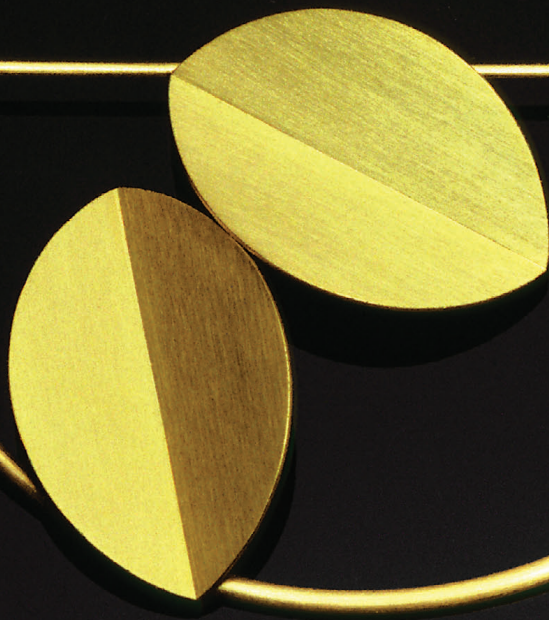


DAVID WATKINS

The Precise Aesthetic



There is at least one common thread in the artist's body of work and that is the feeling that despite the variety and range of expression, each piece has a feeling of being "just right," of having arrived at the place where it feels complete.

Nancy Ukai Russell

“Out of the complex body pieces came the simpler pieces. This is one of my all time favorite pieces: the diamond shape. It took me a long time to figure this out but I found that a square could go over the head and around the neck. I like the perversity, the grit that it gives you. Also, I like that it’s very unambiguous with a square. It’s framing the face. All kinds of professions will say that the face is the critical thing. The idea of framing it is very appealing.”

FLAT SQUARE NECKPIECE, 1976; acrylic, gold.
 Photograph by Michael Hallson.



The artist David Watkins believes

that everything to be said about a piece of jewelry lies in the work itself. “Otherwise, why bother doing it?” he says. The artist speaks in her or his chosen artform because, “you don’t have any other way of expressing yourself.”

Taking this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, there should be no need for words in appreciating jewelry artwork—only the eyes to see and the body to feel. Visually, one can see the form, design and color. If one is lucky enough to don one of Watkins’s pieces, one would use the senses to feel, say, the weight of a neckpiece on the shoulders or the texture and coldness of a metal ring on the shank of a finger.

The wonderful problem with David Watkins’s case is that when it comes to his wide-ranging body of work—which he has been creating for forty years, which people follow closely, and which international museums have been collecting for decades—there is a great deal to see and one feels that words, indeed, are necessary to explain the artist’s process and ideas.

Luckily, when I met the artist in his north London home, he was amazingly eloquent about his work. Despite his declaration that “the work says it all,” Watkins proved to be a delightful, articulate and thoughtful explainer of his work. Words mattered. They also helped me to appreciate more deeply the sixty-eight-piece retrospective of his work showing at the Victoria & Albert Museum



LADDER Pin, 1979; blued tool steel, yellow and white gold, Schmuckmuseum, Pforzheim, Germany. Photograph by Michael Hallson.

in London: David Watkins, Artist in Jewellery, A Retrospective View (1972-2010), February 23 - January 2011.

Watkins and his wife, the eminent jewelry artist Wendy Ramshaw, were in the midst of moving after thirty-two years in their Victorian home—packing paper, cardboard boxes, picture frames, and piles of things to be wrapped were stacked in the hallway and in various rooms, giving the old home a gently chaotic feeling. Meeting as art students at the University of Reading and married in 1962, Ramshaw and Watkins were both outsiders to jewelry, yet successfully launched fashion ventures in paper jewelry in the Twiggy-era of the late 1960s, continuing on to great individual success while also becoming one of the most well-known artist couples in the United Kingdom.

Because of his schedule, we were unable to visit the museum retrospective together, but we did the next best thing: we sat in their tall-ceilinged livingroom on a drizzly day and he gave me a virtual tour. We talked about particular neckpieces, rings and brooches which he singled out as being important to his development as an artist. The images in Beatriz Chadour-Sampson's *David Watkins: Artist in*

“The ladder form is very powerful and meaningful to me and has a kind of mystery. The moment of discovering that form was one of my ‘eureka’ moments. It was in the winter months of 1978, in western Australia.

It was already there in my earlier work but it hadn't coalesced as a single image; it had only repetitive horizontals or repetitive verticals, which I like a lot. And there was this moment when it became more pure and it wasn't ornamentation anymore.

It symbolized something manmade in the sense that it's architectural and certainly unnatural from that point of view, yet it had a certain purity like a simple mathematical statement, which seems a very interesting and powerful association between the made and the mystical. ”

Jewellery were the focus of the interview, and his words became a personal tour of his career as well as some of his favorite pieces.

“Over a long career I've developed a few simple forms that I've come back to over and over again. They may be extremely simple,” he says. “An analogy would be to say that they're like musical notes. You can put them together in different ways and create a different lyric, or you can repeat and hammer something to death.”

Indisputably one of the most interesting and important jewelry artists of our time, Watkins has helped to reshape the way we think about proportion, scale, materials, machines, and even the purpose and aesthetics of wearing objects on the body. He also helped to overturn traditional ideas about what constitutes beauty and “preciousness” in jewelry by using and mixing then-unusual materials: paper, wood, industrial materials such as acrylic and formica as well as gold, silver, titanium, and brass. Instead of gemstones he has applied color in order to ornament, the way sculptors have powder-coated steel, referencing his coming to jewelry as a sculptor, and not from a traditional training background. “I wasn't using colored

stone but I could use color as a substitute metaphor for other kinds of enamel and other kinds of jewelry,” he explains. “And so I used it to give more life to forms.”

He also was one of the first artists to write computer programs for jewelry design, experimenting in 1973 with CAD-CAM and the idea of bending thin steel rods to create “body cages” that looped over the body—the generic body. This was a strong statement that jewelry could be something other than a flowing, draped object made of precious materials worn only on the front of the wearer’s torso.

The circle, as well, emerged as an important form. “These days I’ve come to the conclusion that putting circular objects onto the obvious parts of the body is what I do,” Watkins states. “That’s a very honorable way of looking at jewelry. It’s not trying too hard to be extraordinary in shape. In a primitive sense, it’s what it really should be. The next best thing to body painting is putting something circular on your arm or your neck. I like the fact that if my things were lost for generations and generations and someone came across them and dug them up, they would know that these were things intended to be for the body and not an ornament for fashion. They were meant for the body. And that’s a strong motivation in a lot of what I do.”

Watkins also extended people’s ideas about how machines could be used to create body ornaments of great beauty. He loves machines for their ability to perform a simple task precisely and repeatedly. Machines are not the opposite of craft nor the enemy of the hand. Rather, they embody a high form of craft and engineering which have gone into the design and function of the tool. He also wrestles with basic questions such as how to ornament the body using the tools that are available now. These range from the ability to create virtual drawings on computer screens to the use of nineteenth-century drill heads. Watkins uses both. He is not doctrinaire, employing whatever is needed to achieve as precise a form as is possible, with the understanding that human intervention is usually required to give his work its “final voice.”

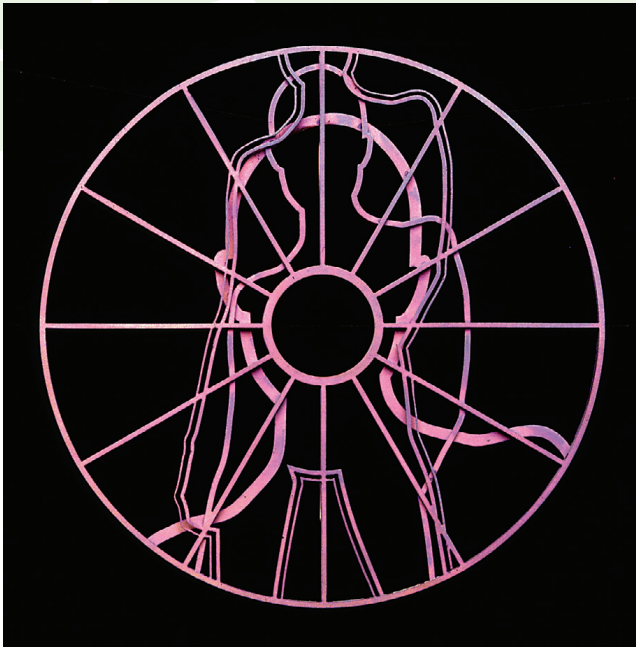
“On a certain level, I could wish that an object could go into a machine and emerge and be perfect and that was it.” There is no need for the hand to be in evidence, he says: “Absolutely not.” But it never seems to happen that way. He has found that in the end, “some intuitive process” is called for.

Watkins may then, for example, take up sandpaper or steel wool and work the surface of a piece until the abrasions bring forth contrast and the essential properties of the materials. “It just so happens that machines will take me ninety or ninety-

“ I don’t draw from nature at all. I’ve done it but it’s not part of my practice. And, indeed, on the whole I have worked with purely geometric forms. But I did happen to take an interest in some leaf forms for some reason. And no doubt there was some kind of sense of romance about it as well as the interest in the form. It was not an intense interrogation of the nature of leaves, it was an offhand thing, sitting under a tree with a glass of wine. But I took the sketches and what I did was reduce the leaves to geometry. A leaf could be a symbol of nature and, among other things, it’s kind of boat-shaped. I’m very interested in forms that can be brought together, to be collaged, and mediated in some way to take on different meanings according to what the mediation is. ”



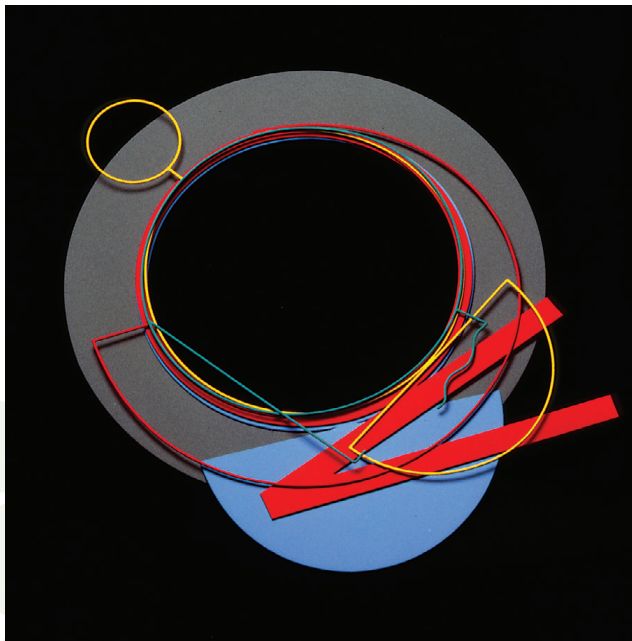
LEAF WHEEL 6 (Clustered Leaves), Pin, 1997; gold, 80 millimeter diameter.



PALACES OF THE NIGHT Pfo4T, Layered Pin, 2003; anodized titanium, 110 millimeter diameter.

“This piece I call Diver. It is a very primitive idea except that it’s complicated by the grayness. The diver is almost a figure against a blue pool. This is perfectly obvious but it gets a little confused by these orbital forms so maybe it’s not so simple. Layering will do that. It will give you those opportunities.”

DIVER, Combination Neckpiece, 1985; neoprene on wood and steel, Private Collection.



“The wheel has mystical content. It’s such a strange symbolic thing, of nature and machine. But it gives me a good, sound infrastructure that has meaning and presence in itself on which I can then play games. To use a musical analogy, it’s like having a good sound chord structure and improvising tunes, and they can be flighty and frivolous or they can be heavy and serious. It can be any way as long as the structure is sound. The human form in a piece is a huge change for me. Can it fit be die within the context of my work? It took me deeper into narrative areas. All these abstract forms could be put together with the body.”

five percent of the way. Then in the end I have to get my hands on the stuff and give it that final voice.”

It is surprising to see all in one place, in the museum exhibition, the sheer diversity of forms, materials and artistic expression. This diversity reflects his restless interest in reconciling modernist ideas with a medium that traditionally celebrates excess. He finds romance in the technological age, and the “striving to understand, control and make perfect. That’s kind of wonderful, I think.” Precision becomes an expressive, aesthetic quality and when Watkins arrives at the point where the piece he is working on has achieved this, he stops.

“It’s in my nature to pursue a visual idea quite fanatically in the sense of getting it right in all of its details and proportions. But then once I have fixed those proportions, I tend not to revisit it. What I’ve discovered and worked out was what I wanted to say—whatever that was—and to tweak it here and there seems a downgrading of the idea. Of course one could do it. But that’s not the truth.”

Truth, however, is contested ground. Watkins himself laughs as he notes that his recent use of the human figure is new, a bit “devilish” and introduces a literal element into his work. His temperament and background suggest that he is flexible and open to change.

Watkins describes his work process as one of “reducing” forms to their essential elements rather than “developing” them, a semantic distinction which implies a winnowing down rather than a building up. His classic ladder and leaf forms exemplify this. These forms have been refined and then used either as a base or as separate design elements, like musical notes, to form a different melody. The ladder form fans out,

“What goes into this is an awful lot of drawing on a computer. I wanted to look at all the combinations of different sized holes and numbers of them around a circle before deciding what to make. So I used a computer to draw them over and over and over. I don't know, I probably spent three weeks drawing it. But it's handmade using an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century machine that has what is called a dividing head that was used for clock making. You can calculate the pitches of holes and arrange a whole series of levers so you can move the object the right degree. What if I made these holes this big? How much weight would you save? Well, this looks good and a lot of weight has been saved; this is the one I'm going to do. But then you get this weird thing that in this particular case, it looks like strings of pearls. Or beads, like bead objects but in reverse. I like that inversion. Inversion is a thing I play with a lot.”



TORUS 280 (B1), 1988; gilded brass, edition of three, *Private Collection*.

some ten years later, into a wheel shape. Both hold “mystical” feeling for him. They contain elements of the human effort as well as the natural and mathematical.

In this sense, the “ramshackle” ladder, created by a different artist, could be considered the more “human” and interesting form because of the obvious presence of the hand. Watkins appreciates this concept but it is not his way: “that would really hurt.” It is the fact that “a bloke in a workshop with a piece of brass and a really simple machine can make a thing of such precision,” which enthalls. “That then acquires a special beauty, out of all that risk and that combination of man and machine. That’s something beautiful—and about our age, isn’t it?”

His family background is filled with “makers and builders” of all kinds, writes Chadour-Sampson, including engineers, draftsmen and blacksmiths. Watkins himself seizes any opportunity to learn as much as he needs at a given time and enjoys the grittiness of hands-on work and experimentation.

In his university days, a chance meeting with a maintenance worker resulted in lessons in metalwork and welding. His background as a semi-professional jazz musician has doubtless brought the spirit of improvisation and innovation to his work methods. A post-university job as a small-scale model maker for Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey was a “feast” of artistic and engineering collaboration, he says, that inspired some of his earliest jewelry pieces.

Watkins also brings the researcher’s intensity to artistic problems, taking two or more years to allow ideas their gestation period until now, “it’s just become what I do.” His curiosity and ability to play in the theoretical and material

worlds is perfect for a teaching environment. He is fascinated by the game of looking at objects and thinking about how they could be improved. “What would you lose and what would you gain?”

He retired in 2006 as emeritus professor at the prestigious Royal College of Arts, where he taught for twenty-two years. His position was chair of the department of goldsmithing, silversmithing, metalwork, and jewelry. One can imagine his lectures as he continues to reflect on the importance of getting things “right.”

“We’re surrounded by things where we say, ‘if only that were better.’ You go into a store and think it will be fairly straightforward to buy something, but you are surrounded by thousands of objects, none of which seem quite right to you. So getting a thing right is somehow absolutely critical.”

Notable in the Victoria & Albert retrospective is, interestingly, the “just right” quality of Watkins’s pieces. Despite difference in form, material or genre, they have the feeling of having arrived at just the right place, like gears having clicked quietly and elegantly into place.

“It is a key objective,” he concludes, “that the thing is really fixed. And nothing could be more, and it is absolutely the way it should be.”

SUGGESTED READING

Chadour-Sampson, Beatriz. *David Watkins: Artist in Jewellery*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2008.

Dormer, Peter and Ralph Turner. *The New Jewelry: Trends and Traditions*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

Drutt, Helen and Peter Dormer. *Jewelry of Our Time: Art, Ornament and Obsession*. New York: Rizzoli, 1995.

Watkins, David. *The Best in Contemporary Jewellery*. Mies, Switzerland: Rotovision, 1993.