



'Ice Teapot', 1998, functional table piece in stg silver, with detachable silver stand, 35 x 30 x 15 cm

Rajesh Gogna

NEW FOR OLD DEVELOPMENTS IN SILVER

Industrial minimalism inspired by a unique blend of modern architecture, historical reference and a concern for making, informs the handmade sculptural metalwork of British silversmith Rajesh Gogna. Profile by Corinne Julius.

I first scorched myself with metal at the age of 13 in the family workshop. I placed my hand on some hot silver cooling on an anvil and that was my first real contact with metal. It left me with a “burning ambition”, says Rajesh Gogna. ‘At 14 I made up one of my father’s designs, a small ceremonial bowl and began to explore fine jewellery making in his workshop. A natural addiction developed in me – I kept returning to the gold sheet I had begun hammering to form the small bowl. I became fascinated with the way gold and silver were so ductile and malleable; the permutations were limitless. But I didn’t want to be a silversmith. I wanted to do architecture.’

Goldsmithing, however, was difficult to escape. As descendants of the famous Mair Rajput caste – Royal warriors turned goldsmiths – it was in his family’s blood. Rajesh’s grandfather had come from Northern India to England in 1947 and established a small jewellery workshop in Birmingham. His grandfather’s five sons, plus the husbands of three of his grandfather’s daughters were all goldsmiths. Rajesh didn’t get to study architecture, but the influence is clear in all his work. His pieces have a strong sense of form and raise the question of the relationship of an object to its surrounding space. His earliest pieces, a series of

teapots that appear to grow out of wall hangings, are a strange mix of 2D/3D. They look like architectural models or aerial views of buildings that have been hung on the wall rather than displayed on a horizontal surface. His current vessels, with their protruding tubes and strange asymmetrical forms, seem like Frank Gehry buildings let loose as a futuristic cityscape on a table top.

Like a surprising number of contemporary silversmiths, Rajesh Gogna is dyslexic and chose to follow a hands-on route. In 1992, at the age of 16, he did a City & Guilds course in basic silversmithing at the School of Jewellery in Birmingham’s traditional Jewellery Quarter. He went on to do a Higher National Diploma in which he started to explore larger silversmithing techniques. ‘This was a new direction for me, moving towards creating functional silverware. The course was industry related and I learnt a lot about silversmithing. I did lighting, tableware and jewellery. I enjoyed the production side a lot, but I played with concept and form. I think you have to have the ability to make something function and you also have to understand it before you can subvert it,’ he explains.

He enjoys the challenge of problem solving, but the real thrill is what he calls “juxtaposing” or turning an idea or



'Hand Held Lota Vessels', 2009, stg silver, sheet fabrication, raising, and assembly, lathe-turned walnut, each diam. 18 x 22 cm



'Hanging Wall/Tabletop Vessels', 2010, stg silver, sheet fabrication, raising, assembly, 20 x 22 x 28 cm



'Zip Bowl', 2000, anodised aluminium, spun, cut and assembled, diam. 30 cm



'Hanging Wall/Tabletop Vessel', 2010, powder coated brass, ht 22 cm



'Vintage Salt Cellar', 2008, stg silver and walnut, 10 x 15 x 9 cm



'Ice Coffee Pot', 2008, stg silver, with detachable silver stand, 30 x 34 x 15 cm

object on its head. 'I'm very thoughtful about my work. It's both my downfall and my strength. I spend a long time being meticulous about decision making. A piece can stay on my bench for two years. It has to be right when I put it out there. I commission myself and set my own boundaries, constantly pushing my making skills by using basic skills in non-traditional ways. Much of my work looks as though it has been manufactured by industrial processes or laser-cutting, but it hasn't. To me it's important that I can do the work by hand and celebrate my skills in ways that are innovative.' His working method relies on his keen understanding of process and the handling of material, which comes from his early training.

Gogna won a design innovation award from the British Jewellers Association and went to Sheffield Hallam University to do the BA Hons 3D Metalwork, Jewellery and Silversmithing degree. He chose this institution because 'It had an historical heritage for Silversmithing. I pushed my limitations as an artist alongside the boundaries of the conventional expectations of Silversmithing. My aim was to address utility and function with the addition of observing new trends and cultural changes in society.' Gogna developed his "Ice Tea-pot" range, based on his research into the British culture of tea drinking and the ceremony involved in making, pouring and drinking it within a social context. By 1997 iced tea was becoming more and more popular in the UK, but makers failed to react to the trend.

'I felt that this was the perfect way to celebrate historical and modern day social change in our culture. I started by taking the most iconic shape of a teapot – the traditional ceramic "Brown Betty" – but wanted to keep the shape of the metal sheet, so I re-formed the teapot to become a contemporary evolution of its original. This involved addressing its function, which had to allow you to pour your pre-made ice tea into the vessel, then remove the vessel from the stand to place it in the fridge. Once chilled it could be taken out the fridge and placed on the stand. The suspended vessel is designed to allow for any condensation to drip onto a tray below prior to serving of the tea.' The piece not only won him the Goldsmiths' Company – Silversmithing Award, but was purchased in 2002 by the Contemporary Arts Society for Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery Modern Silver Collection and has been featured in many exhibitions.

He went onto to do an MA at Birmingham where he developed "Un-zipped", a series of vessels which unzip to relate to the original flat piece of metal. It is an exploration of the sophistication of the zipper, "juxtaposed" within the unexpected context of tableware. He relishes re-examining



'Zip Bowl Series 1', 2000, anodised aluminium, spun, cut and assembled, two sizes, diam. 30 cm and 50 cm

and reinterpreting taken-for-granted objects such as the teapot or the zip. 'The zip is a highly engineered object which people don't understand,' he says. Part of his enthusiasm for the idea was that he could incorporate the zip into his metal forms. 'You can unzip a hard piece of metal to make it tactile.' He created this award-winning series in a range of metals from copper to oxidised silver. Each piece is unique and cut by hand. The "Un-zipped" series has been featured in numerous publications and exhibitions, including the "13th Silver Triennial 2000" in Germany and "Beyond Materials" in Bangkok.

Gogna has continued to explore the historical associations of silver, taking the salt cellar as his basic unit in his "Vintage" series. In this he uses historical designs for handles incorporated into new vessels, often created from a flat sheet of metal and combined with wood. The vessels are placed in the context of the cut-out form of the handle set in the wood panel.

Until recently, despite or because of his family, he has steered clear of his cultural background in both his education and his practice. 'I felt people expected this stance, but I decided having pushed the contemporary I could go back to my roots.' His "Lota" series of vessels relate to a common form of water vessel in India. In 2005 he developed a series of gifts for visiting dignitaries at the invitation of the Indian Government. His subsequent designs were derived from an amalgamation of Indian lotas and 18th century coffee and cocoa pots in the Victoria & Albert Museum. They poured towards the body, rather than as traditionally away from it, which is reflected in the placing of the wooden handles at an angle of 45 degrees. His collections for 2011 of "Hand Held" vessels launched



Zip teeth detail



'Zipper Bowl Series 2', 2000, stg silver, saw-pierced, brushed finish, diam. 32 cm



'Cubism' (detail), 2011, wall plate, stg silver, diam. 26 cm



'Writing Instrument' (inspired by the Quill), 1999, stg silver, length 16 cm



'Folding Cutlery', 2002, stg silver, fold-formed, soldered, polished, 18 x 5 cm



Rajesh Gogna working on a stg silver lota vessel

during the London Design Festival 2010 at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London are heavily influenced by his interest in architecture. Their oval or circular forms are surmounted by a selection of cooling tower-like forms or strange protuberances in silver and wood. Yet they pour perfectly.

Last July he visited the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao as part of a regional maker development program hosted by Designer Maker West Midlands, aimed at encouraging mid-career makers to develop new work. 'I knew what I wanted to do before I went there, but I had to confirm that it was right. I was fascinated by the exterior of the museum and wanted to create silver that, like the building, could be as dramatic outside as within.' The resulting works in silver, black powder-coated brass and rope are clearly striking sculptural reactions to architecture. Gogna refers to them as miniature "3D sculptures in silver".

His other new series of "Cubism" wallpieces, cubes or tessellations cut into a wall-mounted plate, show a similar architectural feel. They are stripped down elements of geometry which challenge perceptions. Scribed by eye, pierced by drill, sawed and folded, they are intended to be displayed on the wall for maximum impact. Like so much of Gogna's work, it is minimalist in approach. He strips the work down to its most fundamental features, working with the ethos of "less but better". The most dominant influences are modern architecture and the Bauhaus manifesto. 'I like elaborate and fussy things for their social history, but ornamentation and pattern do nothing for me. When making I always aim for a clean lined aesthetic. I want my pieces to be neutral but bold. It's a visual effect that shouts at you, but is neutral in so much as its essence is familiar. So I strip away the clutter and textures. Most of my work has a plain matt finish.'

Rajesh Gogna has taught on the production project in the Gold/Silversmithing & Jewellery Department of the Royal College of Art, London, is currently Senior Lecturer on the BA Hons 3D Design Crafts, Jewellery course at Staffordshire University and is also a visiting lecturer at Coventry University on the MA Contemporary Crafts course. He is an active member of the Contemporary British Silversmiths Association, and is represented in its travelling group exhibition "Side x Side Edge to Edge", which was first showcased in Finland 2009 and is currently touring the UK. His future development he sees as addressing the boundaries of Art and the issue of when a craft object becomes art. Some would say he has already emphatically answered the question.

Corinne Julius

Corinne Julius is a respected London-based visual arts journalist with a particular interest in the applied arts. She is a Council Member of the Critics' Circle and was a judge of the prestigious Jerwood Contemporary Applied Arts Prize for Metalwork.