

The 10 Taqqanen of Esther Brinkmann  
by Zasha Colah

*Taqqanen are enigmas, riddles, the hiding of some truth, that one turns and plays in the mind, in order to retrieve.*

*This text is written on the occasion of the solo exhibition 'Renewable Pleasures: The India Chapter', based on two conversations with the artist in April and in June, 2014.*

*i. black cup*

From an invitation she received during a workshop in the South of France on the lost wax technique, that brought together jewellery artists from different parts of the world, Esther Brinkmann travelled for three weeks in 1998 to North-Africa between Niger and Mali, on the trail of the Touareg: the nomadic cattle-herders, warriors and, silversmiths of the Sahara. Perhaps she already had a sense that she would work with shapes of vessels; but here in the semi-desert, the shapes of the black drinking bowls of the Touareg, or the archer's rings made of granite, catalysed her own nomadic, artistic path.

Jewellery itself has sprung out of the nomadic, signifying meaning, past deeds, social status, the stories of previous wearers, or of the maker, a means of carrying one's wealth as metallic weight, on a body in perpetual travel. Esther's process is minute, precise and delicate. It involves a shaping and texturing that is hammered to resemble bark, or deeply etched surfaces, still haunted by the Touareg's shining black vessels.

Esther: 'I began a series of rings I call finger vessels. I have different shapes that have developed over the years. First the double rings, then the spheres, then the bells. They are something you feel. The vessels introduce space, between my fingers and introduce space between the vessel and fingers.'

*ii. shield*

Pieces of slate are split into two symmetric halves, and worn like pendants, with oxidised silver or copper. She titles these 'Shields'.

Esther: 'It's much more about playing with shapes, and the pendant's place on the body, like the shields. I like the idea that they are placed low, that it is a very long necklace. I think it makes sense somehow. A psychological protection. All these necklaces are also things you can grab and hold, so you don't feel alone, or feel abandoned.'

The pendants may be read as psychological confidantes. The skin carries memories of wearing. A ring that is worn many years, will make conscious its absence, when removed. Physically, the body carries the negative space of memory, these rings, enlarge and heighten our capacity to have tactile memories.

Esther: 'I think this psychological space is very individual to the person who will wear it, because the fact is that these rings are always present in you, in the perception of your own body. You cannot forget them. I think with a small ring you could forget it. It might be linked to a souvenir. Like holding a stone. Like having someone hold your hand. A companion. It activates your body envelope because you feel it.'

*iii. dancer*

Esther: 'The sphere rings for me are as if I have gone through the skin of a sphere. Pushed my finger through. Here I play with material, the soft and round, the thin and angular. I think it is a different experience, like pottery.

So the sphere is another possible shape for the finger. And this ring is placed around the knuckle, around the finger articulation. The rings induce new gestures. People speak differently with their hands. It induces

feelings in parts of your body you would not normally experience. The rings enlarge the natural limits of the skeleton. The silhouette of the body changes.'

#### *iv. flirtation*

The artist purposely makes a ring that is too large for the wearer. The outer ring is loose on the finger, and the second ring fits tight, and fixes the first one in place. It has the psychological impact of feeling secure, but at the same time loose. She calls them double rings. Esther's rings bring to mind the philosophies of play, of the lila, and the wisdom they carry in making us feel the present moment. This is a flirtatious work, because it is a mixture of feeling completely secure, while allowing small dalliances, a tipping of toes into the water's/desire's - edge. There is choreography at play in the ways in which the jewellery incites certain movement, or extends the body. They describe safety within an unstable situation, an airy sense of the playful, of movement which

is counterpoised with the dancer's bar of stability.

#### *v. sea-anemone*

Esther: 'The other possible shape is the bell. The particular significance of the bell is the stocking, like a knitted stocking. This is the part that helps the bell. You can move the finger around the bell. That's how it works. And I call it a bell, because you know inside the bell there is always a little clapper, but the finger is not exactly ringing the bell. It isn't rational but a poetic association. The hammered metal fits on your finger through the knitted part, which means it does not have a fixed place. The shape of the bell came from the images of the aquatic creatures, between animals and flowers, the sea-anemone. They have these vessel shapes, moving in the water that seem very soft, very flexible, with magical colours. I wanted something that surrounds and moves around the finger, a gentle light movement.'

#### *vi. masks*

Esther: 'Red face and double' are a series of works made of Chinese red thread, resin, gold or silver. The threads are used to attach little Chinese charms carved out of jade: a small turtle or Buddha, worn around the neck or around the wrist. I make the drawing in thread, and I fix it with resin and red pigment – a thick-honey liquid, that will go into certain crevices, through the lines, and create uncontrolled densities and shadows, that add to the expression of the face. To make the frame, I use a very traditional way of setting a stone, with small hooks or clasps.'

These mono-types, using sculptural or architectural processes, continue, to me, the sense of the game, that greets me strongly in these works. The artist makes a relationship between two different faces, and her own. As though they were all interchangeable masks. The masks have to me a humour, a distance between the serious and the humorous.

Esther: 'There is no barrier between me and what I am, or what I am showing, and what else I could show. It's a kind of mise-en-abyme. *The image is reflecting an image which is reflecting an image, which is reflecting an image.*

I think that is especially there with the brooches.'

#### *vii. rare red beaks*

In this process of enamelling, the colour red is the most difficult to achieve, and hence most rare, as are the red-beaked birds the artist chooses to portray. I like this combination in the enamelled rings – of the rarity of the technique, and the rarity of these birds in Bikaner, based on photographs by her husband, a bird-watcher and photographer. She was also influenced by the red colour of the Thangkas in Ladakh.

Esther: 'I use the vocabulary of the traditional enamel craft, but when I use fragments of flowers, or fragments of birds, when I have parts going out of the frame, it is my interpretation of the traditional.'

Normally you have the whole bouquet of flowers, or you have the image, which is complete, or on a surface you have five birds and the flower branch. But I think if you represent a fragment of the flower or fragment of the bird, then the mind of the viewer continues the image that is sketched onto this. The flower that I am initiating in the imagination of the viewer, is bigger than what can be seen on the object.'

*viii. meteorite*

Much of Esther's work is about assemblage. In her studio, she keeps a little wooden box, in which she collects things: an array of pebbles, shards of slate, thread, dried seeds, establishing scales and dialogues, between accumulations of things. In a necklace, a shower of stones drilled from a black meteorite, are caught within airy raw silk threads.

Esther: 'Perhaps I bought the piece of meteorite once where people come to sell things they have found somewhere. I kept it for a long time. The neckpieces are about collecting and making.'

*ix. endoscope*

'Vu d'ici' are a series of brooches for men and women both. They are vessel conical shapes, one can look through. It reminds me of being at sea. To Esther, it was about looking down, through it, as if looking inside.

Esther: 'You cannot look inside your nostril and look into the body, but this is a vessel, that you can look through, as if looking inside.'

*x. telescope*

Esther: 'This is something that came to my mind when I saw my first moon eclipse, just outside my studio, in 2000 in Geneva. It is about scale. I try to capture something that is very big and out of our understanding. Bigger than my mind. Bigger than what I can conceive. I try to capture the moon eclipse in a small body. A vast universe is captured by nothing, not by our eye that is trying to perceive it. I am trying to capture the feeling of an eclipse, capture it in our emotions, or as a souvenir of it, how one might incorporate it in our experience.'

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Esther's solitaire rings, imitating rolled up balls of thread, caricature the precious stones of the engagement solitaire, and parody their readings of romance and luxury. Esther discards precious stones. Independent jewellery had its beginnings in Europe in the 1950s after the second world war, and it arrives with the emancipation of women, who played such important roles during war time, when small towns and villages had few men left to run the towns. At this time, comic books began to be filled with women heroines, and many women drew comics. Suddenly women would not wear heavy fabrics, big necklaces, pendants, and bracelets. They broke up the sets of matching jewellery. Instead, they bravely wore shrapnel, and incorporated parts of tanks, into their jewellery. Jewellery artists began to express their vision of the world through their work. It began in northern countries like Holland, Germany and England, and soon specialised galleries came up. Trained as a goldsmith, Brinkmann set up the first Contemporary Jewellery Department in Geneva in 1987 at the Haute Ecole Arts et Design, and remained head of the department from 1987 to 2005.

But there is another subtext to the work, beyond the parody of romance, and this seems to be the extravagance of pleasure. Like Helene Cixous's *écriture féminine*, this auteur jewellery, returns to us most distinctly, pleasure and desire, and the heritage of performance artists like Carolee Schneeman, with works like 'Fuses' or 'Interior Scroll'. She dealt with the female, or rather female aspect within each of our experiences of pleasure, as different from the experience and perspective of pleasure that fills most cinema and media which deal with the subject of erotics. The erotics of sensual pleasures – as experienced,

especially by women, or the female perspective, or feminine aspect within each of us – gives the exhibition a fitting provocation for our present time.

Chemould Prescott Road, among the oldest art galleries in India, in 2012 presented provocative solo projects of a certain theme but from varying positions, which this present exhibition extends. From Vivan Sundaram's 'GAGAWAKA: Making Strange', to Shakuntala Kulkarni's 'Of Bodies, Armour and Cages', a distinct trajectory of wearable art is being consciously explored by this gallery's recent programming. To this fray, is added an exhibition by Esther Brinkmann of auteur jewellery. If Gagawaka was a returning to the possibilities of early twentieth-century abstraction through costuming and performance, if the bamboo bodices that were both armour and cage were a performed re-consideration of feminism, Brinkmann's treatment returns us to tactile aesthetics, over the dominance of the visceral, and our dependence on what is written and readable. As with movements of art that came, primarily from Latin America, it achieves a sensory reconfiguring of what amounts to art experience. The works do not cross into being theatrical or dramatic pieces. They remain wearable objects. The wearing goes beyond the visceral concept of producing a picture, and a mental picture of a work. It provokes, because the tactile has become almost unspeakable in art, something out of nineteenth-century aesthetics of texture and form, (as opposed to art history).