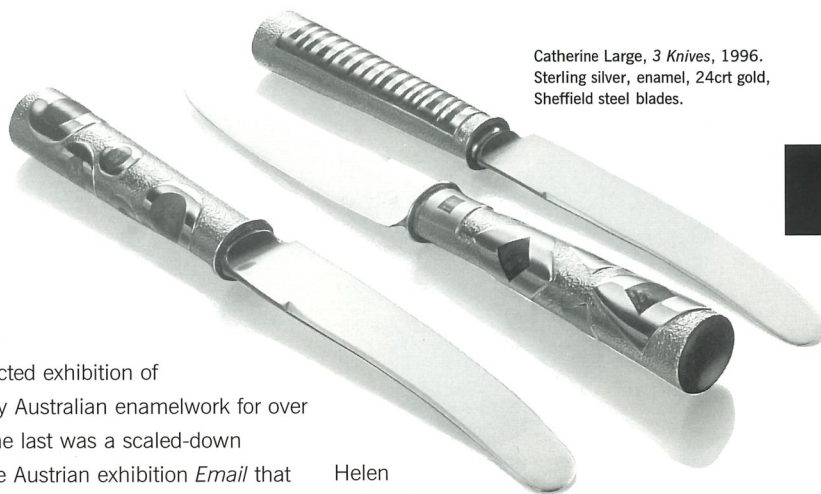


Catherine Large, *3 Knives*, 1996.
Sterling silver, enamel, 24crt gold,
Sheffield steel blades.



FIRE IN THE HEART: AUSTRALIAN ENAMEL

JUDITH O'CALLAGHAN REVIEWS A
NATIONAL EXHIBITION AT CRAFTSPACE
GALLERY, SYDNEY, 1997.

When the Powerhouse Museum mounted *Treasures from the Kremlin: the world of Fabergé* last year, over ninety-six thousand people saw the exhibition during its twelve-week showing. I think it is fair to say, it was the promise of a peek at the obscenely precious enamel objects from the Imperial household that drew the crowds. And it would be hard to find more spectacular examples of the enameller's art than some of the extraordinary Fabergé Easter eggs, the jewel-like quality of the vitreous surfaces sometimes more complex in effect than the natural stones.

a tightly selected exhibition of contemporary Australian enamelwork for over ten years. The last was a scaled-down version of the Austrian exhibition *Email* that had been given a contemporary Australian component for its tour of the Antipodes in 1981. *Email* was quite something, presenting major works from the early 17th century to the present. International stars such as Herman Jünger and William Harper, as well as home-grown ones including Barbara Ryman and Helen Aitken Kuhnen were included in the contemporary section.

The early 1980s were heady days—a time of fearless investigation into the origins, meaning and significance of most areas of craft practice. For those working in jewellery and metalwork, ideas, form and meaning—well anything in fact—were considered more important than intrinsic preciousness. So

Helen Aitken-Kuhnen, for example, emerged as accomplished exponents. Their work demonstrated a mastery of the medium—an exceptional ability to invent and re-invent ways of exploiting enamel's inherent qualities. But given the rigorous interrogation to which kindred areas of practice were subjected, I do find it surprising that enamel, with its vast and diverse history, seemed to inspire little self-analysis.

There were exceptions. Vivienne Binns is an artist who, during the mid-1970s, adapted an industrial process of applying photographic silkscreen prints in vitreous enamel onto metal. The process was used most effectively in a

The early 1980s were heady days—a time of fearless investigation into the origins, meaning and significance of most areas of craft practice

Local experience has shown that the drawing-power of enamel is not limited to big-name blockbuster exhibitions. When the Enamellers Association of NSW, for example, has mounted its annual exhibitions at Craftspace in Sydney, gallery attendances have reached record highs. These are large group exhibitions of course, representing a 'constituency' rather than a curatorial thesis. For this reason perhaps, they usually attract little critical analysis despite their general popularity. In the reviews that do appear, discussion seems to focus almost exclusively on matters of technique.

When an exhibition such as *Fire in the Heart* comes along that claims to "showcase Australia's best work in the enamel medium, both on metal and glass", a certain expectation arises. After all, we haven't seen

where did enamel figure in all of this? Generally speaking not at the radical edge. When it came to the exploration of colour for example, most jewellers and metalworkers opted for acrylic or epoxy resin—materials that had a contemporary association and an immediacy that enamel could not offer. Sophisticated alloy combinations, metal colouration, patination and anodisation were to provide even more alternatives. And when many jewellers were exploring the conceptual boundaries of their medium, such as its physical and symbolic relationship with the body, I can't think of one who identified exclusively as an enamellist.

But certainly, some exceptionally fine and significant enamelwork was produced here during the 1980s. Barbara Ryman, Vanessa Glanville-Anson, Carolyn Delzoppo and

series of portrait panels produced during the late 1970s, two of which featured in *Email*. Here at last was explicit recognition of a predominant area of enamel production: industrial enamelware, the street signs, advertisements and domestic wares familiar to most of us. In a similar vein, enamellist Ian Were began using decals in his work in the late 70s as a way of acknowledging another important aspect of the medium's history and usage. The series of extraordinary helmets he produced in the early 1980s not only incorporated this technique, but also served to break with the convention of demure, small-scale, two-dimensionality that characterised so much enamelwork of the period.

Unfortunately, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, we had to look overseas for evidence of any radical new developments.



Annette McKee, 'True Love', from a series of heart brooches, 1997. Enamelled and patinated copper, engraved brass. 170 x 90mm.

The work of American enamellist Jamie Bennett was among the most challenging. In his large, irregular brooches of that period there was no sense that the forms had been constrained by the demands of technique. The enamel had been 'splattered', rubbed and smudged to a point where it appeared to be totally integrated with the metal. More recently we had the opportunity to see a completely different, but no less provocative approach in the work of Christiane Förster, in an exhibition of student work from Munich's Academy of Fine Arts shown at Melbourne's Gallery Funaki in September 1996. Förster's fragile hollow wire forms encrusted with enamel suggested an organic quality that I had not previously associated with the medium.

So now in 1997, what does a survey of "Australia's best work in the enamel medium" have to show us? Given the curator of *Fire in the Heart* was Ian Were, I was not surprised that an inclusive approach had been taken in developing the exhibition. By choosing not to limit representation to the work of those who specifically identify as enamellists, Were provided a refreshing edge to what otherwise might have had a predictable outcome. Pierre Cavalan for example would hardly be classified as an enamellist, yet he has been celebrating the medium for years in his clever and complex assemblages of mass-produced enamelled badges which resonated with the small didactic display of old enamel signs Were had mounted on the adjacent wall.

Also represented were glass artists, Deb

Cocks, Margaret Ramsey and Lincoln Emsley. I liked the stark contrast between the bald application of Emsley's graffiti-style imagery in solid blocks of colour and the intricate pattern-making of Deb Cocks' *sgraffito* technique.

Also interesting were pieces by jewellers and metalworkers such as Annette McKee and partners Helge Larsen and Darani Lewers. McKee was represented by three large wall-mounted brooches *Death before Dishonour*, *Mother* and *True Love*, based on some of the clichés of tattooing art. While the heart motif has been somewhat over-used in jewellery in recent years, the play between the two mediums—enamel and tattoo—seemed oddly appropriate. I think McKee is on to something. Also promising were Larsen and Lewers' series of simple abstract brooch forms where the enamel has been used in segments of dense colour over convex and concave surfaces.

So what about the enamellists? While some of the work included in the exhibition was unexceptional, it would be difficult not to be impressed by the technical virtuosity of Carolyn Delzoppo, Barbara Ryman, Jacquie Sprogø and Debbie Sheezel. Delzoppo's three wall-mounted pieces in *cloisonné* worked particularly well as strong graphic statements.

In terms of challenging one's assumptions

about the medium however, Donna Brennan, represented by three rings perched quietly by the door, was outstanding. (*Editor's note: see Robert Baines' article on Brennan on p32.*) Here was someone who had turned the medium inside out. It presented as anything but clean, precise and controlled—all those attributes associated with enamel. The surfaces were rough, the forms irregular. But these small, wearable objects were as carefully composed as anything else in the exhibition. The enamel 'impregnated' crystals were delicately supported in wire structures, their baroque forms emphatically establishing the dramatic possibilities of the medium. Here enamel had been extended beyond its usual frame of reference, without losing a sense of itself. If Australian enamel is really to 'fire' in the late 1990s, this is just the spark it needs.

endnotes

Fire in the Heart: Australian Enamel, a national exhibition of enamel on metal and glass, was curated by Ian Were for the Centre for Contemporary Craft's Craftspace gallery, Sydney, 15 February–16 March 1997. The exhibition was developed in association with the National Enamel Exhibition Committee: Mary Raymond, Heather Calnan, Elaine Palmer, Barbara Ryman, and Wendy Hall. 32 enamellers, jewellers, and glass artists from around Australia were selected from expressions of interest to show 92 works. Documentation on the exhibition is available from: Alexandra Bowen, Curatorial Manager, Craftspace gallery on (02) 9241 3800, or email: cfcc@cfcc.com.au

Editor's note: Given her specialist knowledge of the area, Judith O'Callaghan was invited by Object to review this exhibition. In order to avoid potential conflicts of interest, her review was edited by Object's Assistant Editor.

Judith O'Callaghan is Senior Curator of Decorative Arts & Design at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.