

# ELIZABETH SHAW



## Recycled Narratives

Exhibition Catalogue 2018

## Something Precious from Nothing Special

Jewellery is the most personalised of art forms; aesthetic objects that are on you, with you, about you. As such, jewellery objects are also most powerful sites for symbolic exchange, narrative and mnemonic intention. Historically, and in many cultures, the makers of objects with expressive, emotional and symbolic power incorporated rare or precious materials to embellish the significance and aesthetics of the objects they made. Many of the thousands of amulets and cylinder seals that survive from the ancient Near East, for example, were made from exotic, rare and enduring materials such as carnelian, obsidian, haematite, turquoise and lapis Lazuli.<sup>1</sup> However, in the western tradition reaching at least to the Italian Renaissance, where one Roman courtesan could elevate her standing and social acceptability by wearing a necklace of ninety baroque pearls, the status of jewellery has become intrinsically linked to the luxury value of its materials.<sup>2</sup> In the context of contemporary capitalism, the global jewellery market which in 2014 exceeded \$183 billion, is driven by consumer perceptions that fine jewellery (as opposed to costume and trade jewellery) is a discretionary luxury that can express social status and wealth.<sup>3</sup>

Elizabeth Shaw is one of a small but significant group of contemporary jewellers across the globe who are seeking to break this unsustainable luxury paradigm, that sees fine jewellery as a discretionary, exclusive product which is made from durable materials that are scarce, precious and of limited availability. As a leader in this movement for sustainable and ethical jewellery practice, Elizabeth Shaw has demonstrated that it is still possible to incorporate traditional precious metals and stones in contemporary jewellery through reuse and recycling. Indeed this ethical practice enhances the mnemonic power of her works, in knowing that the 100% recycled silver and remounted stones she uses have already had other lives and meanings. But the radical strategy that Shaw has adopted for most of the work shown in this exhibition is to take discarded consumer items and fragments, rich in the patina and registers of use, as the primary material for her pieces. The magical encounters she creates are made all the more astonishing since this is also a political act.



*Diving Bell necklace, Found ceramic fragment, recycled and reused sterling silver*

For in jewellery, the forces that drive the desire for luxury brands and endless consumption galvanise material worth to symbolic meaning. As Elizabeth Shaw mounts this exquisite show of jewellery and objects made from broken fragments of consumer objects, a major jewellery show opens at the National Gallery of Australia.<sup>4</sup> This is the first such blockbuster to exclusively feature jewellery in an Australian public gallery.

The opening sentence of the promotional boost for the *Cartier* jewellery exhibition on the NGA website reads: "Never before have so many incredible diamonds, emeralds and other precious stones been seen in Australia."<sup>5</sup> While the narratives that are evoked by Elizabeth Shaw's pieces relate to a domestic melancholy of back-yards and meandering walks in suburban Brisbane, the Canberra exhibition is, unashamedly it seems, a jewellery show about enormous wealth, power and celebrity, exploring "Cartier's glittering international clientele that included royalty, aristocrats, socialites, and stars of the stage, cinema and music." In the preview article, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (one of the exhibition sponsors) the Director of the NGA, Gerard Vaughan, is emphatic that despite the single brand-name title this "scholarly exercise in curatorship and presentation" is not a promotional exercise for

Cartier but a serious exploration of great works of art. Regardless of whether these are good or great works of art, they are all items or curiosities of extraordinary exchange value, beyond the reach of the thousands who will visit Canberra to “step into the dazzling world of the Maison Cartier and its clients and discover the age of glamour and icons of style.” The promotional value of this show for Cartier is incalculable yet the Director and curator are amazed at the generosity of Cartier and the various high profile owners in lending works to the show including the Queen (of Australia).

The political import of Elizabeth Shaw’s choice of materials and the narratives she evokes becomes clear when her work is framed against this *Cartier* exhibition. Gerard Vaughan excitedly notes “There will be people who have political views about the royals but this is just a historical view of society at this time. I don’t think I am speaking out of turn here to say that the Queen has never lent so much to an exhibition.”<sup>6</sup> Vaughan has overlooked the fact that jewellery does not have selective memory and for Australians some historical narratives are worth remembering. Not forgetting the initial invasion of Aboriginal land, from the Eureka Stockade in 1854 to the Dismissal of the Labour Government by the Queen’s representative in 1975 there has been strong opposition to imperial hierarchies and

monarchical order in Australia. When such sentiments began to intensify in 1880s the radical press in Britain and the Australian colonies took particular exception to conspicuous extravagance by a royal family that drew in today’s money around \$122.3 million a year from the public purse. If the usual egalitarian pacifier, that the “Commonwealth” owns the crown’s jewellery assets, makes any sense it doesn’t make for good logic or politics to charge Australians premium admission to see the Queen’s “Halo” tiara, worn by Kate Middleton at her wedding to Prince William in 2011, or any of the other Royal baubles, since we have already contributed to creating their allure.

The jeweller’s role has always been to give agency to materials, synergise the past and present and realise aspirations for the future. Elizabeth Shaw has shown through the work in *Recycled Narratives* that value does not necessarily radiate from the sovereign’s crown and the most fruitful place to start a meaningful dialogue with material in contemporary jewellery is to begin by making sense of what we have found and making precious what we think we don’t need.

*Professor Ross Woodrow (March 2018)*



*Repaired Arm, Found porcelain arm, recycled and reused sterling silver*

<sup>1</sup> Dominique Collon *Near Eastern Seals*, University of California Press, 1990, 31

<sup>2</sup> Tessa Storey “Fragments from the ‘life histories’ of jewellery belonging to prostitutes in early-modern Rome” *Renaissance Studies* 11/2005, Vol. 19 No. 5, 657.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Moraes et al. “Understanding ethical luxury consumption through practice theories: a study of fine jewellery purchases” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 10/2017, Volume 145, Issue 3, 525.

<sup>4</sup> *Cartier: The Exhibition* National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (30 March – 22 July 2018)

<sup>5</sup> <https://nga.gov.au/cartier/>

<sup>6</sup> Shona Martyn. “Back in the stone age” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3-4 March 2018 (Spectrum 8,9) 8.



*Fixed Dog Ring*, Broken ceramic, reused and recycled sterling silver

front image: *Bird of Prey*, Recycled and reused sterling silver and glass

Photography: Michelle Bowden

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