

Beppe Kessler

Beppe trained at the textile department of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam, Holland in the late 70s. After spending time as an industrial textile designer she went on to work as a jeweller and painter.

What are the main themes of your work?

I always have been interested in themes that you can't easily grasp: huge concepts like time, space, weather, (or recently) nothing. My work has to tell a story that is clear to myself. In 2008 I made a collection about carrying time with you in a brooch, called "ocean of time", with pieces like "what time is it, it is late, slowly, long time, now and then". Later, I worked with the concept of space, realizing that having a home or having space or room around you is one of the most precious things there is, to create landscape-like brooches.

At the moment, I am fascinated by the theme of nothing. It is a challenge carrying nothing with you in a brooch. Maybe things that are no-thing hold everything inside.

What was it about jewellery that you felt opened up more artistic possibilities, replacing your earlier work in textiles?

Textiles were the perfect choice for me as I liked the idea of working with a diversity of materials. Not only sensitivity, but also for colour, for structures, for repetition. And my focus has always been to push materials to their limits and look at how to combine them in new ways in any medium I work with. When I worked as a textile designer I liked seeing my drawings and paintings transformed into high-quality printed fabrics, but although I was proud of these textiles

the job didn't give me enough artistic freedom. The turning point came when I was commissioned to create a unique carpet for the government building in the Hague. This gave me more freedom than my previous work. I realized that my heart was in working

OPPOSITE TOP "La Condition Humaine" necklace features balsa-wood carved beads interspersed with small coral beads.

LEFT "Over and Over Again" brooch in balsa wood and brass.



autonomously with jewellery and painting, and combining the two, so that is the path I went on to pursue.

Are there artists or other influences that have been particularly important to your development?

Eva Hesse was important in the beginning. Robert Ryman, the Zero movement (Jan Schoonhoven), and Sheila Hicks. I admire Giuseppe Penone. I recognized their way of working; it was a confirmation of my own path and inspiration as well.

Can you describe your working process, your use of drawing, notebooks, models etc?

Thinking is always the first step. And I have to feel an urge to make something. In the beginning there is a vague knowledge of where it is heading. Sometimes, a word is the starting point: time, space, nothingness. Sometimes a question: will it be possible to... Questions to me are more important than answers.

With jewellery, I start to work with material and make material sketches: numerous samples of unfinished packed, sculpted or glued materials. I think with my hands. In fact, there is an intelligence in the hands that is different from that in the brain. I have to carefully watch what happens in my hands and stop at the right moment. Mistakes are more interesting than perfection; they can lead you to an unexpected path.

My material comes from everywhere: all kinds of wood, coal, alabaster, bone, pieces of rough materials; found discarded, scattered around, in nature or in my everyday environment, soft enough to form by means of a power file. I always work from big to small; that means I start with a big chunk of material and slowly reduce its form. I push materials to their limits and even further until they break. The way a material breaks shows its vulnerability. That is an interesting point, its true identity.

Wood is one of my favourite materials to work with. It is rather easy and patient, with an enormous variety of types, each with different qualities. It is a living material, growing in circles, in year rings. You can read time from it. You can give it so many faces: leave it rough or make it soft and glancing. Burn it, cut it drill it, break it, bend it and even embroider it.

I like to combine weak and strong materials, like soft balsa wood and metal, together. If you form them with the same effort the soft material sculpts more easily than the strong material and that is interesting (see brooch "over and over again", opposite). You can play with that, make use of that fact and develop a method to handle the two together.

Do your painting and jewellery inform one another?

Sure they do. When I am painting I get ideas for jewellery and vice versa. Since the very beginning of my career I have made both and

I never made a choice between being a painter or a jeweller; I am both. It is a choice not to choose. Painting on aluminum inspired me to use this technique on a smaller scale in a brooch. Embroidering the linen in a painting brought me to embroidery on balsa wood in jewellery. I worked for a few years using embroidering balsa wood and developed a kind of language in that. But I also translated this process again to bigger objects with burnt balsa to hang on the wall, similar to paintings. So, in summary, there is always an interaction. It is an ongoing story, working in two fields at the same time.

You have described yourself as being a hands-on materials person – could you talk about your material experimentation?

Jewellery you hold in your hands, sitting, watching closely. You start with something, a volume. That is why the word “nothing” in jewellery intrigues me. Intellectually, you can think a lot and invent concepts, but after all the physical thing has to convince and communicate the story. By immediately starting to work with material, sometimes led by intuition, you follow another path, parallel to a vague intellectual direction. Thoughts are a motor; they do not wait. They ask for a touching of material, making lots

of samples in trial and error. What comes out looks like chaos, without a straightforward direction, but it makes things a lot clearer: It generates possibilities and impossibilities you did not think of before, charms or unexpected directions. And other words emerge. There always is a cooperation and intelligence between the hands and the eye, with critical thoughts in between. Words are limited. I am not a poet, but I like to make poems through materials, which tell a story.

I was interested that you have avoided learning traditional jewellery techniques, such as soldering, in order to find your own solutions. Could you describe the tools and techniques that you have developed?

In a way, it is a freedom not to be educated as a jeweller (nor a painter), although it sometimes costs a lot of extra time, but it also leads me to other ways. When you don't know what you should do, there are no rules except for your own. Because I have no jewellery skills, I have to solve problems differently. Over the years I started to get a feeling for how to handle metal and gold in my own way, without soldering. If I could master soldering an overwhelming quantity of possibilities would emerge. However, until now I haven't felt the urge to learn it. And moreover there are enough colleagues



LEFT “Eyebright” brooch in balsa wood, brass and bone.



who master it, so why should I? Limitation is also my strength. And the way my work will develop is probably more free and unpredictable.

In the beginning, I used gold leaf rather as a colour, a surface on top of another material. I now use only plate material, as a sheet. And with a hand sawing machine and epoxy, I glue the metal into the wood in such a way that it becomes a part of the image. That is all I need. So there are not many tools that are necessary. Sometimes students are surprised that I use only a few machines and don't master many skills and still it looks professional...

How do you balance ideas and functionality within your work?

That is always a struggle. Some ideas are the strongest at the sketch stage and lose strength as soon as you try to transform them into jewellery. So they are waiting for a solution. It is a challenge to find a way. In my paintings I am totally free, but in the jewellery I really want to make the pieces wearable without losing any quality. It is possible, I know, and I do not go for less. In a brooch it is easier than in a necklace; it can be an object as well, and the closure can be an integrated part of the object, as for example in the brooch “Over and over again and always” (see p. 128).

It takes time to develop ideas without thinking of the end result. In the end, there is always a limitation because you have to think within the possibilities of functionality. But that also forces you to be inventive and free yourself from these limitations.

ABOVE Embroidery and beading is used to decorate this wood brooch.



ABOVE “Encounters” brooch in yarn-wrapped wood, vinyl, acrylic, resin and lava.