

Model for 'The Room of Dreams', 2011, 64 x 64 x 40 cm

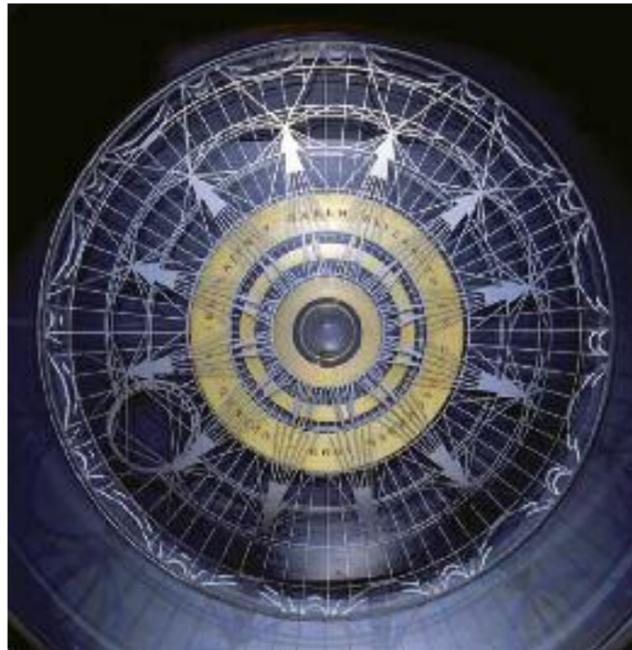


## WENDY RAMSHAW: ROOMS OF DREAMS

Tour itinerary: Somerset House, London, 5 – March – 24 June, 2012; Ruthin Craft Centre, Ruthin, 00 August – 0 October, 2012; Harley Gallery, Welbeck, 0 November – 00 December, 2012; Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, 00 February – 00 March, 2013

In August, 2002 the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh unveiled a new work by Wendy Ramshaw entitled *Room of Dreams*. It was an extraordinary example of the jewel as total artwork – a red and white room filled with furniture, hung with semi precious jewellery, alongside found objects, and contained within the abstract geometry of a Corian wall and patterned floor. As recently stated, it set out to 'seduce the senses and ensnare the imagination' and in 2012 this effect is still evident as new *Rooms of Dreams* are unveiled in London, set in the grand, neoclassical surroundings of Somerset House and supported through Ruthin Craft Centre and the Harley Gallery.

This 2012 installation, and its comprehensive catalogue, reminds us of the unique position which Wendy Ramshaw occupies in the ever shifting landscape of contemporary art and design. Trained initially as a textile designer and illustrator, she has long occupied centre stage in the field of contemporary jewellery, and in the early



'Millennium Medal' (detail), 1999, 18 ct yellow gold, nanocrystalline diamond-coated steel and zirconium, diam. 6 cm HM Queen Elizabeth II and The British Museum

1970s created one of the few original re-interpretations of the ring form, with groups of gold and silver rings, arranged on tiny, turned towers of steel. Her highly prolific 40-year career has produced a wealth of further jewels, whose poetic abstract geometry of spirals, cones and squares has been fabricated in materials as various as gold, clay, paper, Corian, fabric and semi-precious stones. However, all have the rare gift of both acknowledging a machine age – the 1972 *White Queen* ringset shown in "Jewellery in Europe" was analysed by an IBM computer to reveal its infinite possibilities of combination – whilst retaining subtle, emotional warmth. The jewellery is publicly acknowledged through over 70 international museum collections and privately enjoyed by the many individuals who own it all over the world.

But Ramshaw does not sit easily within the contained, often inward looking, world of the independent studio jeweller, with its specialist publications, collectors and critical writers. Her reach is wider and more public, and this is seen most clearly in a growing series of commissions for site-specific architectural metalwork. From an early commission for a gate for St. Johns College Oxford to the more recent dramatic gates for Hyde Park in London, reveal what has always underpinned her work, that she is first and foremost a designer, whose imagination is responsive to the people, and technologies, of a fast paced world.

She has enormous curiosity about human lives and knowledge, and sees vast possibilities in the man made – be they the precision tools imagined and engineered for navigation and shipbuilding by a seafaring nation, or the rich seams of art and artefacts collected in museums. A 2006 residency at the Science Museum in Oxford laid the foundations for another extraordinary installation in Edinburgh in 2007 *A Journey through Glass* which, with its fantastical blue 'Model for Portlet Bay Gate, Jersey', 2010, painted steel





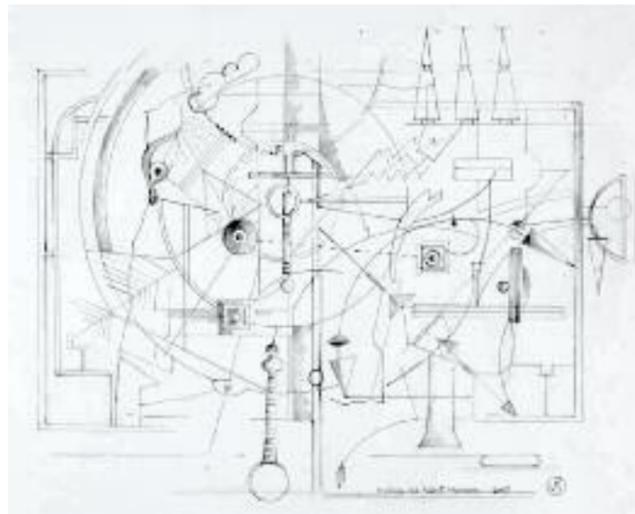
'The New Edinburgh Gate, Hyde Park, London', 2010, cast and patinated bronze, 15 m in length



'Pair of Nonmatching Earrings in Six Parts', 2002, 18 ct gold, precious stones

glass assemblages of vessels and spheres, echoed the collections of antique laboratory equipment in Oxford – and captured the magic of the experimental life.

*A Journey through Glass* also highlights another important aspect of the artist's working life – that of collaboration. The beautiful glass



Drawing celebrating the 'Victoria & Albert Museum's 150th Anniversary Album', 2007, pencil on paper. V&A Museum Collection, London

forms were created with the help of leading gaffers at Pilchuck Glass School in the US where Wendy was resident in 2006. This thread of working with makers of things, and using her acute design eye to encourage imaginative making, spans her entire career from early special collections, like the 1982

is this more clearly expressed than in her response to other forms of art – most particularly sculpture and painting. This found its most direct expression in the jewellery collection *Picasso's Ladies* which was created over a decade from 1989 – and shown in early form in Edinburgh and later as a complete documented collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Museum of Art and Design in New York. Each jewel, or group of jewels, was created by Ramshaw in response to a different female portrait by Picasso. The jewels paid homage not only to the colours, patterns and shapes of the paintings that inspire them but also, through their emotional qualities as jewels, remind us of the intimate lives of these unnamed, painted women many of whom were mistresses of the Spanish painter. A particular favourite of mine is *Chain of Stones for Woman Ironing* – a glittering necklace of silver gilt with multi-coloured stones – a dream filled jewel – that pairs a 1904 Picasso portrait of a very labour-worn, chalk-white woman for whom the jewel would be an impossible, but



'Twelve Trees, the Golden Sun & Silver Bird', 2002, mild steel, aluminium, gold and platinum leaf, 4.7 x 3.9 m. Prior's Court School, Berkshire, UK



'Double Screen eH9681', 1997, mild steel, optical glass and various materials in black, 3 x 4 m. Victoria & Albert Museum, London



'Wall of Dreams', 2002, installation at The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, width 4.9 m

clearly needed, distraction.

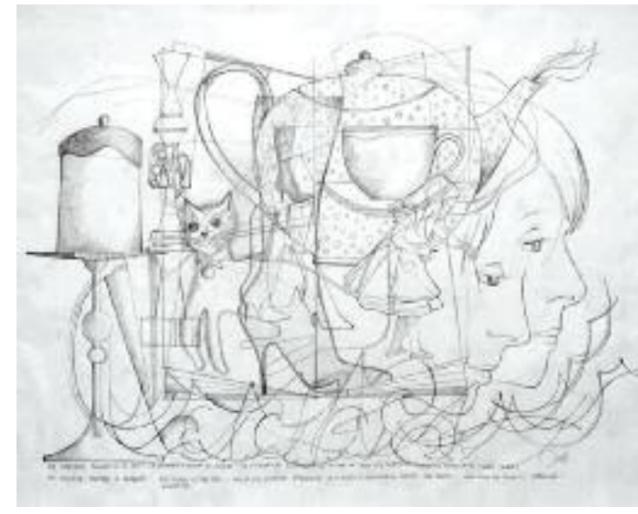
In her essay, 'Making Thoughts Visible' for the *Rooms of Dreams* catalogue, the art critic Marina Vaizey notes that Ramshaw's work explores 'an astonishingly wide field of the possibilities of jewellery as not only feminine adornment but also feminine expressiveness.'<sup>2</sup> This is an important, and rarely noted aspect of Ramshaw's oeuvre that it is both for, and in some way, about women. One of the objects in "Rooms of Dreams" illustrates this well. It is a powder coated white steel plate, fretted with the patterns of keyholes and on to which are tied bunches of red and white keys entitled a *Chateleine for Frida Kahlo*. As Ramshaw tells us, 'many years ago, when I first saw one of Frida Kahlo's self portraits, I was immediately captivated by its intensity, Frida's painted depiction of her life was riveting, deeply personal and complex .... the chateleine is as near to a piece of jewellery as I can imagine making for this fascinating, charismatic woman.'<sup>3</sup>

This response to another exceptional female imagination, with its image of the domestic realised in the form of a chateleine – a traditional housekeepers accoutrement – also reminds us that Ramshaw's prolific, public career as an artist and designer has been balanced by a private family life with three other artists (her husband the jeweller and musician David Watkins; her son the printmaker and sculptor Richard Watkins; and her daughter the designer Miranda Watkins). This element of her life is explored in the late Graham Hughes' book *A Life's Partnership* of 2009 reflecting on the working lives of both David and Wendy. On various visits to her former London studio, I have always been struck by her rare ability to integrate the public and the private; the domestic and the professional. With no hint of disjunction one might find oneself having lunch at her kitchen table surrounded by cardboard models of new gates; racks of Easter cakes for an instal-



'Cabinet of Keys' (detail), 2002, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh

lation at Pallant House, Chichester; and drawings and photographs for a new book, while discussing the expense and heartache of looking after elderly cats. Hers is an extraordinarily integrated story within which she has created a room of her own, which, as Virginia Woolf stated, is that essential ingredient of feminine creative life.



Drawing for the 'What are You Like' exhibition, 2008, pencil on paper, 42 x 30 cm. Museum of Illustration, London



Model for 'The Rooms of Dreams', 2011, 64 x 64 x 40 cm



'Chateleine for Frida Kahlo', 2006, powder coated steel, 44 x 23 cm

Where Ramshaw's poetic space expresses a domestic or feminine element, it also connects to the social and public world of myth, story and other forms of collective, imaginative art. Artists have long understood the power of reverie and dreams to open up spaces for thoughts and imagination. This exhibition evokes the sensuous



'Prospero's Table', 2004, jewellery and objects, 62.5 x 166 x 15 cm. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston



'Face', 1988, brooches, earrings and ring. silver and 18ct yellow gold with pale amethyst on a large glass lens, diam. 25 cm



'Vision One', 2000, pendant necklace, 18 ct yellow gold, nanocrystalline diamond on steel, optical glass, diam. (pendant) 6 cm. Private collection



Ornaments for 'The Sleeping Gypsy', 2002, necklace, 18 ct yellow gold, recycled ivory claws, taxidermist lion eyes, twine, 72 x 4 cm



'Towers', 2005, anodised aluminium, stainless steel, Delrin, brass, crystal and optical glass, ht 16 cm to 100 cm

materiality of poems such as the *Eve of St. Agnes* by John Keats, for example:

*A casement high and triple-arched there was,  
All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
Of fruits and flowers, and bunches of knot grass,  
And diamonded with panes of quaint device  
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes  
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damasked wings ...  
A shielded scutcheon blushed with blood of queens and kings<sup>4</sup>*

Or invokes the enchanted worlds of Shakespeare's plays like *Midsummer's Nights Dream* and *The Tempest* where words transform space into magical rooms. *Ornament for Oberon* makes an appearance in the "Rooms of Dreams" although it's *The Tempest* which is the more significant for the artist,



'Mowbray Park Gate, Sunderland', 2001, mild steel, toughened glass, 5 x 3 m



'Sculpture Park Gates, Goodwood', 2000, anodised aluminium, diam. 4 m



'White Queen Ring Set', 1975, set of 16 rings, 18 ct gold, sapphires, moonstone and white enamel, on an acrylic stand with gold crown, 14 x 7 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum Collection



'White Queen - full-size Figure', 1975, calico, cast wax and brass. For the exhibition 'Jewellery in Europe'



'White Queen Necklace', 1975, 18 ct gold, white enamel, citrine, moonstone, sapphire, amethyst. National Gallery of Australia

both as a text which informed the original 2002 installation and, subsequently, as a re-imagined, transcription that became the amazing furniture/jewel *Prospero's Table* created for the new COLLECT Art Fair 2004 at the V&A Museum (with the Scottish Gallery) and now permanently housed with the Houston Museum of Fine Art in Texas. This latter work responds to the incantatory language of the play by placing a series of jewellery and objects in delicate washes of sea glass, blue enamel, gold in a white cabinet of drawers, like a printer's table. The objects, such as *Prospero's Pen* reflect the poetic roles of the characters in the play.

Fairy tales, like *Rumpelstiltskin* and children's stories like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* - remembered by Ramshaw from the wonderful Tenniel illustrations which she was allowed to colour in as a child - all capture a space of dreams and find their way into the "Rooms of Dreams" installation. There are the simple nickel circles wound round and round with layers of gold embroidery thread in *Necklace for the Millers Daughter* and the miniature gold key on the finest of two-metre-long gold chains, which Alice might use to unlock the tiny hidden door behind the curtain. The stories inform the work but the objects, as Tobias Hill reminds us 'are as subtle and as full of meaning as words themselves.'

'Rooms of Dreams 2012' are an extraordinary feat of imagination which draw together many strands of Ramshaw's thinking as well as the objects which have given that thought life. In an interview with



'Set of Five Pillar Rings', 1972, silver, amethyst, cornelian and chrysoprase

the jewellery historian Beatriz Chadour-Sampson, which accompanies this exhibition, Ramshaw is talking about other artists whom she admires - Duanier Rousseau - who 'lives in his imagination' and in contrast the 'cerebral pattern makers' Paul Klee and Sol LeWitt whom she finds 'totally in control of their medium, finding their own way into their own creative worlds.'

Wendy Ramshaw's reflection on the works of other artists reveals her own stellar achievements. She has found her own way in her own creative world, producing a body of work of such richness and complexity that it is difficult to



Wendy Ramshaw soldering a large necklace, 1985

contain it within any one simple definition of either art or design - although it has added much to both. "Rooms of Dreams 2012" pushes through the boundaries between the imaginative worlds of plays, fairy stories, poetry, architecture, jewellery, sculpture and painting, and in so doing we find ourselves in a new space in which to dream about what it means to be human.

*'We agreed ... on the good things we have in common. On the advantage of being able to test yourself, not depending on others in the test, reflecting yourself in your work. On the pleasure of seeing your creature grow, beam after beam, bolt after bolt, solid, necessary, symmetrical, suited to its purpose; and when it's finished you look at it and you think that perhaps it will live longer than you, and perhaps it will be of use to someone you don't know, who doesn't know you. Maybe, as an old man, you'll be able to come back and look at it, and it will seem beautiful, and it doesn't really matter so much that it will seem beautiful only to you, and you can say to yourself, "Maybe another man wouldn't have brought it off."'* Primo Levi *The Monkey's Wrench.*<sup>5</sup>

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NOTES

1. p. 11 Introduction to Rooms of Dreams, Harley Gallery and Ruthin Craft Centre 2012.
2. p. 53 *ibid.*
3. p. 195 *ibid.*
4. Extract from V. 24 'The Eve of St. Agnes', John Keats the Complete Poems 1980, Penguin Books.
5. Primo Levi *The Monkey's Wrench*, 1987 Penguin Books.