

Case Study 4 - Christine Graf

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Christine Graf

Christine Graf's early training took the form of a traditional gold and silversmithing apprenticeship followed by study for her master's certificate. She produced precious jewellery in her Munich studio for a number of years. In 2001 she created her first significant body of work that focused on the use of enamel. Inspired by an exhibition of white paintings by Robert Ryman she created a series that was an exploration of the colour using variety of white enamels to create a monochrome but complex surface. For these early pieces Graf developed the underfired enamel surface that has been a consistent signature of her work over the last decade. Each simple enamelled surface was set in an elegant gold framework.

She says, 'apart from the investigation of shape and form the most important aspect of my work is the use of colour'. Developing from this early white series she created a number of pieces that combine strong colours such as orange and red with folded



Untitled, brooch, enamel, gold. 2001

foil-thin gold. The enamel not only brings colour to the work but also provides an element of stability to the fragile gold surfaces.

Her pieces from this period appear deceptively simple but closer inspection reveals an attention to detail and the consummate metalsmithing skills that she deploys in the construction of the framing and mounting devises she creates for each piece.

In 2006 Graf took the decision to further her study at MA level at the School of Jewellery, UCE Birmingham. Following on from some early explorations that used salt to create simple bowl forms she began to create asymmetric vessels cut and folded from single sheets of white paper. From these models she went on to develop a significant group of twelve vessel forms, created in the same way as the paper pieces but instead using fine copper mesh. These vessels were minimally enamelled so that the structure and texture of the mesh was still visible through the enamel.

She says of her work, 'my making process is characterised by my intuitive sense of aesthetics; the freedom in the creative process of perceiving, understanding, realising and shaping of an object. Notions like stillness and dynamism, constant and changing, material and immaterial describe my pieces; reduction and colour, fragility and transience, simplicity and lightness are their characteristics. The colour application and the texture of the surfaces I use to emphasise the fragility and ephemeral qualities of the work. As a result it seems as if the metal body is reduced, covered by the enamel it loses its structural qualities and in turn takes on a new visual and metaphorical identity'.

On completion of her MA – for which she gained a distinction – Graf returned to Munich to re-establish her studio. Here a new set of challenges awaited her. She no longer had access to the welding equipment used at college to join the folded mesh vessels, nor to a kiln of the capacity necessary to fire forms of the scale of her MA work. In response to these challenges she began to produce smaller scale jewellery pieces, developing a painstaking method of stitching the folded copper mesh constructions using gold wire.

This stitching acts as both a simple, rhythmic decorative device whilst also serving to secure



Untitled, vessel object, copper mesh, enamel, 2007

the seams of the piece. In some cases she heavily 'embroiders' the surface of the mesh with a closely worked running stitch that gives the mesh surface an added texture. Unlike the single forms of her earlier work these more recent pieces often include two or three simple forms grouped together to form a single piece. The elements of each grouping are slightly different in texture but linked by the use of subtle variations of a single colour. She displayed a group of pieces made in this way in her studio during 'Schmuck' in 2010. As with all her work the backs of these pieces reward the viewer with cleanly resolved mechanisms and framing devices and her close attention to otherwise unseen detail.

Christine Graf's work demonstrates a consummate level of skill in the handling of materials and a clear insight into enamel expressive possibilities. In each piece the form is balanced by the surface treatment that creates a coloured 'skin', containing and emphasizing the space within.

As part of the Innovation in Enamel project Graf was a visiting artist at the Enamel Research Unit, at UWE, Bristol, in the summer of 2010 where she undertook a number of experiments with enamel transfers fired into the enamel surface over simple stainless steel mesh forms, a technique that she has plans to explore further in her Munich studio.



Change, brooch, enamel, copper mesh, gold wire, oxidized silver, 2010