A Conversation with Esther Brinkmann

- Interviewee: Esther Brinkmann
- Interviewer: Jun Jin Wu | Third Voice Space

Q1. As the founder and long-time director of the Jewellery Design Department at HEAD - Genève, you dedicated 18 years to establishing an exacting pedagogical order for Western contemporary jewellery. Yet, you chose to step away from that familiar locus of institutional authority to live and work in China and India for nearly a decade. This radical displacement of time and space is compelling. In an era where digital screens pre-emptively neutralize the 'unfamiliar' before we even arrive, can virtual landscapes ever truly substitute for the raw, visceral confrontation of the body within an alien space? For a creator whose foundation rests upon such a rigorous academic framework, what does this absolute "in-person presence" signify?

A1. In 2000, I met my husband, and in 2005, when he was set to be posted as a diplomat to China, I had to choose between staying in Geneva and continuing my work at the university or starting a new life abroad. The decision to leave Geneva wasn't a difficult one. I left behind a department that was running smoothly. We had interesting students and excellent partnerships with foreign universities. I was ready to embark on a new life experience. Looking back, the privilege of living in another culture is unique and irreplaceable.

Those who travel to faraway countries are filled with images, human relationships, and very varied experiences. And of course, when you live there, it's even more true. You have to let yourself be swept away by the unknown, making room for a multitude of impressions and overwhelming emotions. You leave something behind, and for a while, you're not quite sure anymore who you are. It's about losing yourself in order to (perhaps) discover another version of yourself.

For me, no virtual experience could ever replace the lived experience and the unexpected moments with real people, in real places with their scents, sounds, and so on.

The word "identity" is on everyone's lips. Often, the concept of identity is used to emphasise a sense of belonging. I'm convinced that we are not ONE, but rather MANY. We are therefore inhabited by multiple identities, far more diverse than they appear at first glance. We're also capable of recognising in others human beings with different needs and desires that are just as valid as our own and that can enrich us.

My creative work has always been an integral part of my daily life. The time I spent at school, in the studio, and at home was always dictated by priorities related to activities in one place or another. The transitions from one to the other came easily.

The opportunity to establish the jewellery and objects department in 1984 was crucial to the evolution of my own work. It served as a driving force for inspiration and commitment.

At the same time, the success of my own work as a designer solidified my credibility as a department director and teacher in the eyes of the school administration and students, the public, and the professionals.

The academic framework was nowhere near as rigorous as you might think. This project took shape with clear goals, but the ideas grew and evolved over the years, with adjustments, moments of hesitation, and doubts as well.

Geographically speaking, this project was initially conceived within a Swiss historical context and with Swiss ambitions in mind, as well as with a view to better aligning with the European educational framework. It did not—and still does not—have any "Western" pretensions.

Q2. In your practice, diverse materials - jade, lacquer, raw iron, bone, enamel, and silk - converge in remarkable collision. While many Western artists tend to treat Eastern materials as exotic motifs or superficial collages, your work demands an uncompromising material honesty: exposed chisel marks scraping across wood, rope granulated and mottled beneath layers of lacquer, and stones bearing their natural scars and deep fractures. In an age obsessed with industrial smoothness, why do you choose to leave these material traumas so nakedly exposed? During your years in Asia, how did you physically decipher and integrate these culturally laden materials into a structural resonance with your Western rational logic? Furthermore, in traversing this cross-cultural material archive, did you ever encounter a historical interlocutor across time and space—perhaps among pioneering artists or thinkers entirely outside the realm of jewellery?

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Q3. You once proposed a profound concept: that rings are "vessels for a finger." In traditional goldsmithing, standardized sizing operates as the first and most unyielding discipline imposed upon the maker. In your teaching, however, you consistently urge students to unlearn this dependence on rigid metrics. When you liberate the ring from its traditional, form-fitting conformity—transforming it into a micro-architecture or a tactile vessel—what somatic awareness or micro-perception do you intend to awaken in the wearer at the precise moment their finger enters the piece?

A3. In the late 1980s, while trying to design a ring that could be worn by people of different sizes without any adjustments, I came up with the idea of an oversized ring held in place by a rubber band. The space created between the ring and the finger allows people with fingers of various sizes to wear it. That's how I discovered the appeal and potential of this empty space.

The image that evokes this concept—which still occupies my thoughts today—is the following: "As a vase contains and values a flower, a ring contains and values a finger." Through the years, different shapes and types of rings have materialised this idea with a focus on the space between the ring and the finger and, incidentally, between fingers.

It's pleasant to wear a chunky ring that doesn't squeeze your finger but stays securely in place. This lets you handle it and play with it while being sure you won't lose it. "I can feel its weight, its texture, and its presence."

Another example is the slow, erotic gesture of slipping on the knitted part of a bell-shaped ring.

Typologies of Finger Vessels:

The first type is the *double ring*. The first ring is oversized; the second, or inner, ring fits on the finger.

The second type is the *sphere*. A sphere contains the knuckle and the ring fits at its base. The entrance hole is shaped as if you had pushed your finger through the ball. It is smooth and round. The exit hole is larger so that the finger can move easily.

The third type is the *bell*. Inspired by sea anemones, this series introduces colour into my work. Knitted silk is the chosen material, which corresponds to the required softness and fluidity of the wavy motion in these pieces. The knitted part allows the ring to fit on the finger. With its softness, knitted silk fulfils its function and complements the fluidity of the hammered metal's undulations.









Q4. A significant part of your core oeuvre relies on complex double-ring structures, tapered cylindrical tubes with trapezoidal cross-sections, and hollow spheres. Intriguingly, the inner walls of these structures do not mechanically clamp the finger; instead, they generously grant space for a subtle, internal rotation. Concurrently, the juxtaposition of double bands, or the graduated volumes of the trapezoidal forms, introduces an intricate geometric dimension

between the fingers. What does this "intimate gap"—hidden between the flesh and the metal, nested within the interstitial spaces of the double rings and invisible to the outside world—signify within your artistic philosophy? In the quiet of the studio, how do you determine the exact scale of this gap, which remains simultaneously detached and profoundly intimate?

A4. The intimate space is a very appealing image to describe the space between the ring and the finger. Metaphorically, it represents the space we all need—"a room of one's own," as Virginia Woolf put it. Aesthetically, I find a large ring that doesn't hug the finger is more beautiful. The size of the space is a matter of proportion.









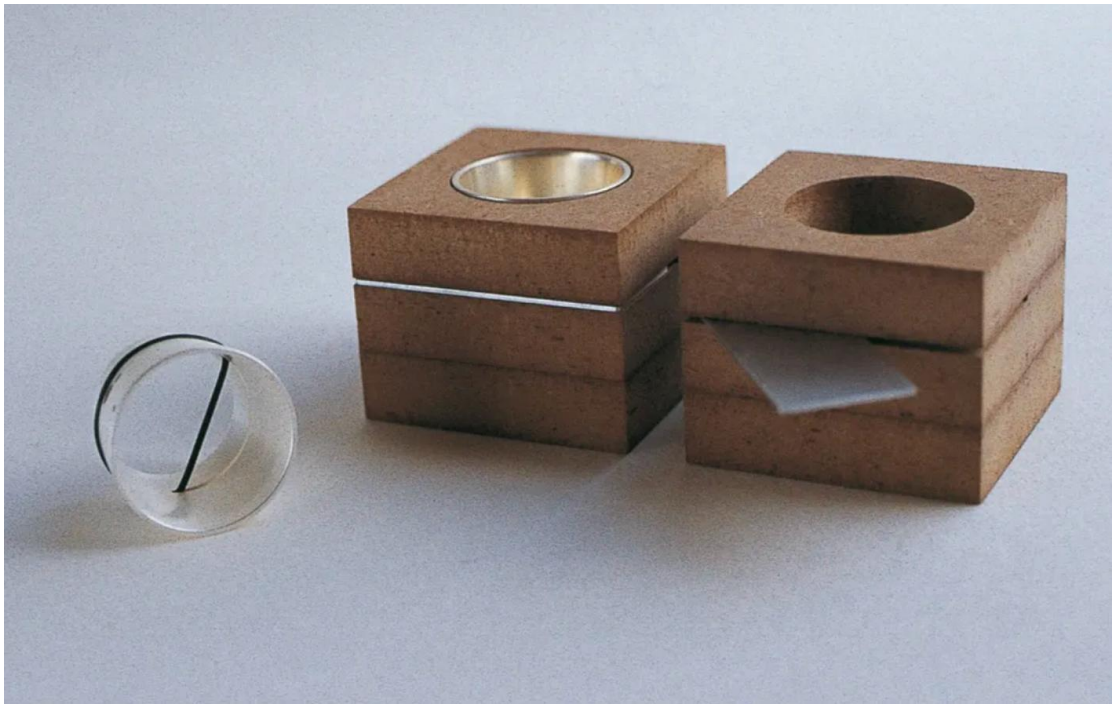


Q5. Another fascinating detail lies in your treatment of surfaces: on certain rings, you carve sharp tangents across the form, threading elastic cords through the resulting crevices to bind them, thereby endowing the interior space with an adjustable, living capacity. When worn, the skin registers a paradoxical sensation—a faint restraint coupled with a highly individualized sense of breathing. Does this specific design—which dynamically harmonizes rigid metal with the living pulse of the body—also mirror your broader understanding of the relationship between the individual and the external world?

A5. Honestly, when I created these rings, I wasn't thinking about expressing or conveying such philosophical ideas. It's a process that's first and foremost very intuitive or instinctive, and then functional. I just want to create wearable jewellery that makes you feel the touch of the hand in an unexpected and interesting way.

I'm not opposed to my creations being seen as invitations to philosophise. But for me, they're first and foremost invitations to experiment and feel; the rest is beyond me.





Q6. Your creations seem to possess a double life: when worn, they operate as an intuitive extension of the body; yet, once removed and placed inside a containment box handcrafted by your own hands, they transform into self-contained, independent sculptures. How do you navigate this liminal state between somatic symbiosis and autonomous existence? Furthermore, what specific role do these containment objects—which we might simply call "jewellery boxes"—play in your broader artistic expression?

A6. I'd like to quote the introduction that Philippe Solms wrote for the conversation we had together for my monograph: "It would not be possible to give an account of the dynamics of Esther Brinkmann's creativity without addressing what she develops around her pieces with the aim of creating a more intense, more enjoyable, or more understandable experience of them. What was at the outset a form of packaging thus became a creation per se, meeting broader needs. Similarly, the mechanics of presentation and mediation, just as the exhibition spaces, have increasingly yielded to site-specific conceptual works. There, too, what arose from practical exigencies—for instance, the need to resort to a display to present a certain type of object to a given public—has been transformed into a layout that is a vector for emotions and meanings, even into an artwork in its own right. Alongside jewellery, but always related to it, Esther Brinkmann is thus at the source of a complementary production, arising entirely from her personal universe and enriching it with supplementary perspectives."

This "other" production, which has only gradually become more apparent, bears eloquent witness to the artist's own approach to the creative process. It is a process that gives pride of place to intuition, experimentation, chance, appropriation, and operations entailing construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. This approach proceeds from encounters and confrontations between materials, techniques, images, and ideas. It draws on opportunities, contingencies, and new beginnings, while allowing conceptual elements to organise themselves at the whim of the "making process".

The question then is: how can I create containers that lend a special quality to the experience of discovering the piece of jewellery inside, as well as to the act of picking it up and putting it back? My intention was for the box to be part of a genuine ritual of unveiling and storing, and for it to evoke a sense of pleasure and wonder that could be renewed as often as desired. With that in mind, for nearly all of my boxes, I wanted them to prompt a sort of interplay of gestures and sensations—an interplay centred on the delayed perception of the object inside, one that highlights the unexpected, the act of handling, and the relationship to the object's preciousness.

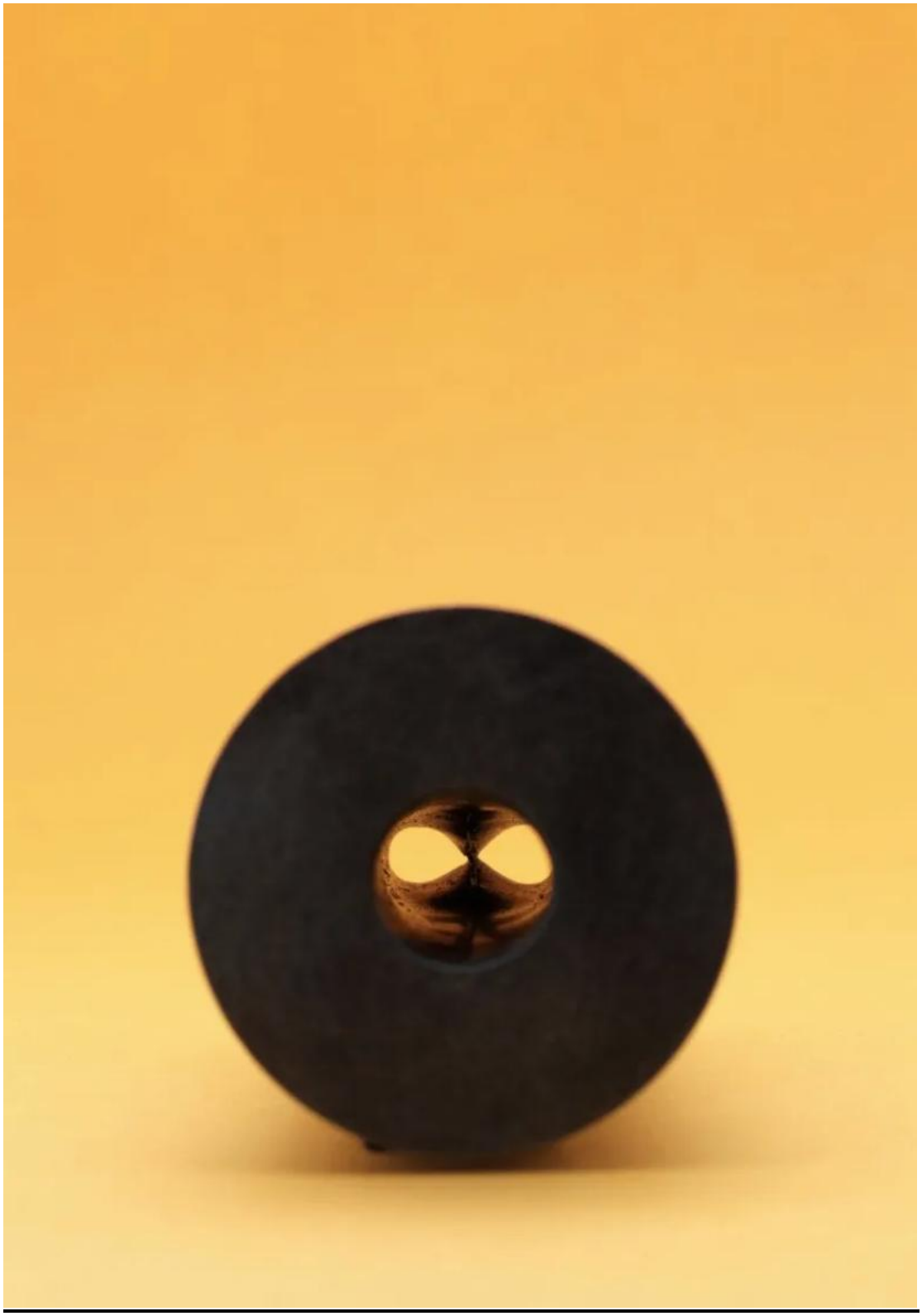
To photograph my double rings for documentary purposes, I used the inner ring to stabilise the ring so it could stand on its own. I also included their case in the frame. This led me to explore two new lines of inquiry. On the one hand, I began to think more about jewellery as an object with its own status—hence, in particular, the creation of rings that can stand upright on their own. And on the other hand, I now envisioned my containers as elements to be deliberately juxtaposed with the jewellery.

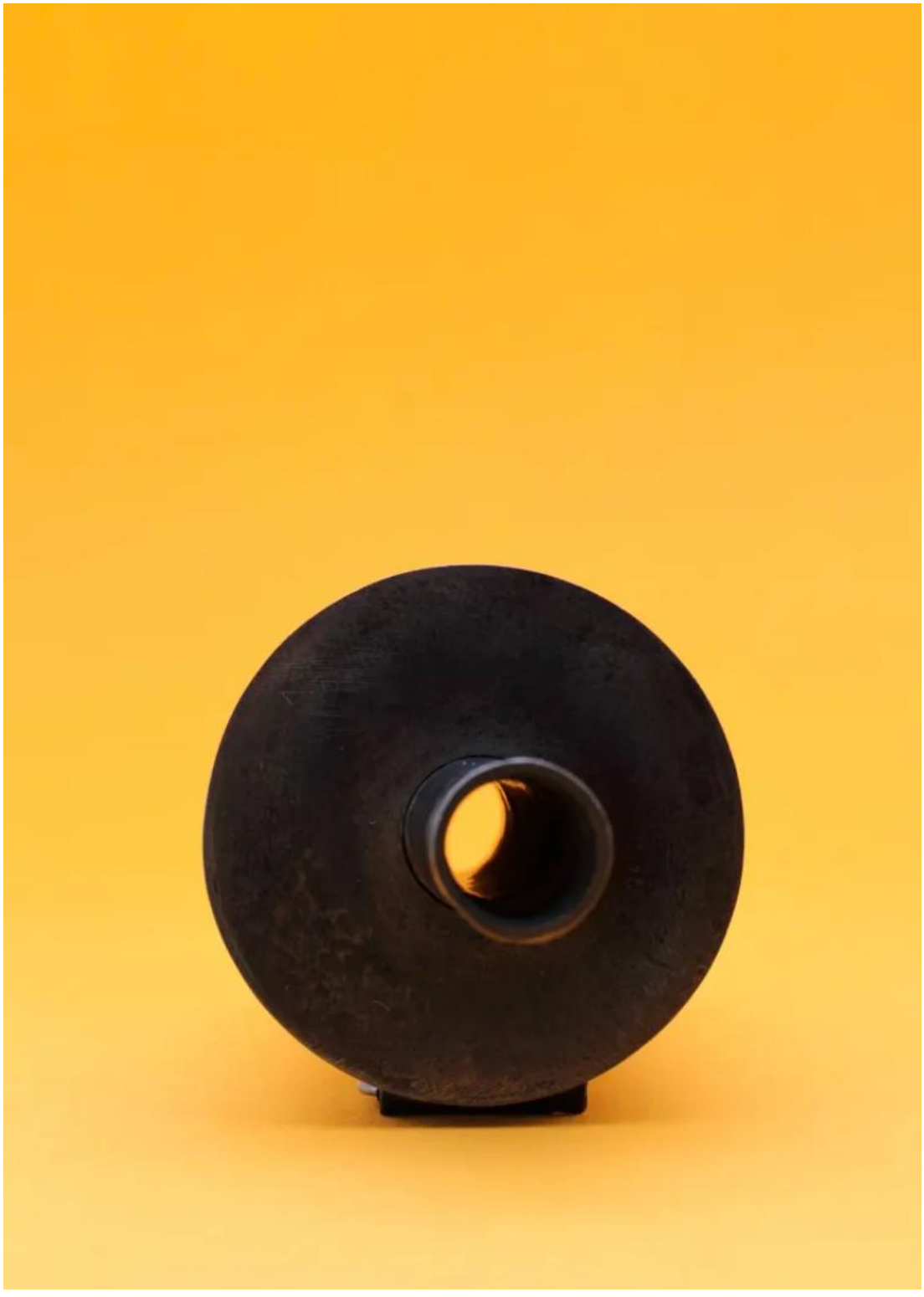
This approach fascinated me. The juxtaposition of container and ring establishes a scale that flatters the jewellery and pairs it with a sort of counterpart, much like a theatre actor interacting with a prop. I have therefore paid ever-greater attention not only to the rings as autonomous objects, but also to their containers: unique pieces that, in their own right, convey meaning and emotion. In terms of craftsmanship, a container may thus require substantial work until it achieves the appropriate physical presence and significance in relation to the ring with which it is meant to interact.

In presenting certain series of brooches and pendants, I also sought to explore the viewer's perspective and mental representations. To this end, among other methods and strategies, I made particular use of photography. Depending on the context, my intention was either to prompt the viewer to reflect on the element of mystery inherent in certain pieces or to engage with this broader dimension that I call "the understanding of jewellery."

With the pendants from the "Eclipse" series—whose interiors can only be glimpsed through a tiny hole—endoscopic shots, for example, lead one to experience the enclosed space in a completely new way and to approach the jewellery object from an unprecedented perspective. In the "Vu d'ici" brooch series, the person wearing a brooch in the centre of their torso sees through it a passage that transforms from its entrance to its exit. In the box that accompanies this piece of jewellery, this interior passage is reflected in a mirror.

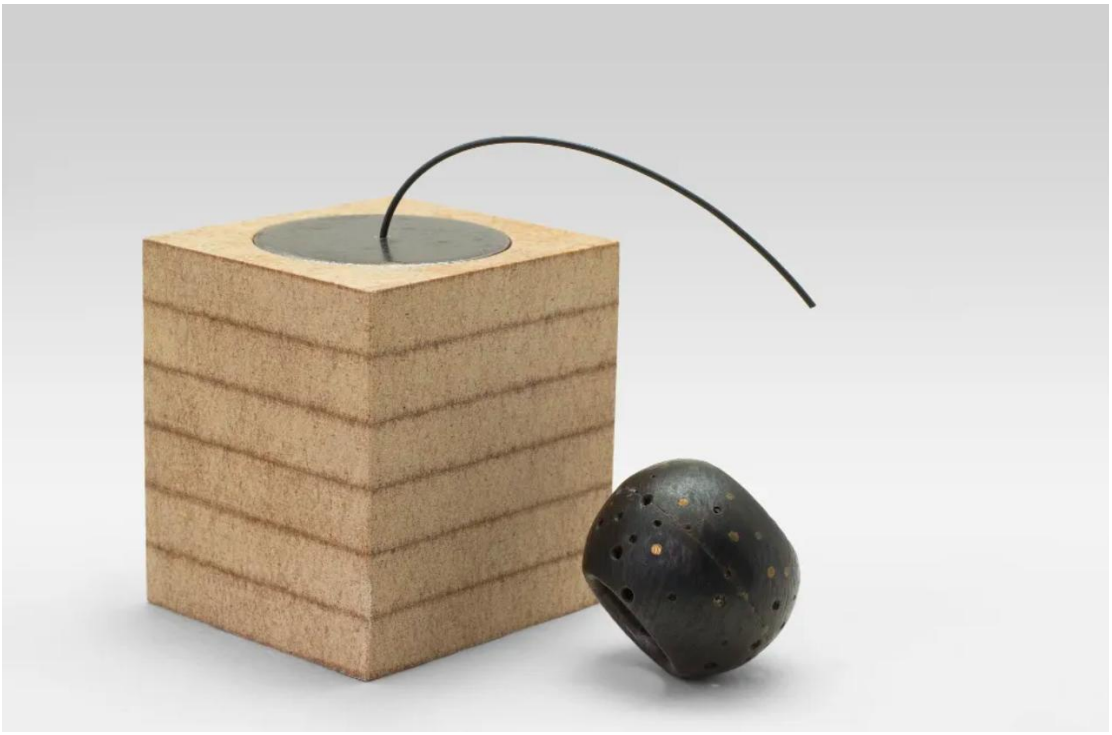
Whenever I have the opportunity, I try to make the most of this creative freedom to offer the viewer a unique encounter with the piece of jewellery. In some cases, I aim to help the viewer experience the jewellery specifically as an object with its own identity—one capable of stimulating the imagination independently of any connection to the body or clothing. In other cases, I'll focus above all on presenting the piece as a companion—a chosen object that reveals the intimacy of its owner. Or I'll invite the viewer to experience the sensual, even erotic, dimension of the act of putting on, taking off, and playing with the object. In other words, I like to think of the various aspects of jewellery as territories that open up possibilities and expand its creative scope.













Q7. You transitioned from an institutional head who instituted a rigorous academic order to an independent creator navigating constant international migration due to familial circumstances. How has this profound shift in identity, coupled with geographic detachment, impacted and reshaped your professional self-awareness?

A7. I was juggling two roles at the same time: head of an institution and independent creator. The radical change was finding myself solely in the role of an independent artist within a completely new context. This shift threw me off balance for quite some time. I didn't know what to do anymore, and, of course, this situation led me to new challenges and new ideas.

To develop some of these ideas, I needed techniques I hadn't yet mastered. I realised it was important and interesting for me to seek collaborations with local artisans. That's how I came to work with a jade carver in Guangzhou, China, and later with a master enamel artist in Jaipur, India. I had to track down expert artisans and then find the right way to communicate so that these artisans would see the value in participating in bringing my ideas to life, even if it meant stepping outside their comfort zone.

Sharing our very different professional experiences was enriching for everyone involved. My approach to the creative process differs from that of artisans who create pieces rooted in tradition. Our criteria for beauty are not the same. It took time, patience, and trust on both sides. Moreover, these collaborations helped me gain a slightly deeper understanding of the diverse Chinese and Indian cultures.

Q8. The external world can easily reduce a woman migrating for family reasons to a single, flattened label. Yet, you have consistently sustained the high-frequency production of a professional artist alongside demanding global educational commitments, such as your workshops across Asia. If we regard frequent transnational migration and the inescapable trivialities of domestic routine as a form of "restraint" that reality imposes upon a creator, how do you—much like your ring designs—carve out an independent space to breathe freely within life's rigid bindings?

A8. Moving to distant countries was a choice, not a necessity forced upon me by war or other natural, political, or economic disasters. I didn't have to flee, leaving all my belongings behind. My studio came with me; I was able to organise myself so that I had the time and space to continue my work. Living intensely in the present, without regretting the past or needlessly fantasising about an unknown future—that is my motto.

Q9. The practice of contemporary jewellery demands immense duration and demanding physical intensity—from the meticulous layering of lacquer to the forging of metal. Immersed as you are in complex real-life identities and daily minutiae, is this highly time-consuming, hands-on labour a physical burden, or has it become a form of meditative sanctuary? How do you distil the enduring "duration" of art through the daily, atomized sequence of seconds and the fragmented nature of every passing moment?

A9. Work is the guiding thread of my life. It's a great privilege to have a passion that doesn't depend on any fixed location, sponsor, or boss. On the contrary, changes open up new possibilities, and I'm happy to adapt to them.

There are familiar gestures that I repeat, and there are new ones to learn. When I create something with my hands, I can feel secure, but sometimes also unsettled. It's a source of satisfaction, but also of frustration—something I've had to learn to accept and manage.

Some models and sketches kept me occupied for a long time before I understood them and found meaning in them. I'd like to point out that sometimes ideas take months, even years, to mature until I find the right solution to turn them into wearable objects.

This work is therefore both a refuge and a means of sharing.

Q10. Looking back at your decades of creative and pedagogical practice, has jewellery evolved for you from a mere medium of expression into an instinctive mechanism for observing the world and experiencing life? If you were to choose one of your own works as an ultimate metaphor for your state of life up to this point, which one would it be? Finally, for the younger

generation of creators—currently saturated by digital media, accelerated tempos, and pervasive consumerism—what advice would you offer on how to safeguard their sensitivity toward materials and maintain absolute honesty toward life amidst all the noise?

A10. My creative work is, above all, a space for freedom, pleasure, and sharing. It allows me to use and transform materials into beautiful objects that others will enjoy discovering, desiring, and wearing—and that they, in turn, will want to share with others.

What I've chosen to describe here as a metaphorical object for my life is not one of my artworks. It is a stone I found a long time ago in the forest. It is a small face that I almost tripped over and that looked up at me from the ground. I picked it up, placed it in an open box, and it has been with me for many years (see page 27 in my monograph).

Keep your eyes open and seize the right opportunities.

Advice for young people: While studying at an art school, you're supported by teachers, classmates, technical resources, and the overall atmosphere. Once you graduate, you'll need friends, patience, and courage to maintain your energy and curiosity. You may have to find a day job to make ends meet. Give yourself the means to pursue what you love, whether it's traditional or revolutionary.

Choose a life partner who isn't jealous of your work.

ESTHER

BRINKMANN