



The Lure of Metal

POETRY, METAL AND A TOUCH OF ALCHEMY. **BRIDIE LONIE** EXPLORES THE WORK OF TWO SIGNIFICANT NEW ZEALAND JEWELLERS **RAINER BENEKE** AND **ANN CULY**

The Lure of Metal, a collaborative project by jewellers Ann Culy and Rainer Beneke, was held in 2000 at Fingers gallery in Auckland followed by *Lure* in Dunedin—the gallery and studio workshop of the artists. Culy and Beneke use forging and the crucible, milking traditional forms for metaphors and resonances within the work process itself; in particular, metal's ability to resist and to be led. The project's complementary catalogue with two front covers, plays on inverted forms, using metallic papers and is jewel-like in itself. Poet Cilla McQueen writes of jeweller Ann Culy, while educator and jeweller Graham Price writes of Rainer Beneke. The writing is lyrical and shows an understanding of making. Together, the two texts produce a startlingly simple gendering that reinforces the project's symmetry.

"The Baltic amber talisman is a warming reminder of a homeland left. A drop of honey coloured tree milk, fossil sunlight, worn over the heart. The aquamarine, talisman of sailors, holds a journeyman's travels to New Zealand. Pounamu, of course, the deep and verdant talisman of arrival in this land."¹

Beneke forges asymmetrically squared forms whose faces move in different directions until they develop an inverted ridge, the back forming a lateral cross against the front. Forging produces squeezed edges and ridges of aligned molecules with a consistency recalling schist. These naturalistic edges are countered by the fine, densely worked surfaces of his primary forms. The metal is sent between the hammered surfaces, like the meeting of tectonic plates it abuts and lifts along a ridge.

Collection of works
by Ann Culy and
Rainer Beneke.



Rainer Beneke,
Brooches, sterling
silver, stainless
steel pins.

In other pieces Beneke plays with the paradoxical simplicity of these forms as he cuts along the ridge and aligns them in fours or links them in bracelets so that the obverse side reverses the front, and the pieces move along in reversed couplings. Such simple orderings are satisfying and as mnemonic reminders of the shared bases of organic and inorganic forms they are literally grounding. Beneke's stones sit between sheets of holed metal, protruding in both directions. Their oval gaze lies toward the base of rectangular discs, sitting with an ordered symmetry that argues an opposing element outside the work, the wearer's head perhaps. Weight and warmth, smooth and ridged surfaces fall against bone and skin. These pieces are for wearing and also double as autonomous forms in the photographer's hands.

"Air feeds living fire that flickers in the hearth. All we need is food and shelter, life-giving warmth. A small hearth is this stone in my hand, an opal holding a memory of fire within the stone. Fire melts metal. Human hands mould metal to encase a stone, to make a ring for a human hand. Skin warms metal, metal cradles stone, stone remembers intense heat."²

Culy's work is also for wearing, in ways less noticeable through the camera's eye. Brooches show figures in passage or flight, tiny, etched-out absences framed in square houses of silver. Here rings, brooches and earrings draw their narratives from process, preparing the work for the wearer's own history. Culy's work is akin to the body—its wrinkled forms and never perfect finish, its asymmetries that derive from the odd ovals of stones or the irregular pouring of metals, acknowledge rather than resist making and time. It is as if these rings have tried as hard as they can to be the body, to merge with its epidermal layers. Stones peep through tiny blisters like pebbles breaking through dried seaweed, while inside tiny holes reveal a winking coloured eye. Some are chosen for colour and light, while others make explicit

geomorphological histories, as does a rod of ruby framed in its own matrix of zoicite.

In her disc brooches Culy works with the crucible, melting and cooling, half-integrating silver and gold in marbled forms which she then forges flat. There is a sort of willed negligence about the way she treats precious metals. Fire-scale is retained, working marks tarnishing and deepening. The bowing of the heated metal after the integration of bevel and ring form is left not as a resistance to the preciousness of the metal, as it once might have been, rather forging preciousness and transience together.

The Lure of Metal played off abstraction and reference, both conceptually and pragmatically. It retrieved modernist concerns with the sharp edged meetings of chance and material while acknowledging post-structural concerns with materiality's resistance to the simplicities of conceptual form. At the same time, the division of labour between a publication and jewellery measured jewellery's habit of relinquishing its makers' histories, as the writing locates these works within contexts a wearer will soon replace.

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The Lure of Metal was at Fingers Gallery, Auckland, 18 September to 30 September 2000 and Lure, Dunedin, 14 October to 4 November 2000. Both artists are represented in the 4th New Zealand Jewellery Biennale: Auckland City Art Gallery 10 November 2001 to 27 January 2002; Hawkes Bay Museum 15 February to 12 May 2002; Dunedin Public Art Gallery 8 June to 11 August 2002.

endnotes

1. Graham Price, 'A textural biography', *The Lure of Metal*, Lure Works 2000, p3.
2. Cilla McQueen, 'Touching the elements', *The Lure of Metal*, Lure Works 2000, p2.

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