

Matters of the heart

Nanna Melland

Coming from a goldsmith background, my initial goal was to make jewellery with a heart theme that would differ from the traditional romantic gold heart. I wanted to challenge people to contemplate on what is often difficult and unknown, and it seemed, with the heart theme, questions about life, death and bodily impermanence came naturally. This may be due to the fact that the heart is indeed a very crucial organ for life and death.



«Fragment of life», 925 silver, glass, epoxy, steel, 2004. Size: pendant.
Piece: 9 cm long, 9 cm wide, 5,5 cm high. Chain: 36 cm long.

Collection Hiko Mizuno, Tokyo, Japan

Then one step lead to another. Before I really knew what I was doing, I began visiting the slaughter house, collecting some fresh pig hearts, and with kind help from The Anatomical Institute of Munich, I was able to study a real heart. What I found out, did indeed surprise me. The shape of the symbolic heart, the upper "ears", and the cone shape at the end, is in shape also to be seen in a real one. I was unable to find any clear answer to explain this coincidence, but I did find it a curious connection between the outer and the inner world, between the art and the medicine world. Which may after all be no coincidence ...

The Fragments of Life necklaces

Initially I chose to use a pig's heart out of practical concerns. The form is very similar to that of a human heart, both in shape and in function,

and with this I also avoided the ethical prohibitions of using a human heart. It was therefore an interesting development to realise that in using a pig's heart, I was in fact touching upon another serious theme; that of organ transplants. Interesting indeed, was it when a doctor told me that one of the fragments I had chosen for my necklaces was actually the heart's entrance and exit mechanism, and is also the section of the pig's heart most successfully used in human heart transplants.

The idea to use glass was inspired while I was carrying out my studies at The Anatomical Institute of Munich. There I saw rows of glass jars containing organs preserved in a formaldehyde solution. I was fascinated by how the glass jars gave the sometimes disgusting (and brutal) fragments of the body a certain kind of poetic beauty, and a life of their own. I had already embedded sections of a pig's heart in epoxy (a type of resin), and decided I wanted to enclose some fragments within a glass sphere. As I put the sphere over the fragment, the glass gave the piece a special kind of space and brilliance. Gone was the dullness of the fragments surface, it became almost magical, as if creating a little world of it's own.

I chose to hang the enclosed heart fragment on a chain just long enough to rest underneath the chin, above the breast, on a so called emotional spot. The spot where one might lay a new born baby ...

The glass sphere stands fairly large and fragile, however in this way is also protected by the wearer without hindrance.

The heart rings

These rings are a demonstration of the Lost Wax casting technique. A technique where a model is fashioned in wax, complete with spur channels. The mould is then created by coating the wax model with plaster and left to dry, creating a solid outer shell. The plaster mould is heated sufficiently for the wax to melt and flow out. The wax model therefore no longer exists, except as a negative cavity into which the metal will flow. With each casting, a unique form is made, and the mould must be destroyed to free the cast piece.

However, these rings were never made in wax, they were blood veins taken directly from

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«Heart ring», 925 silver, 2003.
Size: 5 cm high, 2,5 cm wide.

Collection Hiko Mizuno, Tokyo, Japan

a pig's heart. As the veins are an organic tissue they were burnt away, just as the wax would have been. The negative cavity left behind was then filled with gold or silver. You could say that the process is an inherent part of the work, a cremation process of the flesh from which something immortal is created.

The filling of metal into the cavity, makes a perfect copy of the lost vein. In doing this the impermanent nature of the veins is changed. The rings become precious and wearable, contrary to the impermanent nature of flesh, and stands as a reminder.

People who personally have been close to death, always impress me with their appreciation of life. As if they know that it does not last forever, in contrast to many of us, who seem to live as if death is never going to happen.

The Deutsches Museum had until recently an exhibition called "Leben mit Ersatzteilen", where one could listen to people's near death experiences and hear how they were saved with the help of an organ donor. I was especially surprised by the people who received a heart transplant. They were so happy, despite the knowledge that inside of them lay an organ from a deceased person or animal. That did not seem to bother them. Rather to the contrary, they seemed to rationalise it as some kind of divine intervention. The unfortunate circumstance of another person's death, had in fact saved their life. On the other hand, I do understand that the dramatic truth of an organ transplant, is not something they can contemplate all the time. Life, and not the overshadowing closeness of death, has to go on.

I believe in both Art and Science. Within both lies an interest in human existence, an eagerness to understand the complex reality that

surrounds us. Threatening, painful and chaotic, but also beautiful, pleasant and sometimes even magical! The questions about life and death, that doctors are involved with in their daily work, are perhaps for most people, not the most appealing thoughts. However ironically, it is indeed one of the very few certain facts in our life. One day, whether we like it or not, we are going to leave this world of colours, and move into a dark abyss of the unknown. Our body will then lie in the cold darkness of the earth, the flesh rotting from our bones, the bones turning to dust, and then – to nothing.

It seems to me, that the popular culture that surrounds us, apart from the entertaining aspect, also distracts and thereby prevents us from dealing with a very crucial aspect of life. In fact, I believe that it can be so dominant that the fictional life, we live through films, books and games etc, are more real to us, than our life itself. This can be to such an extent that we require it on a daily basis, like some kind of drug. Perhaps this is due to the fact that my life, full of trivial everyday responsibilities, lack the danger and excitement of what I can see in a film, read in a book, or play in a game. As if a sunset could not compete with any cinematic thriller, when you truly realise that if it did not rise, we would all be damned, or that the wonderful mechanism of our precious bodies, keeps us alive from heartbeat to heartbeat ...

Nanna Melland

Born 8 November in 1969 in Oslo, Norway. Nanna Melland began her training as a jeweller with a traditional apprenticeship in silver and goldsmithing in Oslo, receiving her Journeyman Diploma in 1995.

Along her jeweller studies, she studied at the University of Oslo in Social Anthropology, History of Religion and Tibetan language receiving a Candidata Magister in 1997.

In 1995/1996 she went to Tibet and did a fieldwork on Tibetan jewellery and handcraft traditions, with the cooperation of the University of Oslo, and the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences. She does and have done lectures on Tibetan jewellery in Norway, Denmark and Germany.

From 1997 to 2000 she worked at Ole Lyngaard goldsmith firm in Copenhagen, before she in 2001 decided to go to Munich, and study jewellery at the Munich Academy of Art under Professor Otto Künzli, where she is still studying and living today.