



Ann O'Donnell Modernist Jeweller

Curatorial Project

Dr Samantha Broadhead and Frances Norton

The output is a curatorial project exhibiting the work of Ann O'Donnell (1933 – 2019), a jewellery artist-maker from the North of England. The project was a collaboration between Broadhead and Norton. Both contributors were equal originators of the work, taking joint responsibility for the project design, research findings and dissemination.

Research Process

Interviews were undertaken with O'Donnell in her workshop and with her archive of jewellery-related materials. Additional interviews were undertaken with O'Donnell and her pieces of jewellery. A transcript was made from this material, which was the basis for constructing a film that captured O'Donnell's significance to the jewellery-making world. This was developed into a rationale for selecting works for a jewellery exhibition. This showed O'Donnell's working methods, research notebooks and jewellery illustrations. Work was arranged in themes that referred to O'Donnell's interests rather than chronologically.

Research Insights

O'Donnell was found to be an artist-maker of international significance through achieving international awards, establishing a retail and gallery for 'the new jewellery' and showcasing international artist-makers. Her own work came from her art school background and was about the materiality of gold, silver, stones, fossils and ancient artefacts. Both narrative and formalist concerns can be seen in her work. Her position as a woman artist-maker in the 1960s and 1970s often meant that she was positioned through women's magazines within a domestic space, rather than a professional one. This exhibition revealed the breadth and depth of her creative outputs. It also drew attention to an artist-maker with an international profile who was not based in London.

Dissemination

The curatorial project was exhibited at the Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University between 11 May and 27 July 2017. The show was also screened on Made in Leeds.

Documentary: <https://lau.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/17303/16/Ann%20DOC.mp4>.



ANN O'DONNELL:
MODERNIST JEWELLER



















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INTERNATIONAL JEWELRY SHOW

THE JEWELRY SHOW IS THE LARGEST AND MOST IMPORTANT OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD. IT IS AN ANNUAL EVENT WHICH BRINGS TOGETHER THE ENTIRE JEWELRY INDUSTRY OF THE WORLD.

THE SHOW IS HELD IN THE GRAND PALACE OF THE CHATELAIN DE LA FLEUR, PARIS, FRANCE.

THE SHOW IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC FROM 10 AM TO 6 PM DAILY.

ADMISSION IS FREE.



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Jewels from the sands of time

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John Rev
23 May, 79



A thing of Beauty

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LEEDS
COLLEGE
OF ART
1846



Ann O'Donnell

Modernist Jeweller

Curated by Sam Broadhead and Frances Norton

12 May — 27 July 2017

Blenheim Walk Gallery
Leeds College of Art
Blenheim Walk
Leeds
LS2 9AQ

Preview:

Thursday 11 May
5.00 - 7.00pm

www.leeds-art.ac.uk/exhibitions

Ann O'Donnell is a Leeds-based jewellery designer whose work is motivated by an interest in ancient Roman glass, gemmology, archaeological and geological finds. This exhibition seeks to secure her reputation more firmly within the mid-twentieth century modernist context.

Public Lecture and Show and Tell:

Thursday 25 May
1.00 - 3.00pm

ANN O'DONNELL: MODERNIST JEWELLER

CURATED BY DR. SAM BROADHEAD AND
FRANCES NORTON (LEEDS COLLEGE OF ART)

INTRODUCTION

Ann O'Donnell (b. 1933) is a jewellery artist-maker from the North of England who was educated at Leeds College of Art (1950-1954) where she studied dress design and jewellery as part of her National Diploma in Design. She successfully went onto postgraduate study at the Royal College of Art (1954-1957) specialising in goldsmithing, silversmithing, metalwork and jewellery. In order to graduate, O'Donnell was required to work in industry for a year. So, in 1959 she joined the famous Charles Horner firm in Halifax where she remembers making unimaginative silver bangles in a factory production line. This experience did not fulfil O'Donnell's design aspirations so she continued her practice whilst teaching at Leeds College of Art in 1960 until 1986. O'Donnell taught



Ann O'Donnell, Fibula with Two Amber Beads and Spear Pendants.
Photo by Anne Wyman

jewellery techniques to local apprentices and also ran adult education classes in jewellery design and making. One of many significant moments in O'Donnell's career was in 1966 when her oriental style gold necklace with square cut diamonds was chosen for the De Beers Diamonds International Awards.¹

CONTEXT

O'Donnell was educated within the context of post-war British design when modernist ideas originating from De Stijl in the Netherlands and the Bauhaus in Germany were beginning to permeate through the art school curriculum due to changes in design pedagogy. Jewellery design changed radically at this time. Traditionally jewellery was given for sentimental reasons (to signify an engagement for example). Conventional materials such as gold and diamonds were chosen for their value, rarity and preciousness. Dormer and Turner (1985) claimed that often the design of jewellery (as opposed to its symbolism and material value) was the last thing to be considered by manufacturers. As a result much of the jewellery sold on the high street was conservative in nature. During the twentieth century there was a growth in costume jewellery manufacture that was inspired by the fashion and film industry. Designers made pieces for the catwalk to complement the clothes. Film stars wore glamorous fake and real jewels both on and off



Ann O'Donnell, Gold Brooch with Amethyst and Diamond.
Photo by Anne Wyman



Ann O'Donnell, Square Grey Tree Pendant.
Photo by Anne Wyman

set (Miller, 2010). Made with inexpensive materials such as base metals, plastics and paste, costume jewellery at its best was well-designed and playful. At its worst costume was a cheap and unimaginative copy of traditional fine jewellery; generally it was mass-produced and sometimes poorly made.

The role of art schools in reinvigorating jewellery design cannot be underestimated. A huge contribution was made by Gerda Flockinger (b. 1927), an Austrian artist-maker, who established the first British course in experimental jewellery at Hornsey School of Art (Phillips, 1996). Ultimately, Flockinger along with others from Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and the United States expanded the possibilities for jewellery design. The work produced by these people has come to be known as 'The New Jewellery' (Dormer and Turner, 1985). The New Jewellery was a radical movement, greatly influenced by German designers with the opening of the Schmuck Museum (jewellery museum) in Pforzheim in 1961. Britain also saw in the same year the Goldsmiths' Hall exhibition which included 1000 objects from 28 countries, then described as new jewellery (Phillips, 1996).

As part of this new way of understanding jewellery, materials were appreciated by makers and clients for their aesthetic and physical characteristics rather than their monetary worth. Paper, plastic, resin, enamel, glass, shell, ceramic, were used alongside diamonds,



Ann O'Donnell. Green Malachite Bush Brooch.
Photo by Anne Wyman

gold and silver. Precious and semi-precious stones were often uncut, used in their natural form in settings that were more organic and textured.

The goldsmith techniques were used but these were also experimental often being inspired by makers from other cultures like those working in Japan. The techniques of making became more varied borrowing from other disciplines like textiles and sculpture.

The New Jewellery was more akin to art, Dormer and Turner (1985) claimed that its consumers tended to be those working in creative fields who could appreciate not only the craft, but also the visual and conceptual aspects of the work. Jewellery was celebrated for its expressive and formal qualities rather than its intrinsic value and emotional significance. The New Jewellery valued innovation, design concept, and the craft of making rather than the rarity or cost of the materials. Women often bought their own pieces seeing them as small works of art that could be exhibited on or as part of the body (Campbell in Oliver, 2015). People who wore the jewellery showed others how their taste was informed by discernment and knowledge of design. Collecting contemporary jewellery became an intellectual pursuit rather than an exclusively sentimental one.

O'DONNELL AS MAKER/RETAILER/CURATOR

The main influences on O'Donnell's work are her art school education; her collection of ancient beads and her extensive knowledge of gemmology. She makes work in response to the visual qualities and characteristics of the stones and beads she collects. Often O'Donnell explores an idea thoroughly, producing many variations on a theme. An example of this can be seen in the fibular series where the forms of the brooches are developed through experimentation with goldsmithing in conjunction with the setting of Roman glass beads. In particular, O'Donnell develops the use of reticulation and fusing within her metal work. She cuts and polishes the stones for each piece often looking for formal qualities that suggest landscapes which she echoes in the setting.

As well as a maker O'Donnell's contribution to British jewellery design is through her work as a retailer-curator. Her education and work experience are not unlike other modernist jewellers who have set up small enterprises, freeing them from the constraints of factory-made jewellery design.

Modern jewellery designers of whom many are women, studied at art institutes or art academies after serving goldsmith's apprenticeships before going on to found firms of their own. (Reinhold, 2008)

In 1977 O'Donnell with her business partner, Mae-Fun Chen, opened up *Anno Domini* in Leeds. This was a similar retail and exhibition model to that of the *Electron Gallery* in London founded by Barbara Cartlidge in 1971 and *Galerie Ra* established in Amsterdam in 1976. *Anno Domini* operated as a commercial gallery (Atkins in Oliver, 2015; Chadour-Sampson and Hosegood, 2016).

O'Donnell transformed *Anno Domini* into a gallery space when she began to curate international shows of contemporary jewellery. This resulted in exhibitions that promoted creative diversity for O'Donnell as well as celebrating the jewellery made by other



Ann O'Donnell. Fibula with Bird's Head.
Photo by Anne Wyman

craftspeople. In addition to collecting their pieces she gave others a platform for showing their work in the North of England. Phillips (1996) and Atkins (in Oliver, 2015) have pointed out that commercial galleries contributed to the international exchange of ideas, and, as such, *Anno Domini* introduced the public in Leeds to world class, innovative modernist jewellery.

ENDNOTE:

1. The judging panel included Pierre Cardin and Mary Kruming, fashion editor of *American Vogue*. One of the other winners was Andrew Grima (1921-2007), known for his innovative and modernist jewellery designs (Phillips, 1996).

REFERENCES

Chadour-Sampson, B. and Hosegood, J. (2016) *Barbara Cartlidge and Electrum Gallery*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers.

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Reinhold, L. (2008) *Modern jewellery design: Past and present*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche art publishers.