

Artist talk text by Barbara Heath Adelaide 26-10-2007 following:

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Images from the catalogue - Rhana Devenport: Curator Karen Findeis: Editor/Co-ordinator Boccalatte : Graphic Designer



This graphic from Jeweller to the Lost studio

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I started out in Melbourne 35 years ago, but my practice has been Brisbane based since 1983. My work has a broad scope, which includes one-off commission jewellery, the studio also produces a retail range of jewellery which is sold in Australia, New Zealand and the United States and large scale sculpture for the public domain. Accomplishing this amount of work is not a solo pursuit, but implies much collaboration and team work - our studio consists of a team of four, but many projects source outside expertise.

In talking about this work, I need first to frame my particular approach with some background context.

The practice is run as a business certainly, but one where the bottom line is clearly to sustain passion and curiosity. It's important to me to exhibit and push my ideas, to write and to collect stories about jewellery and its place in our lives.

I use a title - (it's on my business card) - Jeweller to the Lost of course it's tongue in cheek, I'm not looking for lost souls.

But I suppose I am saying that if people are lost in their search for their particular jewel . . . I'm over here!

It's a poetic thing - implies mystique, a creative journey or at least an open spirit of inquiry. We know jewels occupy a special place in the human psyche not only as adornment but also as signifiers. So the work IS part of this continuum.

Commissioned jewellery: in the early 90's I was inspired by a dear client, a senior architect who commissioned a ring for himself. He approached the process with a respect and reverence that was illuminating and led me to understand that a commission could be a truly collaborative and mutually rewarding experience, as opposed to a compromise.

At that time I felt the need to articulate my beliefs in a Manifesto. I needed to describe what a commission is and is not. To set the boundaries as well as to open the scope.

I wrote: The commission starts with a dialogue, the client presents her view and I present mine. Ultimately, I negotiate the license to interpret on behalf of my client. The trick is to stimulate the client to express themselves non-visually - to shift the focus away from the end product and back to the INTERIOR, to the function and to the clients own muses and symbols.

Sometimes the work includes their own emotionally loaded objects for recycling. I think a lot about commission work:

I've recently been reading Gay Bilson's book 'Plenty', in which she describes her approach to commissioning (in the context of architecture) and quotes Elizabeth Farrelly: 'truly vigorous architecture results neither from meek genuflection nor from the client's own insistence on her druthers' .

Gay prefers the idea of 'choosing an architect as a commitment to artistic patronage' which is to say that by becoming the client the owner never allows (the designer) anything less than complete freedom ... quibbling over parts of the package would be to meddle and to undo the very basis of patronage.'

My own experiences cover a spectrum of these degrees of maker freedom. but I find that many hundreds of commissions later, this intimate work continues to stimulate and inform my broader practice - I believe my work is also framed by the relevance of these jewels to developments in the lives of my clients, and also that my work is earthed, by the functional imperative of daily wearability.

Sensuality and the pleasure of wearing objects that conform to the body is part of the work too. The kinesthetic body . . . the one that feels, and knows by feeling. The weight and density of metal encircling a finger, the rolling fluidity of a knotted strand of beads draped around a neck - these kind of presences and restrictions draw our inner attention to our body's own sites of meaning, to our posture and our collective memory and our rituals.

And of course there are the gems, I am a passionate collector. I find them intrinsically beautiful. I

do seek them out, sometimes travelling solely for that purpose. BUT they pass through my hands, I can let them go . . .

The work in this show is from a series titled 'White Enamel Fusion'

The first pieces in this group were made for an invitational exhibition at Studio Ingot, in Melbourne in 2003. In that show, titled 'Chromophobia' (fear of colour) each artist was dealt one colour to work with. Having been given

the colour white enabled me to envision new works based on the Cheapside Hoard.

A collection of historic jewellery that I had long been intrigued by.

The hoard was hidden in unknown circumstances, stashed beneath the floorboards of a dwelling in Cheapside, London, early in the 17th century. Discovered by a demolition crew in 1912, the group of 400 items includes delicate gem

rings each having their gold bands partially concealed beneath white enamel.

Earlier this year I travelled to Russia and the UK on an Australia Council Grant to research more of this work and that study has led to further developments, which I am working on in the studio now.

But I made these objects in 2005 in reference to both that 17thC use of gems set in gold and blanketed in white enamel, as well as drawing on a contemporary sort of sadness and nostalgia for the natural world.

Chain mesh, patterned screens, lattice, these are recurring devices in my work, both on and off the body.

The former enables lightweight fluid forms that drape the body - the latter break up space and light- A client from the middle east once told me that I was making mashrabia:

and I loved her explanation of the word, originally a screen constructed by nomadic desert people to provide shade and shelter for the food preparation areas of the camp and hence the women's quarter. Over time this became an

architectural device which provided a definition between the public and the private space, the social versus the reflective space.

I live in a colonial house in Brisbane where lattice and screens are a part of the vernacular. I love the privacy they provide, the dreamy way they break the harsh summer glare. In 2005 the QAG mounted a survey exhibition of my work. Their video component made great use of the verandah at our house and its moving tessellated light it evoked the physical and repetitive nature of the lattice.

Several of the public artworks we have produced have been based on this lattice concept.

When I was invited to speak about this work at QUT Architecture department The lecturer Leigh Shutter explained: 'Architects rarely make things anymore, and it would be fabulous to have someone who has made urban scale jewellery to come and talk about the processes of jewellery, and translating to a larger scale'. He said It is very difficult to get students to engage with the tactile and direct physical experiential quality of their proposals, when they are significantly removed from the processes of production.

Certainly engaging with the tactile is my first love and my preferred problem solving method, shifting components around in 3D and in real time. I rarely do much more than a rudimentary sketch or diagram to record ideas.

So these works are a departure from my studio processes of production.

And very much collaborative -

The Doorhandle is one of fifty produced in 2004 for the 29 courts in the new Brisbane Magistrates Court. This was a large budget project, included a number of artists plus a curator as well as a project manager. Cox Rayner Architects in joint venture with Ainsely Bell & Murchison were the Architects for The Brisbane Magistrates Court, collectively the artworks procured for the building were awarded the RAIA – Art and Architecture Award in 2005.

Laser cut, rolled and welded stainless steel. The design was digitally produced in our studio, manufactured out, with input from the architectural team and dialogue with the manufacturers. Jay Younger wrote in her curatorial statement: The fretwork design references the breezeway lattice seen above the doorways in traditional domestic Queensland architecture, it may also be seen as differentiating between public and private space . . . an expression of transition and access both

physically and metaphorically.

The handles provide an intimate and tactile experience in that they are touched everyday by the users of the building moving to and from the courtrooms.

. . . and subtly evoke potentially life changing transitions that may occur and the role of the courts in deciding the fate of its users.

I feel that this is at the core of my jewellery practice, this boundary between the public and the private - this liminal zone is where we locate jewellery. It's as if we hang our identities on a veil between the inner and outer worlds.

'Freewheeling' an artist book produced in 2005 in collaboration with Malcolm Enright my husband and creative partner.

This was a joint project initiated by the State Library of Queensland and Craft Queensland for an exhibition of artist books to mark the 100 year anniversary of women's right to vote and the 40 year anniversary of indigenous peoples right to vote.

Malcolm is a collector and it was serendipitous that he managed to scoop on ebay the women's emancipation button (as illustrated in the catalogue) the very morning we were invited to make a work for this show.

The button, a tiny hand painted enamel, shows a woman and her bicycle.

So, it seemed fitting for the bicycle to become our precursor for the work.

The form has the spoked wheels of a bicycle as well as that of the archetypal 'open book'.

In our concept statement I wrote: Its easy to imagine the bicycle might have been a precursor to the suffragette movement. What a piece of liberation that instrument must have been! - at last a means to go where and when you will. Did this new freedom of movement inspired the bold to pitch against other fears and entrenched resistances?

Perhaps the bicycle (and the new freer clothing it prescribed) was the implement that prompted a body knowingness, that prompted a change in perception and a subsequent opening of the mind/intellect.

Once again, the patterns imply a kind of text, the pages of the book speak of knowledge and permeability. Through the shelter of the lattice we can see both opponents to be assailed and the dreams we must stretch out to grasp.

Thank you so much for your interest in my work, I'm delighted to be included in this beautiful show.

Barbara Heath October 2007