

Everything and nothing – jewellery beyond adornment.

by Melinda Young

As a maker, a wearer and a viewer of contemporary jewellery I am interested in jewellery beyond its life as adornment, as a significant, charged object to be worn. This extends to the processes that engender that object, the actions that describe making and the notion that to 'wear' or be adorned with jewellery does not necessarily mean that it is in a traditionally recognisable form.

Contemporary jewellery practice sits at the crossroads of craft, design, and art, it positions 'the human body as a general working area'¹. Contemporary jewellery not only sees the making of recognisable forms of adornment using 'known' materials, it also has an 'open attitude to methods and material'², questioning and pushing against ideas of what traditional jewellery can (or could) be. The materiality and value of jewellery is questioned; sites of adornment and the process of making interrogated. The scale and scope of adornment comes into play as does a (re)consideration of what we consider the jewel or precious object to be. Here I hope that by unpacking (undressing?) some of the work presented in *Made/Worn: Australian Contemporary Jewellery* that an understanding of the significance of the works inclusion in the exhibition can be reached – that ideas of wearability and the different values of adornment can be re-addressed via these pieces.

Ironically the least 'wearable' works in the *Made/Worn* exhibition are amongst those where the body itself is most noticeably (and viscerally) present. These are works of physical intensity - where the body can be in danger - Emma Fielden's hand strikes magnet and marble, her actions are sure and true (yet her wrist bears the marks of a misplaced blow); Catherine Truman submits her gloved hand to the tools of anatomical dissection – there is tension, intimacy and vulnerability³ inherent in these works – a very direct call to attention that the work in this exhibition is made by hand(s) and that perhaps of all the jewels in the exhibition, these making hands are the most precious of all. Claire McArdle's work insists on the intervention of the (absent) hand, her work asks the viewer to dig deep and think carefully about the combined significance of materials and action. Her finely carved gardening tools wrought from wood and re-fabricated car exhaust are wearable talismans, reminding us of the importance that the hand plays in the regeneration of the environment. Helena Bogucki's work speaks about narratives and places imagined from within the liminal space of hospital corridors and waiting rooms, these are sensitively charged, careworn works. That they are designed more for private contemplation and caress than public wear is infused with the circumstances of their creation. Like Truman, Tiffany Parbs also toys with the aesthetics of the surgical grotesque and, like Bogucki, Parbs considers the physical and emotional state of motherhood. In *Slope* the maternal body is forcibly encased at the centre of the site for play, this body is both wearing and being worn. When the body is absent from this work its echo is more strongly felt.



Emma Fielden, *A Diminishing Force* (video still), 2019, Two channel HD colour video with sound, 10 minutes 30 seconds

¹ Lignel, Benjamin (2006). 'What does Contemporary Jewellery mean?'. Bethel : *Metalsmith Magazine* accessed 20 February 2020 via <http://grayareasymposium.org/jewellery/en/>

² Ibid

³ Rackham, Melinda (2015) *Theatre of Detail: Gray Street workshop celebrates 30 years* (exhibition catalogue), Adelaide : Gray Street Workshop Gallery

Making is an act – Emma Fielden breaks this down to an elemental level in her work *A Diminishing Force*, through careful, considered movement as she simultaneously makes and unmakes her materials – Queensland Bianca marble and ferrite magnet. As we watch this act of making/unmaking unfold we are witness to her careful, conscious decision making; evident in the continual movement and placement of the matter, selection and arrangement. The maker's hands are brought to the forefront of the work, we see through them careful thinking – where to strike, when to stop - continuous aesthetic decisions are laid bare. In striking the hammer, Emma's movements are sure and true; their rhythm speaks of her years of training as a musician and as a silversmith, crafts that demand rhythmic, sure movement, the search for a beat. Fielden says “my background has instilled in me a fixation on minute details, repetitive processes and the language of materiality”⁴. We also observe the role of the materials themselves, both their obedience to the hand of the maker and their unruliness, laid bare in black and white. Underpinning Fielden's practice is a quest to know infinity, however we also see in this work the infinite possibilities of making. For a maker the possibilities of how a thing could be are both exciting and terrifying, this work by Fielden goes some way in revealing what made the other works in this exhibition just so. But it also raises questions. Why did the maker stop and say “Yes, this will do, the work is finished.” Is it ever perfect?



Catherine Truman, *In Preparation for Seeing: glove dissection*, 2014, filmed work

The act of making is with the hand also explored in Catherine Truman's video work *In Preparation for Seeing: glove dissection*. In the film, Pat Villimas (School of Medicine, Flinders University, Adelaide), dissects a latex glove off Truman's hand, the latest in a number of iterations of the work they have undertaken together. For *Made/Worn*, two identical versions of this film are played forward and in reverse, a continuous, mesmerising loop; whilst one glove is being dissected the other is being restored. The glove is read as both a separate, wearable object and a part of the human body – a skin covering the hand, Truman says “the ‘skin’ in this film is my skin, proffered as an intimate boundary - one that is both transgressed and restored at once”. This plays out in a cross disciplinary exchange, where the intimacy of the act speaks to the ongoing fascination with human anatomy that underpins Truman's research-based practice as a contemporary jeweller who has long made objects ‘for and about the human body’. For Truman the body is a site where both the personal and the political can be explored, her works give ‘expression to the sensation not only of inhabiting her body but also of controlled risk-taking, both physical and emotional’⁵. Sometimes wearable, sometimes not, at all times the body is at the forefront of Truman's practice, present in both subject matter and the traces of the physical actions of the hand in making the work.

⁴ Emma Fielden correspondence with Australian Design Centre, December 2019

⁵ Rowley, S. in Brennan, A. Ewington, J. Rowley, S. Fuller, H. Walker, L.M. (2000) *Gray Street Workshop Celebrating 15 Years 1985 – 2000* (exhibition catalogue), Gray Street Workshop and Object Australian Centre for Craft and Design, p.34



Helena Bogucki, *Pouch for coastal remnants, How to collect sunshine and We gathered bone and ash*, 2019, Copper, enamel, banana fibre, pearl shell, sterling silver, ink and steel with collection trays and field documentation

The notion of physicality and emotion underpins Helena Bogucki's work in *Made/Worn*. Bogucki's practice is one of conceptual exploration, historical research, documentation and fieldwork – all of which come together in works which combine formed and found pieces, a memento of research and lived experiences that communicates (and obfuscates) personal narratives to audiences via collections of ephemera and speculative adornments for the body. Recently Helena's practice "has become a way in which to articulate and navigate my role within my family while supporting family members with extra needs. Exploring my personal narrative and documenting these transitions is providing the opportunity to create an unexpected and often confronting archive of lived experiences"⁶. The story of 'Bird Island', the subject of the works in *Made/Worn*, is told through three collections: *Pouch for coastal remnants, How to collect sunshine and We gathered bone and ash*. These works use previously collected materials that were available in Helena's studio, these have provided field notes and documentation for the imaginary narrative created by Bogucki and her daughter in the liminal space of hospital waiting rooms, corridors and specialist's rooms. 'Bird Island' is an imaginative, playful world to keep them safe from the fear of the unknown behind closed clinic doors. In manifesting her own experiences as the subject of the work, Bogucki has revoked the desire for creating works of wearable adornment that have a closeness to the body. These are speculatively wearable pieces, vessels for private reflection – objects to hold, to meditate upon, perhaps in the most oft overlooked wearable space - the pocket. In this work it is the deliberately negated obviousness of wearability that connects it so potently and powerfully to the body, encouraging a re-thinking of what and how we wear the things that are most precious.



Tiffany Parbs, *Slope*, 2018, Stainless steel

⁶ Helena Bogucki correspondence with Australian Design Centre, December 2019

The *worn* body is explored by Tiffany Parbs in her conceptual jewellery practice – where to *wear/be worn* is cleverly unpacked in multi-layered reference points in both the making, performance and documentation of the work. The works Parbs creates rely on display and interaction with the body to become animated and demonstrate their true intent. This work, *slope*, is worn physically and emotionally, its deadpan humour presenting a tension between ‘tragedy and farce’⁷. As part of a larger series of works, *smother* which explores the lived, bodily experience of parenthood and the polarities of motherhood, *slope* explores the adult body as a playground⁸ - where the artists body is both trapped and at play. Parbs has long foregrounded her own body in her conceptually rich practice which explores “the way bodies are lived in, how they wear and are embellished over time, and how these processes are documented and defined through socialisation and the media”⁹. There is a reversal in the anticipated outcomes of Parbs performative jewellery – the finished (worn) piece is the image, reliant on the body, the made structures relegated to the status of props or relics – yet in its absence the body is perhaps more markedly resonant.



Claire McArdle, *A small tool for change*, 2018, Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) wood, steel from an old car exhaust, leather

Claire McArdle’s work *a small tool for change* can be read as implement or jewel, whilst both these definitions require a body to enable activation, it could be argued that the need for a body is more present in its absence. As with much of McArdle’s work, these pieces are multilayered, “led by concept but grounded in materiality and technique”¹⁰, coupled with a required performative action from the wearer. The neckpieces in *Made/Worn* are a series of small, wearable shovels wrought from Australian wood carved into the shape of the endangered native birds that nest in the tree that the wood has come from. The areas that these trees can grow in are shrinking due to climate change. The wooden handles are paired with old car exhaust pipes, re-fashioned to create a digging surface meaning the pieces can be used to plant a tree, every tree planted is a small act of change. The wearing/use of this work is also about identity, another constant in McArdle’s practice. She uses her work to question identity, broadly - such as what it means to be Australian - or more subtly, questioning her own identity or asking others to re-think theirs. She says “adornment is the perfect vehicle for questioning identity as it has such a powerful aspect of personal ownership through its wearability”¹¹. This notion of identity can be extended to the projections that we as viewers of contemporary jewellery project onto the pieces we encounter. As we observe the adornment in *Made/Worn*, we cannot help but imagine what it would be like to wear them, to momentarily absorb them into our own identity.

⁷ Hughes, Daniella (2018) ‘a womb of one’s own’ in *smother* (exhibition catalogue) Melbourne : Craft Victoria

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Tiffany Parbs correspondence with Australian Design Centre, December 2019

¹⁰ Claire McArdle correspondence with Australian Design Centre, December 2019

¹¹ Ibid

So, what is a 'jewel'? It is something precious to treasure, a thing to wear (or not), an object of value, a marker of identity, a display of status, a provider of context or meaning, a symbol, intimate, personal, private, public, something that is made, but not necessarily something that is worn. Jewellery represents "all human burdens and sufferings... including the less beautiful aspects of being human"¹². Jewellery holds stories (and hoodoo). Tiffany Parbs speaks for many of the makers in this exhibition when she states that she is motivated by "expanding public perceptions and awareness of jewellery, examining the dialogue between body and object, (the) capacity (of jewellery) for transference of meaning and the potential for jewellery as a medium to reflect a changing social narrative"¹³. When we look at the work in the *Made/Worn* exhibition, we understand that each of the artists is telling us a story – they are telling their truths and those of the world around us. There is despair for the environment, for the political state of the world. There are personal stories of the transformative power of parenthood – of the way that children too are made and worn. That there are precious moments amidst burden and drudgery. Many of the works in the exhibition are presented in a stateless form - without the context of the body we are asked to imagine its presence. In the absence of a body, there is anticipation, however, the body is also as McArdle says, "the site of wearing but also the absence of it. It is the thing that thinks, that makes, that wears, that views, that feels. It is everything". Everything and nothing, just as the work in this exhibition is wearable (or not).

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This essay was commissioned by Australian Design Centre for the ADC On Tour national touring exhibition 'Made/Worn: Australian Contemporary Jewellery' on show at Australian Design Centre in Sydney from 26 March to 27 May 2020 and then touring across Australia.

About the author:

Melinda Young is a contemporary craft artist whose work spans jewellery, textiles, installation and interactive public art projects. She has exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally since 1997, her work is held in public collections and included in numerous publications. Melinda has spent the past 20 years working within the contemporary craft and design field as an educator, curator and gallery manager. She is currently an Associate Lecturer at UNSW Art & Design and undertaking a cross-disciplinary PhD at the Australian Centre for Culture Environment Society and Space, University of Wollongong.

¹² Unger, Marjan (2010/2019) *Jewellery in Context – A multidisciplinary framework for the study of jewellery* Arnoldsche p.55

¹³ Tiffany Parbs correspondence with Australian Design Centre, December 2019