above: Areta Wilkinson, *96:04. Labels* (1996), black-lipped oyster shell, argillite, white marble, acrylic, silver, steel cable, and enamel paint. Photo: Sean Shadbolt.

opposite page: Areta Wilkinson, *96:05.* (1996). silver, flax, green kea feathers, pingao, orange kea feathers, kiekie, blue kereru feathers, muka, pheasant feathers, basalt, argillite, totara, pounamu, red oxide, paua and beef bone. Collections of Auckland Museum and Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu. Photo: Sean Shadbolt.

Pasifika. Instead she makes contemporary jewellery that questions modes of representation employed in a colonial context. Wilkinson's works, while aware of New Zealand jewellery's varied pasts, merge abstract form and contemporary narrative in such a way as to suggest the emergence of a new jewellery type in Aotearoa.

endnotes

1. Ngai Tahu's tribal lands comprise most of New Zealand's South Island.
2. The extended family. Areta Wilkinson is of Ngati Irakehu, a sub-tribe of Ngai Tahu.
3. While these feathers can be used for craft practices, they cannot be sold in any form nor owned or held by individuals—but must be retained by the tribe or another authorised group.
4. The people of the land, the Maori.
5. New Zealand nephrite jade.
6. Native parrot and wood pigeon
7. The tribe.

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ROWENA GOUGH

WHITE HEART, DARK TRUTHS,
DEEP WATERS, SOULFUL DREAMING
CRAWFORD GALLERY, SYDNEY
17–28 JUNE, 1997

The miracle of traditional crafts is the accretion of thousands of experiments, repeated unsystematically until perfect, in a process which is nevertheless never complete. Of all the crafts, weaving is the most literally demonstrative of this communal method, each piece requiring countless repetitions, each thread building on the last knot. Thus each pass of the weaver's hand sits in a metonymic relationship to the entire history of the craft, each piece promising either successful closure for the moment or the possibility of winding back through the labyrinth until the right path is chosen.

Rowena Gough recapitulates this slowest of all processes of invention in recent works. She showed brooches, pendants and neckpieces in metal, but the most important works were spectacular chains and ropes binding together pearl-shell and metal. These may be read as an extended tribute to human persistence and to the enduring fascination of patterning, and while they are entirely dependent on the spirit and practice of traditional craft, Gough fashions something quite different from them. Gough is not a traditional craftsperson, she is rather a modernist in origin with a cosmopolitan professional training, who practises an ancient craft which she respects as the vehicle for her contemporary practice as an individual artist. To grasp the extent of Rowena Gough's achievement it is essential to understand the tensions implicit in these inter-connected but essentially different practices.

This is Gough's first comprehensive exhibition for nearly nine years, though the direction of her work in the last five years has been revealed in group exhibitions and publications. Thus the pearl button and metal bandoliers which were the Sydney exhibition's centre-piece are now well-known. They are also justly celebrated. Miracles of dichotomous structuring, the bandoliers are simultaneously heavy and fluid, metal and shell, precious and mundane, black and white, open and closed. In the last pair the contrasts begin to break down, to become more ambiguous,

less neat. This matters. As the perfect little rings thread demurely through serried ranks of baby pearl-shell buttons, these spectacular pieces are neatly circumspect and yet openly erotic. In photographic images the bandoliers drape the body of the model in luxury reminiscent of the gowns of 1930s screen goddesses, in the flesh they promise a sumptuous second skin, an infinitely eroticised surface.

Metal, shell, skin: this has been a long evolution. In interview Rowena Gough spoke of a slow change in her work, which she dates back to the advice in 1982 of the veteran German jeweller Hermann Jünger, to think of 'the skin of the metal', as manipulable rather than imperturbably rigid. Contact with Pacific material culture in New Zealand in the 1990s took this intuition along a number of new paths. From the work of New Zealand jeweller Warwick Freeman, first seen in 1984, Gough learned to appreciate the possibilities of shell combined with metal; in Maori culture Gough saw the power of reiterated motifs' patterning experience: spirals, for instance, natural forms refined through long observation and dignified by generations of representation and use. Directly inspired by the example of Warwick Freeman and Alan Preston during her visits to New Zealand in the 1990s, Rowena Gough studied the great variety of Pacific jewellery, including chains of shell money woven together with vegetable fibre strings. Pearl-shell does not occur in New Zealand waters, but the great museum collections there shelter many remarkable pearl-shell artefacts brought by colonial traders, missionaries and collectors from the Pacific Islands.

With several exceptions Rowena Gough's works do not appropriate the forms of Pacific Island culture: two supple and slightly transparent coolamon forms are made from silver wire; several ropes of buttons more closely resemble the New Guinea shell-money necklaces which were their original inspiration. For the most part Gough's pieces instead approximate the craft demanded by their Pacific counterparts, and the long history of successive inventions, changes and refinements embodied in them. Nor does Gough fashion her own components from available natural materials, as Pacific craftspeople do. Rather she reworks found modern materials with quite different qualities and historical references. Exquisitely fine and strong stainless steel and sterling silver wire, and rather more robust sterling silver thread or steel links, substitutes for bush string; and hand-cut shell discs have been replaced by the pearl-shell buttons once essential for European fashions, now nearly obsolete, though undimmed in memory. Indeed Gough refers directly to the traffic in pearl-shell from Australia[1] to Europe and back again to the settler societies of the South Pacific, in the form of these buttons—tiny, ubiquitous, almost heirlooms.

Most importantly, the cumulative wisdom of Pacific craft is honoured by Gough's Herculean invention of different forms of threading appropriate to her present materials. This is painstaking experimental work, which has been remarkably successful. Occasionally I baulked at the precise configurations of a piece, finding the relationship between the fine springy sterling silver wire and the large buttons in 3 x 3 uncongenial, for instance; with *Button Chain* I was disturbed by the lightness of elements that seemed physically more weighty. Possibly this is a failure of nerve on my part, but not all experimental configurations in a virtuoso performance will be equally satisfactory. In the end the simplest pieces were the most compelling: *Big Button Rope* and *Channel Tryst*, the longest ropes of threaded small buttons, were magnificent. In structure they seemed to be simple. In fact they were extremely compressed, weaving complex ideas and issues together with skill and experience.

The beauty of maturity in an artist is that strands are woven together which were once at a loose end. (Nothing need be wasted if one waits long enough. This is grandmothers' wisdom.) To this recent work Rowena Gough brings her European training as a jeweller, her personal and family history, and her recent explorations in Pacific and Australian material culture history. All of these skeins of life are now woven together. In 1997 Gough sees the relevance of her family history in construction—engineers on both sides, her mother a professional tailor; she has literally combined the female and male sides of the family, joining the pearl-shell buttons of girlhood with impeccable metal-smithing in steel, gold and silver. Materials themselves carry the past; gold summons memories of childhood in central Victoria, and family stories of her grandfather wresting gold from Bendigo soil; the buttons recall the customary female rituals of family life, since pearl-shell buttons are talismans of childhood for women of our generation. Gough is aware of the complex tales stored in the layers of nacre in the tiny buttons, which are simultaneously products of colonial trade, the remnant of systematic transgressions of the environment and the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, and the imposition of European manners and dress on the Pacific. Pearl-shell buttons are talismans of childhood for women of our generation. Paradoxically, their present value is to force us to see that the recognition of the colonial past is a necessary part of maturity, both personally and politically.

Gough's pieces approximate the craft demanded by their Pacific counterparts, and the long history of successive inventions, changes and refinements embodied in them.

White Heart, Dark Truths, Deep Waters, Soulful Dreaming: the title of Rowena Gough's exhibition is perhaps not quite as elegant as the work itself. Yet it speaks of her appreciation of the emotional resonances of her materials and methods, signals her sense that life is rather like the vastness of the Pacific, navigated by Polynesian (and other) seamen who voyaged without certainty of their final destinations, and of the way an artist's personal life is embodied in her work. In this exhibition that is literally the case: Rowena Gough's splendid chains are woven from her body and her life, into each link and every circle.

endnotes

1. Pearl fishing commenced in Australia in 1861, and at the height of the demand for pearl-shell buttons produced over 75% of the world's supply. See also Kristin Joyce and Shellei Addison, *Pearls: Ornament and Obsession*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, pp126,151.

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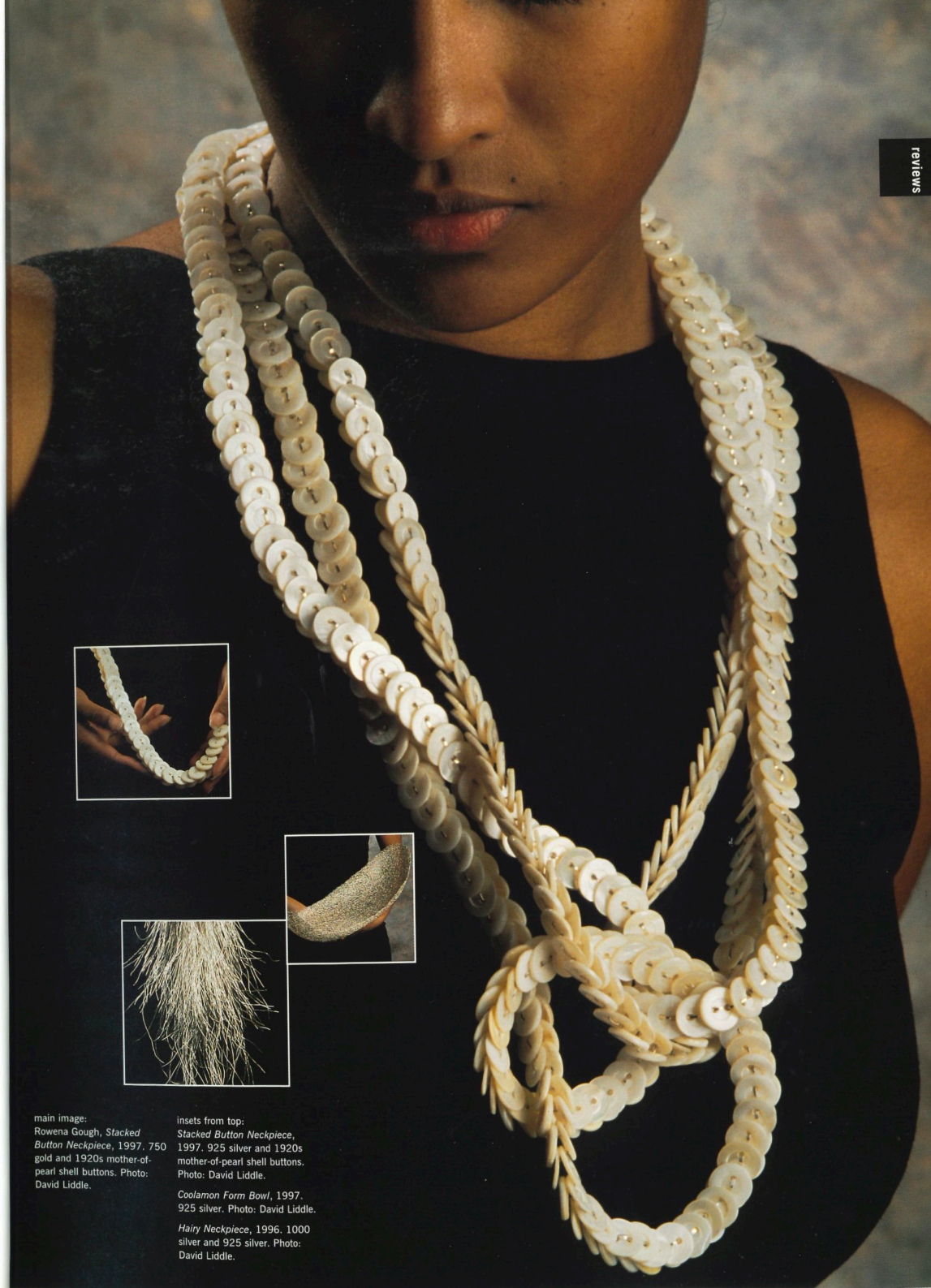

main image:
Rowena Gough, *Stacked Button Neckpiece*, 1997. 750 gold and 1920s mother-of-pearl shell buttons. Photo: David Liddle.

insets from top:
Stacked Button Neckpiece, 1997. 925 silver and 1920s mother-of-pearl shell buttons. Photo: David Liddle.

Coolamon Form Bowl, 1997. 925 silver. Photo: David Liddle.

Hairy Neckpiece, 1996. 1000 silver and 925 silver. Photo: David Liddle.