

“An enduring relationship”

In our fast-paced, commercially driven world, one of the clear streams of jewellery making – the considered, one-off, hand-wrought piece – is being muddied, if this metaphor isn't too extreme, by the voracious and novelty-seeking nature of the fashion world and the retail jewellery market.

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Contemporary Australian jewellers continue an ancient tradition of body ornamentation. But their intellectual engagement with their work, as **Patricia Anderson** uncovers, drives them to unexpected places. It is a world in which they can never rest on their laurels.



Previous page: Helen Britton's *Bouquet* brooch stands out against the neon colour and chaos of Sydney's Chinatown. The artist's work appears courtesy of Gallery Funaki, Melbourne. Photo: Keith Saunders

Historically speaking, jewellery must have some relationship with the human body to be defined as such, and the most enduring relationship of all has been demonstrated to us by the burial practices of our ancient cousins. In almost every corner of the globe, they have preserved a record of the dawning of human consciousness – of life and death – by placing objects on bodies before burial. Thus jewellery's pedigree may even be longer than that attached to cave paintings, rock carvings and figurines, because with human consciousness came self-consciousness, and the human body was the most immediate surface at hand to make manifest that awareness.

This particular awareness, which is intimately linked to the first artisans, flowered no later than 35,000 years ago during the Aurignacian period. From this time, carved amber, ivory and bone beads, and the incisors of reindeer, wolves, foxes and bears were fashioned into pendants and necklaces and amulets. What makes this lineage so appealing to a jeweller in the modern world is that the impulse that sustains it remains unbroken. The imperative to make something original and of enduring significance, to have some manifestation of the creator's cerebral processes, survives in a contemporary world in which the disposable and the novel seem to be prized above all – not to mention the discounting of the hard-won skills required to bring complex ideas full circle.

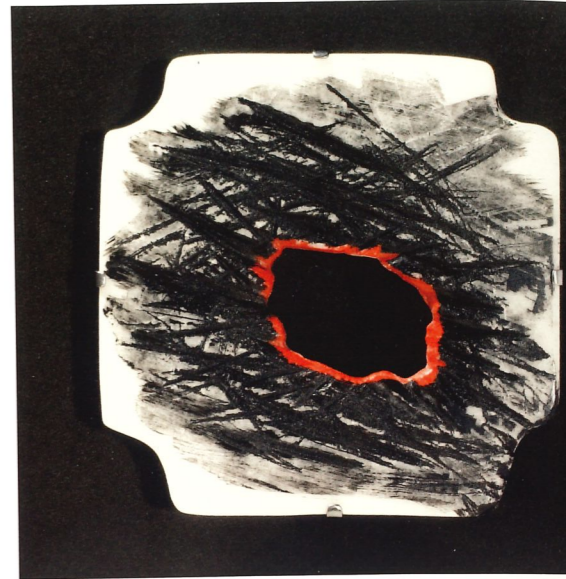
Elements of nature expressed in a most literal form appeared early, and these generally carried ritualistic and symbolic meaning. Consider the ancient Greeks and Romans who created wreaths from beaten, fine gold sheet, which resembled oak, myrtle and laurel leaves (from the latter we get the expressions 'to rest on one's laurels' and 'to earn one's laurels').

The remains of settled agricultural communities testify to the exalted place held by the animal kingdom in the imagination of early man. Animals were representatives of a vast pantheon of gods. Until Judaism, Christianity and Islam were well established, animals reigned supreme in jewellery. The Egyptian menagerie – including the falcon, the ibis, the jackal, the vulture, the scarab beetle and cobra – is merely the most obvious. The Persians favoured

the lion and that mythical composite beast, the griffin; the Mesopotamians (today's Iraqis) preferred the ram and the goat; and the Minoans worshipped the bull. A further extension of this list is irresistible: the Chinese celebrated the dragon, and our Aboriginal people the Rainbow Serpent.

This elaborate introduction of nature into a discussion on contemporary jewellery is not misplaced when we consider how it plays a part in finely wrought pieces in the work of several contemporary Australian jewellers. Marian Hosking's affection for the natural world has been much in evidence over the years. Initially, her work in silver introduced figurative elements in such a discreet manner that only on closer inspection did the embossed patterns on her brooches resolve themselves into ferns, seaweed or gum leaves. Slowly, in larger mother-of-pearl shell pieces, these patterns reversed themselves so that tiny swallows and wagtails were cut from the pearl surface, leaving a series of delicate perforations through which light could play and suggest movement. These organic concerns also expressed themselves in a series of rings: curved ovals of hard stone or sea-shell fixed to a simple silver shank. The visual effect for the wearer and the viewer was not unlike balancing a smooth river pebble on the back of one's hand. More recently, Hosking's pieces have grown more complex in appearance and workmanship. A forest of movable components riveted to flat silver ovals and squares creates a visual sensation of great vitality and excitement. These pieces also unleash a host of associations in the viewer's mind, such as the opening and closing of sea anemones and sponges in tidal rock pools, and fields of wheat and corn swaying according to the wind's dictates.

- < Marian Hosking, *Leaves Brooch*, 2006, 925 silver. Photo: Julian Hutchens
- ✓ Marian Hosking, *Celery Top Pine Brooch*, 2007, 925 silver. Photo: Julian Hutchens
- ↗ Margaret West, *Testament*, 2005, Carrara marble, paint, 925 silver. Photo: courtesy the artist



If the figurines, the engraved stones, the paintings on the walls of caves embodied the ancient impulse to create some kind of symbolic order over chaos, to impose some pattern on crowded perceptions, then perhaps we have a template for an examination of an extraordinary body of recent work by Margaret West. One might even suggest that West's current work represents some kind of exorcism of the conflicted feelings that arise from surveying the wreckage of man indulging in his favourite pastime: carnage.

West's work began, and has remained, at the furthest edge of contemporary jewellery's concerns. Her pieces can all be worn, but they are finely tuned to a range of emotional extremities – like sound frequencies that are almost, but not quite, out of the range of our hearing. Contributing to an exhibition called *Luminaries* in 2006, West mounted 52 carved and painted brooches from marble and silver in a work entitled *FRIEZE: Ecce Homo (précis)*, 2006. Aesthetically, they were related to an earlier series, with the resplendently optimistic title, *The Sky is a Garden*. However the 2006 works were far darker in spirit, and were driven in part by body images from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Scored and marked marble forms shadow, in the most abstracted and formally compelling fashion, a poetry of horrors: dislocations, flayings and puncturing. If anything, apart from their formal beauty, they might represent the long march out of the cave and the short march back into it.

Julie Blyfield, like Hosking, has found much to nourish her in the natural world. In the last few years, Blyfield has spent a good deal of time in her Adelaide garden, and in examining the botanical collections at the South Australian Herbarium, the Adelaide Botanic Gardens and the archives of the South Australian Museum. What she discovered in the latter was wholly reflective of the delicate and fugitive nature of botanical specimens. A 1907 album of pressed specimens of indigenous desert

plants, which had been assembled by a Lutheran pastor and labelled with their original Aboriginal names, became the inspiration for an expansive body of work based on their detailed forms transformed into three dimensions, which echoed the intricacy and subtle faded greens, ochres, rose, and yellows of the original specimens. Called *Pressed Desert Plant*, the series was first exhibited in 2003 in Amsterdam, and Blyfield's most recent works were shown in Paris 2007. In her hands, fine silver no longer resembles metal, nor do the pieces masquerade as organic material. They occupy a place of their own – the place of the object created anew, with affection for its subject, and great skill in its execution – entirely unfamiliar and surprising to our eyes. Blyfield, like West, has employed paint, but in colours that suggest sunlight and life, rather than incarceration and pain.

Mari Funaki's tiny, origami-like sculptures are fashioned from either 18-carat gold or black steel, and might point to austerity being the new opulence. Gold is a seductive material. The ancients believed it embodied the greatest living force, the sun, and gold's malleable and ductile qualities have made it a favourite metal for jewellers since those qualities were discovered. Funaki's brooches, rings and small objects, with their asymmetrical geometry, are disciplined and refined. In her hands, gold is obliged to behave in the same manner as a matte black steel – a medium that couldn't be more removed from gold in its inherent qualities. Her works, large and small, are as economical and precise as a haiku poem and, because they embody the concerns of sculptors who work on a larger scale, the viewer or the wearer is

compelled to take into account how these works play out their small rhythms in space. Funaki, who owns the only gallery in Australia committed entirely to the best contemporary jewellery both here and internationally, has said: 'I work with evocative forms based on nature and the everyday environment. They might remind you of something familiar or something from your memory.'

Helen Britton's work too, in its dazzling accretions of unlikely objects, might raise something from the depths of memory, or trigger a chain of unlikely associations. Since the late 1990s, Britton had her work exhibited in Australia, the United States, and in Munich and Amsterdam (two of the more celebrated European centres for contemporary jewellery). There is something both inevitable and precarious about Britton's confections of cast-silver components, pieces of flexible and fluorescent acrylic, urban cast-offs, tiny misshapen pearls, hardstones, gemstones and cast resins. These items, all inanimate of themselves, acquire a life of their own in her hands, where she creates short stories from tiny pockets of chaos. One association that comes to mind is the eighteenth-century curio-cabinet of the connoisseur, bristling with objects both fragile and robust, brought together from all the cultures of the earth and meeting each other for the first time. Or, if one were to find a parallel image in the mineral world, it might be the lurid growths that occur when certain crystals are placed in an alum bath and within days have delivered a world never seen before.

The fertility of Sally Marsland's work, which shares certain organic principles of growth and fragility with Hosking's and Blyfield's, is demonstrated by several, not unrelated bodies of work. One consists of pod-like objects and tiny bead-like pins in pastel-coloured anodised aluminium; another consists of vessels, brooches and objects which, in either oxidised silver or a graphite compound, resemble fragile eggshells or opened, tulip-like blooms. In another, Marsland creates from epoxy resin free-form brooches of spreading pools of colour. In their way, each of these groups of works suggests the visual link between the floral world and the man-made world. Some forms, which found their way into an exhibition, *Almost Black*, shown in Munich in 2000, suggest another, theoretical layer of man-made activity. Their scored and corrugated surfaces and ragged edges called to mind the charred detritus of bombed cities, or the lava-like offerings of the volcano's rim.

In our fast-paced, commercially driven world, one of the clear streams of jewellery making – the considered, one-off, hand-wrought piece – is being muddied, if this metaphor isn't too extreme, by the voracious and novelty-seeking nature of the fashion world and the retail jewellery market. In the latter, I'm referring to the bland, anonymous, machine-

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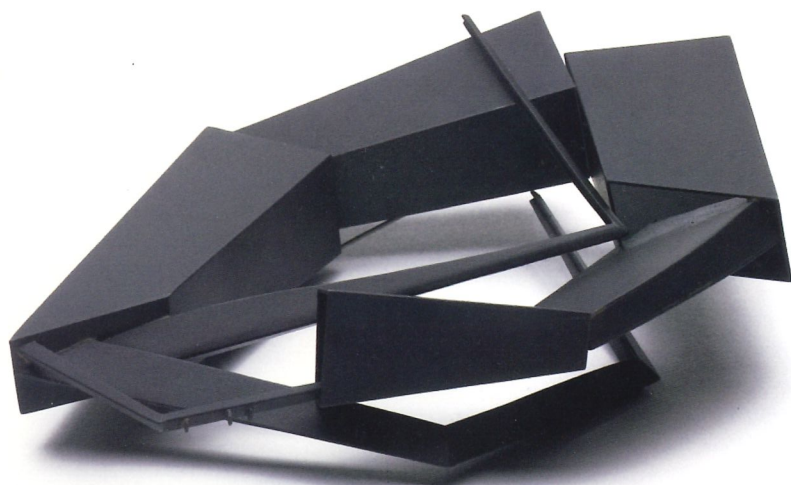
... they embody some of the most vibrant and cerebral elements of jewellery-making today. They have a story to tell and life of their own.

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> Sally Marsland, *Flat Colour Brooches*, 2002, epoxy resin, powdered pigment. Photo: Terence Bogue

✓ Mari Funaki, *Bracelet*, 2006, heat-treated mild steel. Photo: courtesy the artist



assisted pieces that rely heavily for their appeal on the monetary value of their materials – that is to say, gold and gemstones. Even Tiffany, Bulgari and Cartier, whose pedigrees are established and distinguished, have succumbed to the blandness of the conveyor belt.

The situation for contemporary jewellers in Australia is not unlike that faced by painters and sculptors. Of the many who graduate, few will stay the course, not because they are not inventive, hard working and committed, but because the market-place will not sustain their more remarkable offerings. This in turn explains why so much of the jewellery for sale through craft shops and standard retail outlets has the unhappy appearance of the generic and the formulated.

Aesthetic judgements about what is or is not pleasing to the eye, regardless of its symbolic intent, are always judgements made on shifting sands. Some man-made offerings, such as those discussed above, have an essential 'rightness' about them, which remains unchanged regardless of seismic shifts in taste. What is pleasing about an African mask, a Georgian milk jug or a Mark Rothko canvas will still please 100 years from now. Art has the capacity to exercise our eye before our language skills, not the other way round.

And sometimes art takes you where words can't follow. This is true for art on walls, on plinths and on bodies. The six jewellers illustrated here are interesting to us because they embody some of the most vibrant and cerebral elements of jewellery-making today. They have a story to tell and life of their own. ■■■■

Patricia Anderson has written two books on contemporary jewellery in Australia. Her most recent publication is *ART + AUSTRALIA: Debates, dollars and delusions*. She is currently writing *Robert Hughes and the Antipodeans*.



▲ Julie Blyfield, *Margaret's Pressing Brooches*, 2006, oxidised sterling silver, enamel, wax. Photo: Grant Hancock



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