

## A Conversation between Zasha Colah and Esther Brinkmann

ZC: With each new form, do you add somehow, to your own conception of the body?

EB: My work develops slowly, and in different directions. I'm not always focused on the same things. I have works I have done many years ago in this exhibition. Putting them together I do not feel there is an obvious difference however, because my work is outside of fashion and design. It is not marked by time or a trend. I have intuitions, but I don't know how to materialise them, and then suddenly, three days later, sometimes five years later, or while sitting in a concert, I find a shape, a way I can materialise my concept.

ZC: Do you keep a notebook?

EB: I'm not very good at that. I make a lot of drawings for the ornamental things I am doing.

ZC: What did living in India bring out in your work?

EB: Being in India, I started to think about what I could add, what can be the new element that can be introduced in my work. I decided it would be ornament and colour. In previous works, I used monochromes. I thought being in India, it is the right moment, the right challenge for me to work on the notion of ornament, giving decoration to a surface. I was inspired by the textiles I saw. My way of working previously was more structural, three-dimensional. I like to build things, more than decorate things. The right challenge seemed to be to relate a two-dimensional image on a three-dimensional object.

ZC: How did you begin to work with meenakari? I understand it is a technique that comes from Persia. That 'meena' means azure blue, like the heavens.

EB: I chose the enamel work because I felt that the colour aspect of enamel was something I was interested in. To bring in colour, I could use all kinds of materials, and textiles, and the most obvious way is to use stones. But working with stones is not what I wanted to do. I wanted to do something that is special, that has been traditionally used, and I like the Mughal jewellery of India. And then also the coincidence that I met the master and had access to his studio.

ZC: Do you often collaborate? What have been your ways of collaborating?

EB: I have collaborated very rarely. I only worked with one person for the meenakari. I met the National Awardee, Kamal Kumar meenakar three months after I arrived in India. An artist I met gave me his address, and I went to see Kamalji in his workshop in Jaipur. It is an old palatial haveli, where all his ancestors were meenakari masters working for the royalty. I was so excited to find the tradition in continuance. I explained to him, I am not only a designer, but I also make things myself. I had to explain that I wanted to make the metal objects and surfaces myself. He told me he was able to have the metal made for me, but I cannot work like that, since my ideas come intuitively while making. I also experiment with weight, thicknesses, and textures of the metal. Ideas come to me as I work.

ZC: Tell me then about your time in the studio.

EB: It starts like this. I make the ring. I start with a piece of gold, to begin with. It can be a silver bar, or a special alloy of them, used for enamelling. There might be two or three metals mixed together. It is a very special alloy that allows for the brightness of the colour, and I imagine every family, or every workshop has their own secret.

From my side I know the work of a goldsmith. I know while I am working with this metal the shape is getting more concrete. But as I am in the process of transforming gold or silver, the shape is also changing, because the material gives you possibilities that you even don't know before you start working on the material.

I shape and press and re-heat the ring many times. Each time you press and laminate the metal it will get harder and harder. When I heat the metal it becomes malleable and I can work on it. I draw the shape with a marker, and then I saw it out, and then I bend it. I work with it with my bare hands. I work only when it's

cold. Then the two parts must touch each other perfectly, and this is the point at which extreme precision is needed. It's just one very fine line, and I put little pieces to solder it. I also like to leave some traces of how it is done. You might see a slight line. The colour of the soldering alloy is slightly different and has a lower melting point than the alloy. Otherwise, it would all melt together. Instead it melts just a little bit before the other metals.

ZC: Can you explain the nature of your discussions with the meenakar?

EB: Kamalji's work is proudly traditional, there is no experimentation. That is not in his basic interest. I tried to stay as much as possible within the traditional practice, seeing the limitations, as a chance for creativity. I wanted to learn what I could do with the traditional enamel. I thought also for him it is interesting to work with someone who has different ideas about how to consider ornament on a surface. I think that was, and still is, what I am trying to do.

ZC: And you know his colours already?

EB: This is his absolute mastery. I know the colours somewhat. I mark them carefully on my drawn designs. Sometimes I want to use new colours. And then he would send me a little sample, or little image. Most times the colours were okay. Sometimes the combination of colours was completely unexpected. I would ask him for time in such cases. If the composition just didn't work after this I would send the piece back and ask him to change the colours. But sometimes he would also try to convince me to try the new combinations. This was largely the nature of our discussions.

ZC: And how does the tradition continue? In which direction do you see it going in India?

EB: Kamalji has two young daughters. Though it is not a tradition for women to practice the craft of meenakari, I have hopes that these girls will learn and keep alive this ancient technique.