The poetry of sensitising materials

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Inspired by the Arte Povera movement, jewellery artist Annamaria Zanella combines base materials with precious metals. The unmistakable blue pigment, produced according to a recipe from the fourteenth century, is just as important as plastic or corroded steel. Their interplay reveals the indwelling energy of the jewellery.

The pieces of the twice winner of the Herbert Hofmann Prize contain personal impressions and wearable references to nature surrounding her. The artist's living reality – and thus her oeuvre – also encompasses the political, the question of how we as a society want to live together.

Ispirata al movimento dell'Arte Povera, l'artista orafa Annamaria Zanella combina materiali semplici a metalli preziosi. All'inconfondibile pigmento blu, prodotto seguendo una ricetta del XIV secolo, viene attribuito lo stesso valore della plastica o dell'acciaio corroso. Ed è la loro interazione a rivelare il potere intrinseco dei gioielli.

Le opere di questa artista, due volte vincitrice del premio Herbert Hofmann, contengono impressioni personali e interpretazioni della natura che la circonda. La realtà della vita dell'artista influenza la sua produzione che abbraccia anche un aspetto politico, affrontando problematiche sociali del nostro vivere insieme.

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THE POETRY OF SENSITISING MATERIALS

In Annamaria Zanella’s early jewellery, one can observe an emerging desire to sensitise materials. Consider her works with iron from the 1990s, such as the brooch Ferro (cat. no. 3, 1992) published in Jewelry in Europe and America. New Times, New Thinking by Ralph Turner. The recycled metal elements have been assembled into a dynamic composition, in which small gold dots rivet the constituent parts together, one after another. This sequential joining reveals the jeweller’s working method and underpins the somatic experience. Zanella focuses on juxtaposing different materials and the act of generating a form while transforming them with tools and heat to redefine and animate the metallic and non-metallic surfaces. This process of form creation and surface manipulation is what I describe as ‘sensitising materials’.

The whole relationship that occurs between every action of the making process, including the growth of the work in collaboration with materials, is defined by the British anthropologist Tim Ingold as ‘narrative quality’. Ingold argues that making is a process of ‘growth’ and that the maker is involved in a morphogenetic process: a confluence of forces and materials, where the maker engages in form generation together with the materials. Ingold’s theory was articulated more intuitively by the jeweller and teacher Mario Pinton (maestro of the School of Padua) in 2011, when he asserted that ‘a project is a creative act, it is an invention ... the operation must not result from a mere rational process, but moreover a human act with all its gifts.’ Pinton acknowledged the importance of considering the process of making not only a rational fact but also a collaborative action that generates ‘the narrative quality’. One might argue that the gifts Pinton refers to can be identified in the ability of makers like Zanella to emotionally charge materials with poetic resonance. I contend this is partly achieved through the act of sensitising surfaces. In the jewellery by Annamaria Zanella, poetic resonances emanate from deep within to illuminate her chosen theme.

Zanella’s dexterity in sensitising materials is matched by her judgements when selecting materials. These choices often embody deep sentimental attachments and aid personal narratives. The latter, in conjunction with the title, could define the work as narrative jewellery according to jeweller Jack Cunningham. He considers this to be ‘a wearable object that contains a commentary or message which the maker, by means of visual representation, has the overt intention to communicate to an audience through the intervention of the wearer.’ One example amongst many is Ferro, which includes broken bits of windscreen and window glass from the car accident she suffered. This brooch was one of the first times Zanella was recognised in the context of European Contemporary Jewellery. Thereafter her jewellery developed through striking touches of colour that would help guide viewers towards a piece’s intended feelings and content. In the brooch Blue Cell (cat. no. 17, 2003) she premiered the merging of strong colours with her innate interest in revaluing poor materials. This union of papier mâché and a striking blue serves to further embed emotion into matter.

Intriguingly this deep and resonating tone of blue spans Zanella’s career: featuring in Blue Cell and Mother Cell (cat. no. 77, 2014), through to the recent body of work, Mediterranea, and Blue Doors (cat. nos 107/08 both 2017). The emotions invested in these pieces include a passionate celebration of creation in Mother Cell through to compassion, in the explora-
tion of the flow of migrants arriving on Italian shores. To heighten meaning Zanella uses titles to reveal glimpses of concept with reductive force, in the same way a poet seeks to synthesise fleeting moments or complex concepts into a few words. There are further analogies with poetry in her practice, the physical engagement of making jewellery, with its various steps and processes is somewhat akin to writing a poem, line after line. The simple filing of metal is repetitive, but the sum of its actions alters geometry – redefining shape or enhancing smoothness. Similarly the building of intense colour requires the application of several layers of pigments in a rhythmic and sequentially additive process. In the case of Mother Cell, the stratification of pigments guides the viewer as though reading the verses of a poem. The title confirms reference to the female womb and the surprise that emerges in discovering the generative capability of lives formed within a female body.

Overall Annamaria Zanella is a jeweller whose trajectory is sustained by consistent and rigorous research. Her distinctive creative voice differentiates her artistic language from other exponents of the School of Padua. Zanella’s jewellery stands out thanks to her ability to unite sensitised materials, potent concepts and vibrant colours into a myriad of poetic visions.

Roberta Bernabei

5 Bernabei 2011 (see note 2), p. 163.
6 Jack Cunningham, Contemporary European Narrative Jewellery, available online at https://www.jackcunningham.co.uk/chapter01.html (last accessed 5.5.2018).