

Pilgrimage to Munich

This year a large contingent of New Zealand jewellers went to Schmuck and Talente, the annual jewellery circus in Munich. Peter Deckers makes a whirlwind dash around 100 exhibitions.



In March each year thousands of jewellery enthusiasts travel to Munich for a bonanza of exhibitions and events radiating from the curated jewellery exhibition Schmuck. It's the oldest contemporary jewellery exhibition in the world and part of the massive international Handwerksmesse fair, which is held in six big halls and showcases all kinds of handicrafts and design – everything from BMW concept cars, automated compost toilets to spicy alpine chocolates – as well as the curated Schmuck jewellery forum, which fellow Kiwi Shelley Norton and I were invited to participate in this year.

During the fair, which runs from 12–18 March, there are over 100 jewellery exhibitions – in galleries, artists' studios and pop-up spaces in Munich, so it's challenging to see everything. At the openings you can hardly see the works through the thick crowds, yet the odd peek reminds you of the great work that's there, and what you really came for. It has become like a big party and more about who is going where to the next big meet-up, so you have to go back a second time to see the works properly.

Next door to Schmuck is Talente, featuring international practitioners under the age of 33 who work in a range of fields, including textiles, glass, metal, jewellery, ceramics, furniture, typography and industrial design. Here, nine New Zealand artists showed work, which was a record

number of Kiwis at the fair. They included Auckland industrial design-artist Alex Styants, exhibiting his futuristic wheelchair, and Wellington jewellery-artist Jhana Millers, whose large canvas covered in gold leaf was printed with a number relating to New Zealand credit card debt. Graphic designer Samantha Lewis from Wellington won the prestigious Talente prize for design with her wonderful typography and graphics, mixing both English and phonetic spelling. This award follows her 2013 'Best of the Best' Communication Design Award from the prestigious German Red Dot Design Awards and will put her firmly on the international stage. Invaluable support from Creative New Zealand ensured all the artists travelled to Munich, and 'campmother' Renee Bevan, who was enlisted as mentor for the Talente group, ensured they met and mingled with the right people, visited artists' workshops and attended the events and exhibitions.

However, we were outnumbered by the 75-plus New Zealand artists represented in *Wunderruma* at the renowned Galerie Handwerk – the largest exhibition of New Zealand jewellery ever to be seen in Europe. New Zealand jewellers Karl Fritsch and Warwick Freeman curated this exhibition of over 200 pieces selected during trips to jewellers' and artists' workshops, and galleries and museums throughout the country. They collected up work from dusty corners,

Opposite page: Niki Hastings-McFall, *Polynisation*, 2014, plastic flower-covered tree outside Galerie Handwerk, Munich, as part of *Wunderruma*. Photo: Fran Allison

Right (from top): installation view, *Wunderruma*, Galerie Handwerk, Munich, photo: Caroline Billing; Samantha Lewis, *Foanetiks* poster from *Talente*; installation view, *Wunderruma*, with Chris Charteris' work, *Wasekaseka*, perspex and waxed nylon, photo: Caroline Billing

gallery stockrooms, old and new museum collections, and included 'unlikely' artists such as Peter Madden, Francis Upritchard, Billy Apple and Michael Parekowhai. The duo went to work with superb knowledge, creating a show as one voice – a real Kiwi story pieced together by their choices, without explanation. It united classic *hei tiki* borrowed from the local Staatliche Museum für Volkerkunde, a commercial kowhaiwai-pattern-covered motorbike helmet, various bone and stone carvings, headdresses made from coloured straws, Madden's hand-painted real flies, and Lisa Walker's wild laptop necklace – all displayed in dark grey cases spread over two floors. All blended in well to form some kind of relevant stone, bone, shell history, with nothing really out of place, not even Parekowhai's or Madden's works. The works sat well in the crisp modernist interior of the newly renovated gallery and I felt the exhibition brought a particularly New Zealand mood to Munich; it reminded me of Vincent Ward's iconic 1984 film *Vigil*.

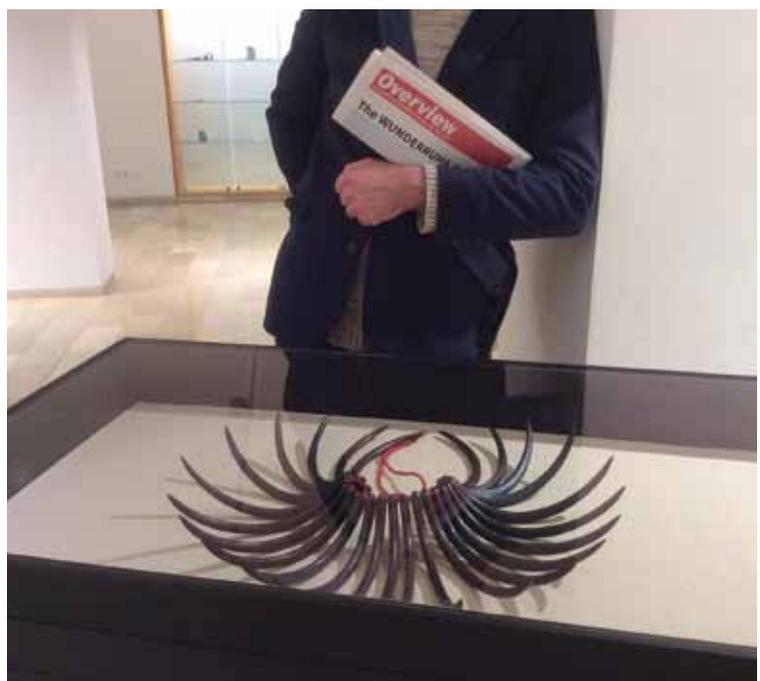
Outside Galerie Handwerk, and announcing the jewellery spectacle inside, was Niki Hastings-McFall's colourful, site-specific work, *Polynisation* – a distinctive Pacific work in which she wrapped a living tree with brightly coloured plastic flowers. This worried some German greenies who saw it as environmentally unfriendly; they thought she was restraining the buds on the tree from bursting forth, encouraged by the high spring temperatures. But I thought her work showed how we see our Pacific culture – colourful and wonderful, adapted away from its natural roots – and how our 'clean green' image is sometimes more an idea than a reality.

As well as curating *Wunderruma*, which will travel to The Dowse Art Museum in June this year, Freeman had an impressive solo show in the reputable Wittenbrink Gallery, and Fritsch showed new works in the ancient Einsäulensaal. Their dealer – Galerie Ra from the Netherlands – also had a makeshift gallery space at the fair opposite Schmuck.

The Munich events showcase new work, connect with international experts and collectors, and grow audiences. The diversity of jewellery on offer is great, although after visiting three consecutive fairs I've begun to realise that the 'jewelleryness' (an expression coined by art writer Liesbeth den Besten) is being eclipsed by just 'jewellery'. 'Jewelleryness' is about the idea and concept, often set in a particular context. 'Jewellery' is about the work, ready to be sold. The latter is vital for artists and galleries to survive, and it's not unusual to see work offered for sale for anything from €500 to €36,000.



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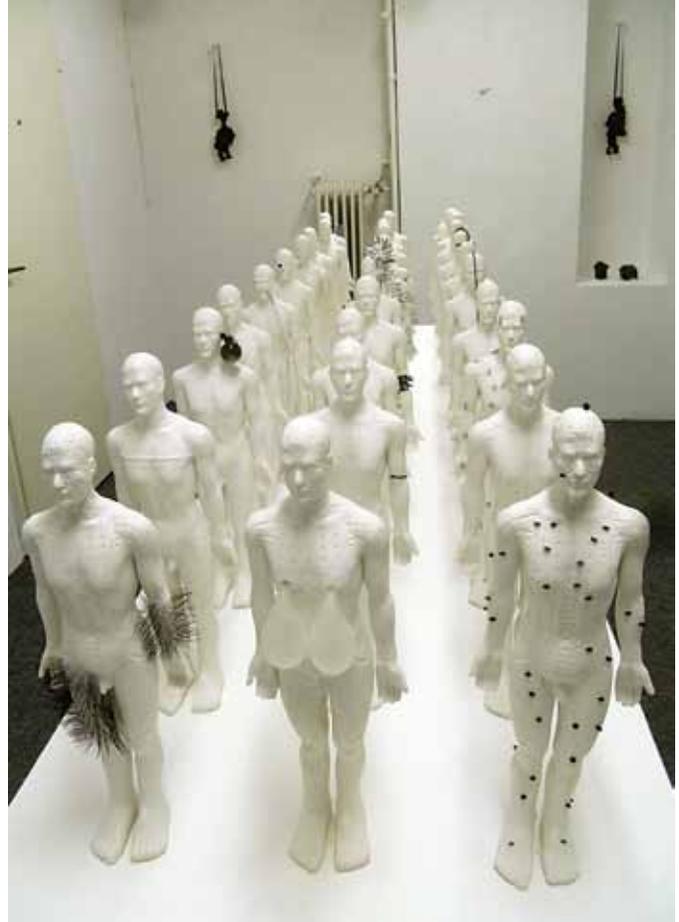


Innovation has always belonged to the jewellery movement, but lately I've felt the winds of change sweeping Munich as commercial pressures threaten to kill off the excitement that 'jewelleryness' brings. I'm reminded of Estonian jeweller Tanel Veenre and his compatriots who had an innovative exhibition in a Munich graveyard in 2010. In his 2013 solo exhibition Veenre displayed works in a dusty foundry, among silica dust, racks, tools, casts and wax models. The works reacted well in the context, making exciting readings. This year he presented work in the same foundry, on a big spotlight board; the dusty foundry wasn't visible in the darkness. This time the work didn't interact with its surroundings, instead it was reduced to 'beautiful and exciting', ready to be picked up by a paying customer.

It seems even fresh new makers are aiming to attract the handful of rich collectors; while visiting the shows I began to wonder if contemporary jewellery has had its innovative run and is now situated closer to the more stagnant classic jewellery world. Perhaps the altruistic innovation of 'jewelleryness' is dying?

Not so – in the backstreets of Munich I discovered exciting examples of 'jewelleryness'. The London-based Dialogue Collective came up with an idea related to telling stories. This collective always presents innovative ideas, rather than presenting jewellery for the sake of it. In their makeshift Galerie Hell their stories were about the Jack the Ripper murders in 19th-century London. The jewellery was positioned on multiple serving trays and represented the stories being told by a presenter wearing a clean white lab-coat. On the other side of a table the viewer could ring a bell to stop the story. This relationship between narrative and object interested me as I believe that perception is always influenced by cultural, social and economic constructs. If somebody points out the shape of a sheep in a cloud, it will be hard not to see that sheep, until the cloud dissolves. Thus the Jack the Ripper-related objects are altered by the narrative and trigger memories and associations.

Other dabblings into 'jewelleryness' included Swiss jeweller David Bielander's show *Demiurg*, an installation with objects, wallpaper and jewellery. His narratives were presented as a carousel with five dioramas, including disorderly juxtapositions, humorous references to Dutch still-lives, and a self-portrait echoing Arcimboldo's *Vertumnus* created from his own jewellery. In contrast, Ruudt Peters' installation on the other side of town was all about order. Both installations were made with historical knowledge, but Peters' work is more personal. Peters spent three months in China exploring *qi*, the inner alchemy of Eastern culture. The resulting exhibition comprised drawings on stone, which have been made into jewellery, and a main work comprising rows of porcelain figures cast from an acupuncture model and then reworked with the addition of wire, glass and hair. They're placed in formation as the Emperor Qin Shi's terracotta army. This installation, like Bielander's, was originally made



Ruudt Peters, *Qi – Cun Zai*, 2013, porcelain, glass. Installation view at Galerie Klaus Lea, Munich. Photo: Peter Deckers



Dialogue Collective, *Dialogue in Hell*, 2014, installation view, Galerie Hell, Munich

for a bigger museum space and both were somewhat compromised by their more casual Munich iterations.

But the real 'jewelleryness' is still the craziness of Schmuck itself where 100 shows and 5000 enthusiasts interact with one other. At the end of my four days I began to feel overloaded or Schmucked-out.

Wunderruma is at The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, from 21 June to 21 September 2014.