For more than 40 years, the gold and silversmithing department of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) has regularly brought distinguished international and Australian artists to work with students and practitioners from across Australia and New Zealand. These masterclasses have had an important and enduring influence on the development of the country’s lively and intelligent contemporary jewellery field. ‘MasterMakers’ at RMIT Gallery represented a comprehensive examination of their legacy.

This huge exhibition featured the work of 84 artists who either taught or participated in the masterclasses. The biggest challenge for its curator Mark Edgoose was how to wrangle almost 200 incredibly diverse objects into an aesthetically coherent exhibition while also making the story of the masterclass program legible.

Edgoose met the first part of the challenge admirably. The exhibition was undeniably handsome and he made effective use of two long purpose-built cases and the walls of the main gallery to install the majority of the work. Two smaller breakout rooms offered the opportunity for a more intimate encounter with the objects on display. One of these rooms was devoted to the experimental working processes of the classes, showing video documentation, maquettes and notebooks.

However, apart from this room and an introductory wall text, there was nothing in the gallery space to direct the viewer’s understanding of how the objects constituted an account of the masterclasses. Edgoose eschewed more extended labels within the cases in favour of a simple system of sequential numbering of the works. This created space for each object to enjoy some aesthetic autonomy, but obliged the viewer to refer constantly to the 11-page room brochure for any information about them.

Neither the brochure nor the way the work was installed gave an indication of which of the artists were teachers and who were their students. This assigned everyone’s work an equal value that reflected the collegial atmosphere of the classes, but it also meant that the installation tended to bury the history that the exhibition set out to recount. Having said that, the exhibition was a fascinating chronicle of some of the interests and preoccupations of four decades of practice.

Contemporary jewellery is a prodigiously diverse field, encompassing immersive engagement with the mastery of traditional materials and techniques at one end of the spectrum, and highly experimental, speculative projects at the other. Helen Aitken-Kuhnen’s refined enamel work, Ian Ferguson’s and Stefano Marchetti’s bravura excursions into alloying and patination, and Robert Baines’s extraordinary revival of the demanding technique of granulation provided distinguished examples of the former. At
the same time, the exhibition included works breach ing categories and genres such as Tassia Joannides’s loosely wearable objects made from second-hand underwear, and Eli Giannini and Lindy McSwan’s collaborative performance Watch your Manners (2019), represented here in the form of a video and the props for the performance.

Vernacular forms provide a rich field for investigating jewellery’s social meanings and practices. Their ironic cooption became the basis for a witty conversation about the value and meaning of skill in David Bielander’s cardboard (watch) (2015) and Karl Fritsch’s untitled 2005 rings. The legendary Otto Künzli invoked the button and the badge in American popular culture in his strangely sinister Mickey Mouse brooches from the early 1990s. Manon van Kouswijk’s poetic exploration of the form of the bead necklace, Pearl Grey (2009), elided the act of wearing jewellery and the genteel social ritual of taking tea, while Nicole Jacquard adopted the formal language of the locket in a series of works that also referred to the relationship between photography and sentimental jewellery.

Found and reworked objects were also a strong theme, of which David Clarke’s mashups of cast and found vessels and figurines that engage with notions of function and dysfunction were the most virtuosic example. At the other end of the spectrum, Bin Dixon-Ward’s sombre-toned 3D printed neckpieces offered a fine example of the way in which new processes and materials provide opportunities to rethink the possibilities of making.

This small survey in no way addresses all of the preoccupations of the show, but it does indicate ways in which the exhibition might have animated the material to establish dialogues between artists and the milieus from which they emerged. At the same time, I acknowledge that it is perhaps unreasonable to think that the format of an exhibition can encompass a comprehensive study of the history and impact of the masterclasses. Julie Ewington’s useful catalogue essay supplies other contexts for thinking about their value that cannot easily be translated into the limited form of an exhibition.¹ Her contextualisation of the program within the activities of an active network of funding and educational institutions, the tracing of global links forged by the program and her prioritisation of the voices of its participants both reinforce the value of ‘MasterMakers’ as a research project and suggest a more extended platform which might incorporate a variety of forms: a symposium and book, for example, or even a website.

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