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Citation: BERNABEI, R., 2004. British contemporary jewellery artists in Jewellery Unlimited. Jewellery Unlimited [catalogue]. Rome, Italy: Alternatives Gallery, pp.57

Additional Information:

- This article was published in the catalogue to accompany the Jewellery Unlimited exhibition in 2004.

Metadata Record: <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/24911>

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Alternatives Gallery

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“British Contemporary Jewellery Artists in Jewellery Unlimited”

By Roberta Bernabei

11/06/2004

The group exhibition of contemporary jewellery entitled, ‘Jewellery Unlimited’ opened on the 16th April 2004 at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, England. It was organised by the Bristol group of the Association for Contemporary Jewellery (ACJ) and its fruition resulted from their constant perseverance and dedication. The exhibition is significant because it provides an overall panoramic view of current artistic and handicraft production of jewellery in the UK. Therefore, it is an example for emulation in any similar context.

The ACJ is a British association founded in May 1997 in response to a forum at the international conference, '*Jewellers' Exchange*' held in 1996 in Newcastle. The collective body of jewellery artists recognised the need to create an association capable of promoting an understanding of contemporary jewellery in the UK.

‘Jewellery Unlimited’ is the first exhibition resulting from an open submission to present ACJ members. The jury, composed by experts such as Cynthia Cousens, Sarah James, Elisabeth Turrel, Karin Walton, selected work using the following criteria: boldness of design, concept, materials and techniques. Finally, a heterogeneous group of 97 participants were selected, ranging from internationally renowned jewellery artists such as Jane Adam, Dorothy Hogg and Jacqueline Mina, to early career jewellery artists, artisans, and young designers. Each participant showed three to five pieces. Overall, a wide range of styles could be observed incorporating precious metals, resins, silicone, and unusual objects as in Astfalck’s chicken bone necklace, “On Memory and Loss” (picture 1). Her field of research concerns memories and devotional objects, through the latter, Astfalck tells stories using autobiographical and historical material (picture 2). She states that, ‘In all our experience in the world of action there is a general need for personalising what is alien to us in order to understand it, even if this understanding is ultimately recognised as an illusion’.¹

Another Jewellery artist interested in the ambiguity of expressions is Yoko Izawa. She has attempted to transmit this ambiguity through her beautiful rings (pictures 3,4, 5) and mysterious necklace (picture 6).

¹ Jewellery Unlimited, 2004, (Catalogue) p. 19

Izawa states, 'that although certainty is often required in modern society, ambiguous expression has been the most distinctive characteristic found in Japanese values and religious beliefs.'²

'Veiled Jewellery 2' is the emblematic title of Izawa's necklace; its body is composed by a 39 sequence of silver ellipses of different sizes bound end to end. The necklace is covered with an olive green elasticated fabric tube that clings perfectly to the contours of the internal silver ellipses. The shrinking and expanding Lycra fabric defines sinuous rhythms, which are intensified by the combination of differing colour saturations and transparencies of netting. The resulting effect is similar to the famous lampshade, 'Lampada Falkland' (1964) by Bruno Munari, in which he exploited the same technique as a result of research into Japanese lanterns made from paper and bamboo.

Overall, the installation of the exhibition is restrained. The specially selected display cases were constructed from steel and glass with simple illumination, and each contained three shelves with up to six pieces of jewellery. The Minimalist metal structure enables the viewer to observe each work without any distractions. Considering the precious variety in the works on display, one could argue that the absence of any dating restricts a contextual and historical understanding of the exhibition.

Two further aspects complement the contemporary jewellery and conclude the exhibition; displays on jewellery making techniques and historical jewellery. Both presentations encourage a deeper understanding of jewellery, and especially for the novice audience. The techniques of jewellery making are expounded in twenty phases, enabling an explanation of how to make a simple ring. Also on display is a cross section of objects from the historical and ethnographic collection of the Bristol City Museum, including ornaments from 300 B.C., late 18th C English mourning jewellery, and some contemporary jewellery including work by David Watkins and Wendy Ramshaw, which establishes a link with the work of ACJ members.

In its totality the exhibition stakes a claim to shape the history of contemporary jewellery. An ambition that will be sustained in the long term by the accompanying fully illustrated 112-page catalogue, with 3-4 pictures of each artist's work and a personal statement. Of course its title is, 'Jewellery Unlimited'.

² Jewellery Unlimited, 2004, (Catalogue) p. 57