stakeholders and material elements) and the interplay of unique skills and meaningful experiences acquired in the past to exploit current advantages and situated conditions in the present while exploring new, imagined futures (Chiles et al., 2010; Elias et al., 2018, 2022; Thompson & Byrne, 2022).

Second, we contribute to the literature on craft and craft entrepreneuring, joining others (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Khaire, 2019; Kroezen et al., 2020; Pret & Cogan, 2019) in highlighting how human engagement remains a defining feature of craft, yet also deepening understanding of how the *whole* body (hand, eye, ear, limbs, brain, heart, and all in between), in interaction with other bodies (human, material), is fundamental for imagining and creating unique offerings through the temporal interplay between past, present, and future. Looking beyond the well-established role of tradition, rooted in the past, as a key driver of craft (e.g., Dacin & Dacin, 2019; Kroezen & Heugens, 2019; Land et al., 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019), as well as the spatiotemporal connection to places of origins, which denote histories, traditions, authentic quality and value (Lehman et al., 2019), our study unpacks the body, in all its complexity, in real-time exchanges that honor the past (through tradition, personal history, and cultural embeddedness) but also leverage the uniquely human elements of aesthetic practices in the present to continually experiment onto the future. Overall, we elevate the present, as the moment where past and future meet (see Chiles et al., 2021), showcasing the deep potential of the human body in bringing different time horizons together. As we have shown, it is with and through the body, along with this temporal interplay, that one seeks inspiration to develop a reputation while navigating potentially differing perceptions of value, and this is fundamental in (re)strategizing; for example, in the conceptualization, design, adaptation, and execution of ideas, products, and services (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Weiser et al., 2020). The situatedness and salience of the present moment, borne through the instrumentalization of the body, enables us to build on the work of Bell et al. (2021), who have masterfully illustrated the interconnectedness of past, present, and future in craft, shaped by and with the body. Specifically, we suggest that more than the sensorial and affective relations that embodied materializations bring forth, there is powerful strategic and entrepreneurial potential in leveraging the embodied temporality of craft, that is, in interconnecting temporal horizons while navigating craft-specific tensions to create a unique aesthetic signature that strengthens competitive distinction.

Related to this second contribution, we recognize that beyond the interactions with stakeholders that we explored in our paper, we also observed some involvement with community and the broader competitive landscape, leveraging aesthetic practices for social innovation and creating more resilient communities, yet these dynamics fell outside the scope of our study. We recommend investigating the cultural and social aspects of aesthetic practices for strategic entrepreneuring, with a particular focus on how (craft) entrepreneurs contribute to community

entrepreneurship (see Murphy et al., 2020; Slawinski & Franklin, 2022). For example, scholars could investigate how competitive and aesthetic practices unfold within affective atmospheres (Michels & Steyaert, 2017; Reckwitz, 2012) and how these may be leveraged in collectives or festivals, where groups of entrepreneurs (both craft and non-craft) may come together, collaborate, synergize, support one another, all while simultaneously competing and devising “new possibilities of feeling and acting collectively” (Michels & Steyaert, 2017, p. 79) with the ultimate goal of community engagement and betterment. Finally, we encourage further exploration of the dynamics between humans and machines in the context of craft-based innovation and how this affects broader communities of practice. In line with the extant literature (e.g., Bell et al., 2019; Kroezen et al., 2020; Pret & Cogan, 2019), our participants emphasized human engagement as a key characteristic of craft, yet both also relied on machines (e.g., luthier devices to build guitars, mechanical instruments to produce musical performances) to materialize their craft, using them at different times in the creation process while enchanting and empathizing with stakeholders and broader communities of practice. We thus recommend further inquiry into the synergistic relationship between humans and machines, for example, leveraging recent advancements in AI technology, but not forgetting that there is something uniquely human to craft offerings, making them difficult to replicate, even by the same craftsperson.

6 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In closing, as our study shows, craft entrepreneurs leverage aesthetic practices to distinguish a useful and beautiful offering that is brought to life through skillful virtuosity. Embodied processes such as materializing, enchanting, and empathizing are truly, at times madly, but also deeply human, providing the *je ne sais quoi*,⁵ (Strati, 2007), that differentiates unique and meaningful offerings from technologically-mediated products and services (e.g., mass-produced guitars and computer-generated music). Our main contribution with exploring these three dimensions and associated tensions (reputation, inspiration, value perception) is to highlight the salience of embodied, everyday interactions and perpetual dance between craft entrepreneur and stakeholders, along with deep engagement with material and social elements. The body, along with all the experiences that it facilitates, drives this emergent, endless, and relational process of balancing tradition with innovation to strengthen competitive distinction. Overall, the aesthetic practices that are at the heart of craft entrepreneuring are key for giving voice and life to both human and material elements (Dudley, 2014), making it difficult—if not impossible—for machines to accomplish authentic craft work and its unique value, at least for now.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ One was a multi-sited micro-ethnography on the co-creation of aesthetic value (Elias et al., 2018), the other used enactive research to explore entrepreneurial imagining (Elias et al., 2022).
- ² We thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to deepen the analysis and further unpack latent tensions in our data.
- ³ To protect Sasha's intellectual property, we do not show the inside of this guitar-in-progress, where the braces are located; we instead show him scraping wood from the side of a guitar using a similar aesthetic practice.
- ⁴ Binding is the process of applying strips of material (e.g., wood, nitrocellulose) to a guitar's edges, to protect them from scratches while providing an ornamental and aesthetic allure to the guitar as a whole.
- ⁵ French expression that translates literally as "I do not know what," referring to a quality that is not easily verbalized or named.

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