mapping impermanence

Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

18.11.05 - 25.04.2006
Untitled, ring, 2001
silicone, iron, 3x3x3cm
Enclosing Space

Upon observing Roberta Bernabei’s jewellery, one is immediately aware of the fact that its “contents” go beyond mere adornment. Space, absence, presence, the human body: all key words in Bernabei’s art. Indeed, her works can unquestionably be considered miniature sculptures for the body.

The concept of making space tangible has been one of her main areas of research in recent times. This idea initiated in her earlier works with her “memory spaces”, consisting in stones or objects removed from the cluster that had been created for them, leaving an empty space; the viewer is thus prompted to envisage or remember its former contents.

This theory then developed into a concept of space surrounding the human body. Jewellery’s relation to the body and its interaction to it has always played an important role in her work.

As opposed to most Italian artists, Bernabei has made very little use of gold, if not in a minor form for its symbolic value. The choice of expression in unconventional materials led her to the use of found objects in earlier works, whilst since the year 2000 she has been experimenting with silicone, human hair, ice, soap and chocolate, among others.

She has made use of silicone to convey the space/body theory. A silicone mould is created with imprints of parts of the human body or of spaces between parts of the body. Alginate is subsequently encapsulated in the spaces created and magnified by what resembles a lens. On the other hand materials such as ice, chocolate and soap have been employed as a metaphor to describe the temporary nature of our lives. Human hair is used as a means of expressing the opposite as, along with our bones, it withstands decay even after death. Her fascination also stems from the fact that our DNA can be traced through the hair.

In more recent times the space-related theory has further evolved and directed
Bernabei to study the concept of space in other cultures and to broaden her definition of space. The Japanese culture has been of special interest to her, since space is conceived as an experience in Japanese society; hence the absence of it, for example, is seen differently according to the situation and is not necessarily negative or positive in itself, but subject to different circumstances. This phenomenon has led her to study the juxtaposition of circles limiting and enclosing space (see the porcelain circles piece, 2005). The outlines of the white circles in this piece draw the viewer’s attention to the empty space within and the surrounding area. Her current creative process puts emphasis on empty spaces and white surfaces: white as a reference to purity and essence. Different sized geometric shapes, generally circles, are combined to exemplify her studies of the aesthetics of empty spaces.

Amber coloured silicone has been utilized lately to underline the correlation between the fossil resin that preserves and withholds vital information on extinct species, such as insects or plants, and silicone that preserves space, now referred to as space in general rather than space surrounding the body. Amber does of course conceal a given moment in time, but most important of all is the notion that amber conceals space, just as silicone conceals space in Bernabei’s work. Bernabei’s command of her chosen materials is evident, as is the use of the “language” she avails herself of to convey her messages. What strikes the viewer is that nothing is left to chance. Each and every detail is accurately studied and planned before proclaiming a piece completely finished. All artefacts are the result of months, at times years of studies and come together to form a puzzle, in a skilful play of codes that are set out for us to decipher. We are then left to delve into a world of hidden meanings, making the pieces all the more stimulating. The viewer is invested with an active role and cannot remain indifferent when observing the works before him/her.

Rita Marcangelo
October, 2005
Director, Alternatives Gallery, Rome
Chairman, AGC – Associazione Gioiello Contemporaneo
Untitled, ring, 2001
silicone, iron, enamel, 3x3x4cm
Imperfezioni, brooch, 2005
amber silicone, sterling silver, 5x5x3cm

Untitled, brooch, 2004
silicone, cotton, 7x4x2cm
Riflessi, necklace, 2005
amber silicone, sterling silver, 10x9x1cm
Coralambra #1, brooch, 2005
silicone, sterling silver, 10x9x1cm
Untitled, pendant, 2005

copper, organza, enamel, 12x12x1cm
Neckpiece #3, 2005
leather, sterling silver, 32x32x5cm
Bianchi #3, brooch, 2005
sterling silver, porcelain, 8x9x3cm
Bianchi #1, pendant, 2005
sterling silver, porcelain, enamel, silk, 6x4x3cm
Senza Titolo, pendants, 2005
black porcelain, cotton, 12x6x1cm
Polymer 3, ring, 2005
sterling silver, 4x3x2cm

Butane, brooch, 2005
sterling silver, steel, 6x3x3cm
CV

EDUCATION

1982-88 Istituto Statale d’Arte, G. Giovagnoli, Sansepolcro, I
1990-91 Fachhochschule für Gestaltung, Schwäbisch-Gmünd, D
1988-93 BA (Hons) Sculpture, Accademia di Belle Arti, Pietro Vannucci, Perugia, I
1995-98 Università per Stranieri, Facolta Lettere e Cultura Italiana, Perugia, I
2001-02 MA Metalwork and Jewellery, Sheffield Hallam University, UK
2005 Master Class, E.K.W.C. Den Bosch, NL

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1995 Roberta Bernabei Jewellery, Sir Richard Young Gallery, Dean Clough Galleries, Halifax, UK
2000 Contemporary Jewellery, Palazzo Pretorio, Sansepolcro, I
Roberta Bernabei Gioielli, ArtOrafeArtGallery, Florence, I
2003 Roberta Bernabei Contemporary Jewellery, Alternatives Gallery, Rome, I*
Istituto Italiano di Cultura C.M. Lerici, Stockholm, SE*
2005 Memory Spaces, 20/21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe, UK
2005-06 Mapping Impermanence, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, UK

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1989 Young Italian Designers, Expo 89, Basel, CH
IV Biennale d’Arte Orafa, Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, I*
1990 Ori d’Autore, Galleria La Roggia, Pordenone, I*
22 Affinità Centrifughe, Palazzo Penna, Perugia, I*
1992 Varianti Plastiche, Galleria Moretti, Deruta, I*
Weihnachtsausstellung, Hilde Leiss Galerie, Hamburg, D
1994 Le bijou en 3 temps, Chèret Gallery, Paris, F
Applied Arts Centre Design Yard, Dublin
Art in Progress, Dublin
1996 Contemporary Jewellery, Design Yard, Dublin
1999 Radicequadrataditre, Ellos Atelier d’Arte, Rome
Manschettenknöpfe, Schmuckwerkstatt Galerie, Berlin, D
2000 Papier, Museum für Kunst und Gewerb, Hamburg, D
Hilde Leiss Galerie, Hamburg, D
2001 Arts Institute at Bournemouth, Bournemouth, UK
L’Immagine del Gioiello, Alternatives Gallery, Rome*
Open Sculpture, Royal West of England Academy, Bristol, UK*
British Art Medal Society, Simmons Gallery, London*
2004  Jewellery Unlimited, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery*  
Kunst im Verlag, Galerie Schöner, Königsbach-Stein, D  
Sieraden uit Engeland, Lous Martin Gallery, Delft, NL  
Winter Exhibition, Alternatives Contemporary Jewellery, Rome, I  

2005  Containers/Contained, Target Gallery, Torpedo Factory Art Centre, Alexandria, USA.  
Pensieri Preziosi 2005, Oratorio San Rocco, Comune di Padova, Padua, I*  

2006  Collect, Victoria & Albert Museum, London*  
Women in Jewellery, Alternatives Gallery, Rome, I*  
* catalogue

PRIZES

1992  EC Scholarship  
2002  Armours and Braziers Award, Sheffield, UK  
2003  Pangolin Editions Casting Prize, UK  
2004  Travel Grant, The Association for Contemporary Jewellery, UK  
2005  Arts Council Individual Grant, UK

LECTURING

1995-04  Lecturer, History of Contemporary Jewellery, Le Arti Orafe, Florence, I  
2002-3  Visiting Lecturer, S&J, Sheffield Hallam University & De Montfort University, Leicester  
2004-  Lecturer, Silversmithing and Jewellery, Loughborough University

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and Catalogues

1989  IV Biennale d’Arte Orafa. Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, I  
1990  Ori d’Autore. Galleria La Roggia, Pordenone, I  
22 Affinità Centrifughe. Palazzo Penna, Perugia, I  
1992  Varianti Plastiche. Galleria Morelli, Deruta, I. Pisani, M.  
2002  L’Immaginer del Gioiello. Alternatives Gallery, Rome, I  
Open Sculpture. Royal West of England Academy, Bristol  
Mapping Impermanence. Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery. Marcangelo, R.  
Pensieri Preziosi 2005. Oratorio San Rocco, Comune di Padova, I. Cisotto, M.

Newspapers/Journals/TV

Alternatives: Roberta Bernabei Y Michael Shaw. Arte Y Joya. (SP) no. 156, p144-147  
2005  Arts Centre Displays. Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph. 22.06.2005, p16
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