

SUBSEQUENCE

Jasmine Watson first worked with enamel in the mid 1990s, during her training in jewellery and glass at Unitec's School of Design. In the decade that followed, a busy practice which included designing and making jewellery, costumes and accoutrements for major film and television productions, left little time for further exploration. In 2005, however, Watson began to focus once more on enamel, commencing a process of learning, development and experimentation which, in a relatively short time, has produced extraordinary results.

The ancient process of enamelling encompasses several techniques of varying complexity, and even the simplest of these can be difficult. Many jewellers prefer to work with two-pot paint or resin than put up with the vagaries of vitreous enamel, for it's a hard taskmaster. It insists that you pay attention, do your homework, and remember what you've learned; it's quite prepared to crack, to flake and bubble, just to show you who's in charge. As Watson points out, it all depends what you're after. Each material has its own qualities, and only vitreous enamel will give her the subtleties of colour and detail she seeks in her pieces.

Enamel begins as a powder of finely ground glass. This may be used dry, but is more commonly mixed into a watery paste, then built up into a solid glaze by firing a number of thin layers in succession. The application of these layers is a delicate process, which Watson likens to 'painting with wet sand'. The canvas is generally an engraved metal surface (*champlevé*), an arrangement of metal 'wires' glued onto a metal backing (*cloisonné*), or, most demanding of all, a fine metal framework, in which the enamel layers are suspended (*plique à jour*). Successful enamelling, then, demands a command of both glass and metalwork, and the ability to manage the relationship between them.

Fortunately, Watson's metalwork skills were already well-honed when she set about developing her enamelling practice. After tuition in hand engraving, *champlevé* and *plique à jour* from Australian enamellists Helen Aitken-Khunén and Valerie Aked, she attended a series of workshops in Australia and Japan with Master Japanese Enamellist Tsuruya Sakurai, learning the traditional Japanese enamelling techniques of *Doro Shippo*, *Hon Shippo* and *Shotai Shippo*.¹ In April 2010 she had her first solo show of enamel jewellery, at Auckland's Masterworks Gallery,² and later that year *Mandalam*, her second solo show, was held at Fingers and The National, Christchurch. In early 2011, the *Mandalam* work was exhibited in Japan, where it received two international enamelling awards.³

The Masterworks pieces were a series of patterned brooches in enamel and silver, based on radial and concentric symmetry. *Mandalam* built dramatically on this, appropriating these earlier

works as motifs in a larger system of patterning which was expressed across a series of hexagonal brooches, creating an overall pattern capable of several permutations.

Subsequence draws in both these bodies of work, and goes forward with them in an increasingly refined and stylised approach which emphasises the mathematics of pattern. Moving literally into a new dimension, *Subsequence* embeds Watson's exquisite brooches in the familiar ordering systems of Islamic tiles and Escheresque optical illusions, and inverts their gentle doming into shallow bowls. Visual references to radial and floral symmetry, such as the rose window, the mandala, the chrysanthemum and the lotus, are overlaid with mathematical logic and the notion of subsequence.

Watson invokes 'subsequence' both as a state of being and a mathematical formulation (a sequence within a sequence); implicit in both is the condition of being part of a larger whole. Connection, continuity, our participation in the infinite order which underlies all nature, visible or not – all these ideas and sensations are articulated by the complex patterning, with its ability to repeat to infinity in all directions, by the common thread of meditative harmony, spirituality and balance running between the individual motifs, and by the cultural crossing-over of techniques and symbols. The making process, with its methodical layering and its balancing of technical, formal and aesthetic considerations, reinforces this, and Watson seizes each step in construction as an opportunity for added visual complexity.

To create the bowls and brooches of *Subsequence*, for example, Watson has used a process of soldered *champlevé*, attaching a thin, intricately pierced fretwork layer to a backing which is then engraved before the enamel is applied. Each piece is fired in four layers, and five times altogether, the delicately nuanced colours of the enamel built up gradually over the engraved detail.

Exhibited alongside these *champlevé* brooches and bowls are Watson's working drawings, two-dimensional counterparts which highlight the complementary role drawing plays in the conception, visualisation and execution of her work. These finely detailed works on paper also prompt us to consider the commitment to craftsmanship, and the painstaking accumulation of material knowledge and technical skill, which underpin her practice.

Professor Richard Sennett sees craftsmanship as founded on skill developed to a high degree, a process which he suggests takes around ten thousand hours of practice.⁴ You can do the arithmetic if you like. But what do these hours actually mean? Simply this: the more we do, the more we can do, and the better we are, the harder it gets, because each question answered stimulates us to ask more. Like Watson's patterning, everything is connected, yet the possibilities are infinite. This 'experimental rhythm of problem solving and problem finding', as Sennett calls it,⁵

reverberates through *Subsequence*, where technical excellence matters, but so do imagination, determination and curiosity.

Rigel Sorzano

August 2011

¹ Watson describes *Doro Shippo* as 'the original type of enamel', developed in Nagoya, Japan. The colours are opaque, with a softly muted, stone-like quality to the fired surface. *Hon Shippo* is the technique of making three-dimensional work in *cloisonné* enamel, a process at which Japanese enamellists historically excelled. *Shotai Shippo*, sometimes referred to as 'Japanese *plique à jour*', involves making three-dimensional *cloisonné* enamel, then acid-etching away the copper backing to expose the enamel and wires, creating a transparent or translucent vessel.

² Masterworks Jewellery Box Showcase, 22 April – 8 May 2010.

³ The President Award, at the 44th Exhibition of the Japan Enamelling Artist Association Exhibition, Ueno Royal Museum, Tokyo, Japan, and an Award for Excellence, at 24th International Cloisonne Jewellery Contest, Ueno Royal Museum, Tokyo, Japan.

⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p26, 172.

⁵ *Ibid*, p26.