

Paradoxes on a String

Jewellery artist Nanna Melland is known for using unorthodox materials and surprising forms of presentation to create unique works that one would probably be more prone to contemplate than to wear. The starting point for her apparently paradoxical choices is a desire to create unity between her chosen themes and materials. Inter-Uterine Devices (IUDs), lead orchids and aluminium airplanes are thus all part of a coherent whole.

Monica Holmen

When Nanna Melland starts making a piece of jewellery, she does not allow herself to be limited by material conventions. Instead, her choices are governed by the material she finds interesting and its potential to tell stories. “The story in a material is a precondition for why I choose it; I can’t choose it just for its formal qualities... Yet since I work so intensively with the themes, the material and concept in my works overlap”, says Melland.

With her strong thematic emphasis, there is little doubt that Melland’s conceptual approach to jewellery and materials is a consequence of her rather liberal education. She studied at Munich’s art academy – Akademie der Bildende Künste München – under Professor Otto Künzli, internationally recognized for his conceptual approach to art jewellery.

“Only at Munich’s art academy can you study jewellery within the same open curricular structure as visual art”, says Melland. She should know. She studied in Munich for almost seven years:

There wasn’t much discussion about whether something was craft or art. We who studied under Professor Künzli were part of the art academy and made art. Our status was the same as for those working with visual art. We spent a lot of time developing our own works and on presenting them in group exhibitions, both in Germany and internationally.

Melland’s experience from art academy has resulted in an unrestrained approach to materials, but even so, “each and every idea, material, form and technique should be analysed and tested until one ends up with a result one feels has succeeded. This takes time, and at the academy we had a lot of time”, Melland recalls.

Industrial and emotional

Since her Munich days, Melland has continued testing out materials: “Research and curiosity are fundamental. All my works start as research projects”, she explains.

Jewellery of lead, aluminium, pigs’ hearts, used IUDs or fingernail parings cast in gold all bear witness to a conceptual approach. But her research also has to do with coherence: “All materials tell stories, and for me, the material, idea, form and technique must join together into one unified whole.”

Melland’s jewellery pieces contain stories that are just as important as the materials themselves. An example is the necklace *687 Years* (2008), which consists of used IUDs galvanized with copper. Melland elucidates:

It seemed paradoxical that this impersonal, industrially produced item could have such a strong emotional and intimate impact on millions of people. I was also fascinated by the IUDs’ beautiful forms. They are small and hidden inside the body, and they have an interesting medical history.

To make *687 Years*, Melland chose to use real IUDs which she gathered from various gynaecologists. The title reflects the combined number of years they were in use.

The forms are important, but also their history: that they have *actually* been inside bodies. When I first got them, they were caked with blood and quite repulsive. My solution was to galvanize them with copper. In this way, I hid the repulsive aspect but retained the ‘real’ history in them. They are a type of archaeological material. The necklace is something more than a necklace; it’s not an easy thing to just hang it around your neck.

Poisonous beauty

In *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*, 2007), it was lead that caught Melland’s attention. The jewellery series consists of cast lead replicas of real orchids. “At the time, I worked with themes such as nature, seduction, attraction and transience. I was interested in the good kind of seduction, but also the kind that poisons the body and mind. Lead was the right material to express these ideas”, she argues, and continues:

I wanted the softness of the lead. In another metal, the flowers would have become stiff, but with lead, the orchids twist and turn almost like real flowers one might wear. And the lead's colour gave the jewellery a sinister quality I didn't find in other materials. There were ambiguous contrasts between the poisonous lead, the natural forms and the orchid's seductive aspect – even a thing of beauty can be poisonous.

Lead is an unconventional material in jewellery. “Because lead is poisonous, anyone wearing this jewellery must be aware of that fact. Yet these pieces are also lacquered, so the lead is sealed and not directly dangerous to wear”, she says.

The fact of lead being a non-traditional material in jewellery did not deter Melland from using it: “If there's something one *shouldn't* do, then in art, that's exactly what one *should* do! Even in the avant-garde world of art jewellery, I found lead to be taboo, and I liked that.”

Decadent contribution

In the poisonous jewellery material, Melland discovered yet another source of tension. She originally studied to become a goldsmith, and her motivation for doing so was her strong attraction to gold as a material. To make jewellery with lead was also a way of confronting the goldsmithing tradition to which she belongs. Melland explains that lead and gold should never be in the same workshop: “For example, sometimes it may be necessary to repair a piece of gold jewellery with lead, due to the low melting temperature. But if the piece needs to be repaired again, the price is high: when you re-heat it, the lead ‘eats’ the gold away.”

Despite gold and lead technically standing in opposition, the two materials have followed each other closely, not least amongst the alchemists.

Gold is a precious metal because it doesn't erode in nature, and because there's a limited supply. These factors have caused it to be valued in all cultures throughout history. Gold is eternal, but its form is mutable. Gold has always been melted down and reshaped.

The mutability of shape points to transience – a leitmotif in Melland's artistic practice.

I made a gold necklace called *Decadence* (2003). It consists of cast gold replicas of my own finger- and toenail parings, which I collected during a five-year period and then cast in gold. It's an unusual, decadent contribution to jewellery history's many pieces made with teeth, claws and bones.

Melland also relates how, in creating works such as *Decadence*, *687 Years* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*, she explored what it was that people find attractive and repulsive: “My motivation was to transform impermanent, repulsive and dangerous materials into things that were permanent, seductive and valuable.”

Same content, new packaging

In her latest work, the installation *Swarm* (2012), Melland has used a far less ‘dangerous’ material: aluminium. Nevertheless, the same exploratory approach to materials undergirds this project: “One reason for using aluminium is the metal’s formal qualities: how it reflects light, how thin it can be before breaking as well as its light weight. It’s as if the material isn’t really there”, she explains.

Swarm takes the form of a wall-mounted, site-specific installation. Thousands of small but variously-sized flat airplanes hang literally in swarms, like an armada of wings facing the same direction: in towards the centre and out again. When working on the project, Melland was looking for a material that brought people together. She found the answer to be aluminium: “It’s not a matter of a dangerous or repulsive quality in this material, but the fact that we *need* it in our everyday lives. Aluminium seems to be everywhere; it’s used by millions of people every day. It’s the material of the masses.”

Seeing thousands of small airplanes on a wall, it is tempting to read the work as commenting on current environmental problems: that we, as individuals, are free to fly around the world as much as we want, but that this results in catastrophic pollution. Melland, however, disagrees:

It’s pure speculation to say that air traffic is a big environmental polluter. That’s just too simplistic a view. Sometimes people interpret *Swarm* in that direction, and I can’t do anything about it, but for me, it’s misguided to reduce the work to a political comment. The story in *Swarm* is about the human *individual* and the *masses* of humanity that must constantly balance their life between order and chaos.

As with earlier works, *Swarm* also bespeaks the theme of transience:

The core of everything I do is an attention directed to life’s transience and mutability. The purpose of my work is to put things in perspective. For example that a person is a

transient being seen in the perspective of eternity. Everything is always changing and moving. Modern air traffic has caused human migration to accelerate in a complex world, and not without consequence. We are one swarm amongst many others, battling to survive; small, insignificant dust particles in a cosmic vortex where no one knows the outcome. The swarm of airplanes is an attempt to visualize this, and to invite viewers to contemplate it. Therefore, another important part of the work is that the public can acquire the airplanes and bring them out into the real swarm of humanity.

Ritual jewellery

Melland relates that a key characteristic of jewellery is its contact with the body, either physically or imaginarily:

Throughout the history of jewellery, one finds many pieces that were *not* meant to decorate the body, but were used as elements in rituals. I suppose *Swarm* and my other works move in a more ritual landscape.

Jewellery works made of lead, IUDs or mounted as part of a large installation do not initially appear wearable in the normal sense. When asked how she sees jewellery as a format, Melland answers that jewellery is something you *can* hang on the body. So also the airplanes in *Swarm*, all of which have a little hole enabling them to be worn as pendants. By putting a given sum in a collection box by the installation, viewers can take an airplane from the installation.

One *becomes* a part of the swarm when one acquires an airplane and wears it. It's like a ritual where something real happens to the participants. All my jewellery *can* be worn, but aside for the airplanes in *Swarm*, I think most people prefer to look at the works. They're like cult objects; the viewers can experience them without needing to wear them.