

PHILIP NOAKES

Sculptural Silver at the University of Western Australia

Philip Noakes is recognised as one of the outstanding contemporary jewellers, goldsmiths, and silversmiths working in this country. Over many decades he has earned a reputation as a consummate craftsman and a highly original and innovative artist within the expanded world of metal craft.

From his early study for the technically demanding four-year full-time Diploma in the Design and Craftsmanship of Silversmithing at Sir John Cass College of Art London in 1972 he has taken opportunities as they arose and initiated them when they didn't, thus fashioning his practice to be constantly reflexive to the changing environment in which he finds himself. While at 'The Cass' Philip remembers the excitement of seeing works by David Hockney, René Magritte, Andy Warhol, Lucie Rie, Hans Coper and Henning Koppel.

Every artist forges their practice from a combination of these chance encounters that coincide with discovered aptitudes and happy accidents. Each does it differently, first succumbing to their impulse to create and then finding impetus through a rigorous process of trial and error; success and abject disappointment, euphoria and dark depression. Where they start is often circumstantial, but where they end up is always hard won. After exploring a plethora of options available they eventually arrive at a unique place, one they carve out for themselves, even if it remains unresolved. Even so their practice remains forever in a state of flux.

Philip is the archetypal adaptor, highly flexible, using his skills to solve problems and always finding new perspectives from which to recalibrate and reimagine the world he inhabits. He refuses to be constrained by his history. Indeed, he employs his history as a springboard to launch challenging projects and establish creative initiatives, such as Sculptural Silver.

After many years of fabricating jewellery, the urge to return to the passion of his early student days as a silversmith and create objects and vessels raised from flat sheets of silver was sparked by a visit to London and a reunion with old classmates from the Sir John Cass College. In 2016, he returned to learn new techniques and build a skill base around the use of new equipment. Once armed with this arsenal of possibilities he began to work in earnest, first with copper maquettes to explore ideas that played with variations of classic forms and then to test how textures would play across these forms.

This miraculous process conjures up beautiful items. His hollow forms are transformed into closed containers, bowls that seem to float and lavish sculptural objects, all with elaborate textures created by hammering, engraving, oxidising and with flame treatments to enliven the surface of each vessel. In developing the works for Philip Noakes: Sculptural Silver his experimentation led him to explore exciting and previously uncharted territory. He tried out new raising techniques, researched the effects of hammering on different metals and experimented with scale through the creation of pieces that were larger than anything he had previously tackled. His raised forms became more adventurous while he concurrently returned to the traditional techniques he had learned as a student.



The exhibition itself has been a triumph and justified those words. Fifty plus works were installed in a cavernous gallery dimly lit to allow a video of Philip working to be playing on one wall. Into this Aladdin's Cave a forest of plinths crowned with clear acrylic covers held a treasure trove of gleaming silver and flamed copper:

Each case containing a striking individual artwork or a related group of objects, was bathed in a pool of light. In one a centrepiece floated eerily in space apparently suspended. Touches of gold on some of the elegant *Ocean Currents* and *Crystal* vessels were a subtle contrast that enlivened classic forms reworked for a modern age.

On first entering the exhibition, long acrylic wall cases held examples of work from student pieces undertaken at Sir John Cass College, through commissions to recent experiments laid out below his renderings of the same objects. On another wall a smaller wall case of miniature objects was placed beneath magnified images of their various surfaces that illustrated the differing textures and thus explained and complimented the major works.

Elegant pitchers, low platters, globular vases, spaceship evocative centrepieces and enclosed pyramidal vessels all cried out to be admired. In an alcove in a dividing wall two moon shaped vases glowed as a light beam caressed their rippled texture.

Nearby a centrepiece on loan for the exhibition showcased an interesting collaboration in design between the woman who had commissioned it for her new home and the maker.

Textured surfaces enliven almost all the vessels with patination, another fascination of Philip's, seen on many pieces. The colouration achieved on copper is almost as lively as that which can usually be seen on titanium and has been stabilized with a protective wax to ensure durability. These colour points provided contrasts that enlivened the display.

Now Philip Noakes is once again hard at work making for his next exhibition to be held at the Australian Galleries in Sydney in April 2020.

Dorothy Erickson

