

## ***Bodies and Jewellery in Tacit Recollection***

Elizabeth M. Grierson

### *Fragile Narratives*

*'evoking a sense of fragility, sensuality, transparency and intuition' (Yu Fang Chi).<sup>1</sup>*

The body has long been subject to interpretation in the hands of artists. In *Tacit Recollection*, six women jewellery artists consider a complex and contingent field of interconnections between the body and the world it inhabits. Through this exhibition, new ways of thinking about jewellery as a poetic imprint on the body may become apparent.

Jewellery may generate stories for makers as much as for wearers. The curator **Yu Fang Chi** assembles jewellery narratives with the potential to bring subjective encounters into wider social assignments. The curatorial aim of *Tacit Recollection* is 'to reflect on the relation of body, memory and external world'.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the artists in this exhibition works with hand-crafted jewellery to invest it with possible associations. Monika Brugger, Yu Chun Chen, Yu Fang Chi, Carole Deltenre, Yuni Kim Lang, and Lauren Kalman, manifest sites of aesthetic, social and material relationships between the body and external worlds.

Contemporary jewellery is ideally suited to this task. As the body may be considered a sacred, personal or intimate site, so too jewellery carries that sense of intimacy and the personal. Yet at the same time jewellery objects speak beyond the self to evoke stories of the cultural, material, spiritual or external world of time and place.

### *The Being of Jewellery*

*'In the artwork, the truth of beings has set itself to work' (Martin Heidegger).<sup>3</sup>*

Jewellery has been used traditionally to adorn the body, enhance clothing, charm, allure, attract, even protect and give mana.<sup>4</sup> If we read through Martin Heidegger on the work of art, the work of jewellery may be seen as a way of setting the 'truth of beings' to work in the world. There is an activating process of 'bringing-forth' and 'un-concealing' at work here.

This activation of a sense of 'being' implicitly brings forth a 'non-being' at one and the same time. For **Yu Chun Chen** it is an intimate narrative celebrating maternity and sisterhood. The artist works with respect for the materiality of craft traditions from West to East. The body in display wearing a belly brooch calls for understanding from its fragile interior. There is perhaps a tacit recollection of something being nurtured and yet to come.

Overall the work in this exhibition brings to mind the mid-twentieth century, French philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, and her embodied approach to existential philosophy. Challenging established conventions, de Beauvoir considered lived experience as an autobiographical site, extrapolating from her embodied reflections to establish wider existential questions and answers. Thus, *The Second Sex*<sup>5</sup> came to be seen as a foundational tract on lived philosophy in the light of women's oppression. Reverberations of her approach to existential ethics may be discovered in this exhibition – a lived philosophy emanating from the artists' bodily works.

### *Bodies Embodied*

*'The body is the inscribed surface of events' (Michel Foucault).<sup>6</sup>*

The body has long been a site of personal and cultural knowledge, imprinted with signs, its values marked by clothes and adornment. In the work of **Lauren Kalman**, the body becomes inscribed by historical challenges of gender and power. Fabricated head and face coverings 'adorn' the body with hooded, implicit violence. Here is the endless, if voiceless, collective cry of women in the historical discourses of patriarchal power.

According to Michel Foucault, the body carries the imprint of our actions, 'manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors'.<sup>7</sup> **Yuni Kim Lang** investigates hair as an ephemeral bodily material. She suggests the convergence and movement of hair in a way that emphasises its mass and volume, calling into question the obsessive way hair is managed, touched and presented. The knots and tangled rhythms entwine around the body with a compulsion to adorn. Rope-like, the hair situates a locus of historical, social and political analysis as it shifts the boundaries between the body's intimate and external worlds.

The body in art has a long history of being displayed as a site of desire, carrying the lure of sexuality for the external gaze, its surface inscribed with power and politics. Feminist approaches consider the intimate bodily forces of seduction and impacts of social codes. **Carole Deltenre** captures the visceral elements of intimate bodily form and function in jewellery objects. Framed as cameos, female genitalia lure to be caressed, questioned, touched, attracting and subverting at one and the same time. Here Foucault's inscribed surface of events inveigles the viewer in a subtle, if fleshy, encounter.

### *Poetic Imprints*

*'How does the body, not merely the mind, remember the feel of a latch in a long-forsaken childhood home?' (John Stilgoe).<sup>8</sup>*

In the phenomenological world of objects, Gaston Bachelard suggests the body imprints memory through apprehension rather than a cognitive comprehension. There the poetic trace may lie. In his *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard speaks of 'household activities' as creative acts: 'The minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture, or practice phenomenology while polishing a piece of old furniture, we sense new impressions come into being beneath this familiar domestic duty'.<sup>9</sup>

Bachelard notes 'the object's human dignity' increases in the domestic gestures, and the object is registered as 'a member of the human household'.<sup>10</sup> **Monika Brugger** works with objects and materials often forgotten – tools, utensils, humble thimbles worn by women in the small acts of sewing and often hidden away in sewing baskets. Perhaps in the making of earrings the thimbles take on a new dignity, a 'human dignity', yet not forgotten is the piercing of the body for wearing the pieces and the piercing of cloth in the acts of stitching. In tacit recollection of domestic tasks, objects are renewed to accessorise the body, carrying with them the traces of an unhallowed fragility.

In the work of **Yu Fang Chi** the fragility of the female body and its cultural histories extend to processes used by women in the domestic realm. Bachelard's phenomenological approach to household activities and the way they become embodied with new impressions, reverberate in her work. The visceral forms entwine with a marked sensuality, coiling like bodily organs, yet they carry the imprints from discarded materials of kitchen duties. Here, with the capacity for sensuous adornment, ambiguity carries an expressive form.

### *Transformations*

In the hands and imaginations of these six artists, processes of material, aesthetic and poetic transformations activate new ways of seeing. But this exhibition brings more. The feminine and feminist interventions of contemporary jewellery expose not only the fragility of poetic associations, but also cultural and political representations and challenges. The female body emerges from its interiorised cultural space to celebrate a transformative potential.

In concluding this commentary on *Tacit Recollection*, it is to be hoped that viewers will enter the intimacies of this exhibition and will find space to celebrate the poetic imprints they encounter.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yu Fang Chi, *Tacit Recollection* exhibition statement, <http://tacitrecollection.wixsite.com/mysite>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*. In D.F. Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings, Martin Heidegger*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> For traditional Chinese, jade jewellery absorbs evil spirits and protects the wearer from evil; and for Māori people of New Zealand, the *hei-tiki*, a *tāonga* (treasure) carved of pounamu or greenstone is worn to enhance the wearer's life and give *mana* (prestige).

<sup>5</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley editor and translator, Vintage Books, New York, 1973. First published in French 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*. In P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Penguin, London, 1984, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> John R. Stilgoe, Foreword. In Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston Massachusetts, 1994, pp. vii-viii. First published in French 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.