

## **Brown Betty Goes *Bling!***

Johannes Kuhnen: a survey of innovation

A travelling exhibition curated by Daniel McOwan, School of Art Gallery, ANU, May 1-30.

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The current exhibition of works by jeweller and metal smith Johannes Kuhnen [at the School of Art Gallery, ANU](#), is both a pleasure and a privilege to view. With works collated from galleries and private collections throughout Australia and Germany, it traces his craft preceding his emigration to Australia in 1981, up to the present day.

Kuhnen, who co-founded [Queanbeyan's Workshop Bilk](#), is head of the metal smithing workshop at ANU. His work is influenced by the clean lines and geometric concerns of the Bauhaus, in which his own esteemed teacher, Friedrich Becker, was trained

The SOFA gallery is bright with the shine of polished and anodised metal trays and teapots, precious boxes and jewellery. The objects talk to each other across three decades. One sees how shapes are re-worked, ideas re-formed, and how the advent of new pigments allows for increasing visual audacity. In pieces, big and small, burnished oranges, sultry pinks, and other luminous hues both challenge and match the delicacy of opal fragments in a necklace, or the quiet sheen of white-gold.

In many pieces, Kuhnen raises serious questions about the tensions and relationships between aesthetics and use. The teapots are a case in point. [Brown betty goes \*Bling!\*](#) Both fulsome and streamlined, their shining surfaces intersect with handles expressing lines of flight. The pots adjust in size to content [a nice formalism]. The delicacy of green tea is acknowledged in the intimate *Green tea teapots* [2008-9] whilst a *Turkish coffee-pot* [1999] concentrates inner space to match the heady smell. Its lid is meshed like the screen in a mosque.

His *Vessel* [2009], represents the end of a long line of experiments with the idea of 'dish'. From flat-edged ovals, to this one with raised sides, the bronze-gold 'floors' both attract our eyes, yet refuse to be fruit-bowl. The *Vessel's* shape is an arena, a colosseum, a circus ring. Silver battens secure the surrounding walls.

Kuhnen's jewellery, too, plays with ideas of functionality. A series of pendants come with interchangeable parts; in a series of rings, one can interchange precious rock-spheres. What is the subject here, the wearer and her preferences, or the jewel?

No-where is this challenge more apparent than in the *Wall-Mounted Arm Rings* [1999], a re-take on earlier armrings created in the 1980s. Often, we imagine jewellery will sit on the body. Here, the 'wearable art' is flattened and held within a frame. It is both ironic and fantastic, these gorgeous pieces held at arm's length from their use.

The exhibition includes a rather quirky series of eye frames. Some hark back to the 1930s in Germany, like stepping into an Expressionist film. They are modest, yet assertive: what is greater than the gift of sight? Yet these deep half-moons are highly decorative-- signs of 'personality', linked to histories and nationalities. They look out over a field of shiny plates, pots, and decorative 'things', reminding us that, above all, it is *how* we look that gives value.

A delightful retrospective exhibition of a fine and sensitive artist's work. Not to be missed.