



Marina Civiero (NSW),
Whimsical Thoughts, sterling
silver, gilding metal, acrylic,
raffia and bamboo.
\$1500 award winner

HEAD FIRST

A National Non Acquisitive Award Exhibition
of Jewellery

Head First is the latest in a series of jewellery exhibitions that have identified parts of the human anatomy as site-specific locations for the exploration of adornment, enhancement and celebration of the body. The premise of these shows is that by highlighting a chosen site as a point of reference for engaging in a discourse on aspects of the cultural, social and political dimensions of contemporary life, new meanings are inscribed onto the body.

Traditionally the dynamic tension created through the process of adornment has reinforced power relationships, denoted status or indicated religious beliefs. Indeed, since the Renaissance, jewellery has been employed most often as a way of reinforcing the power relationships between men and women, with

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the woman identified as the possessed object, bound by the jewels and bonds presented by her lover. The wedding ring, despite its Christian overlay of charity and love, remains a symbol of possession and control. The precious stones and metals reinforcing the power relations of subjugation and dominance in their role as signifiers of wealth and status.

Yet while these traditional readings are still widely acknowledged, contemporary jewellers have sought to subvert some of these conventions through a combination of technical innovation and overt social commentary. By employing non-precious materials and incorporating current theoretical, social and political concerns into their works they have embraced the potential of jewellery and adornment as a means of inscribing new meanings or critiquing established readings.

Beginning with *Neckworks* in 1992, *Armed* in 1994, *Up Front* in 1995 and now *Head First* the Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia have sought to establish this exhibition as a major national survey of the most adventurous work being created in the country, and it has been very successful. Their success is not only evidenced by their ability to attract artists committed to the conceptual

development of adornment as a means of activating the human body as a site of discourse and debate, but through their engagement with the challenges thrown up by this award they have extended the notion of adornment to incorporate contentious issues, to confront fear and anxiety and to puncture accepted social attitudes and mores. And where better to sight these issues than on the body itself, in full view and in constant movement where they are contextualised by their integration with human experience?

In her award winning work *Whimsical Thoughts*, Marina Civiero playfully examines the nexus between the brain as a site of innovation and the catalyst for ideas and its protective cranial cap. In her variation, the ideas are so charged that they literally burst forth from the head to make the wearers thoughts visually accessible to everyone. Somewhat akin to the cartoon light bulb that appears to indicate synaptic activity. This potential nightmare,

when our innermost fears or immediate responses are out of control, is handled with great panache and wit, while retaining its dark foreboding through the mode of presentation on the skull of a darkly serious young man. Innovative solutions to siting works on the human anatomy is the premise upon which this show is built, so while headware and earrings are in abundance, the more engaging and challenging works are those that push at the boundaries of convention and identify new relationships with the wearer. Civiero's *Whimsical Thoughts*, activated by any movement of the wearer's body presents a witty and alarming image of social intercourse and the dangers of letting your ideas escape. In another form of discharge or escape from the head, Helen Britton's ear plugs *No byway on the superhighway* explode from the ear like unruly hair growths. Reiterating the old connections between the brain as a computer, in this instance the image is one of dysfunction as the computer/brain has exploded internally and exited via the ears. These techno-shards plug right into the ear canal to provide protection from ambient noise. Equally evocative are the beautifully wrought silver lips submitted by Nicky Hepburn. Highly resolved and in the

tradition of fine jewellery, they very innovatively identify a new site for adornment. Her prosthetic lips speak eloquently of past or future rituals that celebrate words, or perhaps silence. The silver tongued has become the silver lipped. Like an Egyptian Pharaoh whose words were precious, these lips convey the weight of authority and value. However, although hinged to allow speech they can only be parted with the tongue, an activity that gags speech while simultaneously reinforcing the sexuality of the mouth. The full shape and elegant definition of these lips recalls the movie star vamp who in the late twentieth century must protect herself from Aids. Is this the 'Lip Service' or the title?

Prosthesis is, not surprisingly, a popular approach in this exhibition. Making up for our deficiencies has become the focus for a great deal of our energy in the twentieth century; whether it be to enable us to fly, move at the speed of sound or simply improve our vision. In this last category contact lenses and glasses

are now so ubiquitous that we hardly recognise them as a prosthetic addition, but in this show Felicity Peters has produced an elegant essay on that most prosaic of prosthetics. Her glasses are functional, if somewhat heavy, and hide small diamonds for the subtle spend-thrifts. More unusual is Julie Blyfield's *Crown for the balding male*. Rather than sweeping long side locks over a bald pate, Blyfield suggests a tiara of locks held within a finely made copper headband to both celebrate the loss of hair and to find a more elegant solution to the tedium of brushing, washing and cutting.

Like its predecessors, *Head First* has generated a response from artists around the country that is both witty and intellectually engaging, and as such it is one of the most enjoyable and thought provoking of the series.

11-21 July, 1996: Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft in conjunction with Hewitt's Art Bookshop, Fremantle.

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