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Chance encounters: The construction of meaning through the process of assemblage in the boxes of Joseph Cornell and contemporary jewellery of Thomas Mann

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SECTION 2

INTRODUCTION

Having looked closely at the art of Joseph Cornell, one of my major sources of inspiration, I will now turn to an analysis of my own body of work, entitled *Marriage Material* and exhibited in May 2005 at Franchise Gallery. The whole process of producing artwork of this nature was an interesting one for me, in spite - or perhaps because - of the fact that I had not engaged with it before. It was an opportunity to explore the many different subjects that intrigue me, through a mode of expression so distinct from that of academic discourse. What I ended up making surprised me, as it appeared quite different from what I initially imagined my work looking like: what happens from point A to point B is an interesting and often curious process, one that is not always obvious to the viewer in the finished product, although it cannot help but be inscribed there. My concern in this section will be to chart that process by investigating the main sources which had an impact on it, as well as the works themselves, which are its end result. In the following five chapters I will be discussing the work of contemporary American jewellery designer Thomas Mann; the stop-frame animation of filmmaker Jan Švankmajer; the discourses on the collection and display of objects; the history of automata; and my work, together with its exhibition. (Importantly though, these discussions will be framed by my personal interest in the subjects and how they relate to my work: an in-depth and all-encompassing academic investigation into these topics is beyond the scope of this thesis.) After that analysis, I hope to reach some kind of conclusion that will connect it back to the work of Cornell, and his constructed universe – in essence, to chase my own 'thread of affinities' across this enchanting landscape.

CHAPTER 1: Thomas Mann

Thomas Mann started making jewellery as a high school student in the early sixties, opened his first shop in 1967, and is now the owner of a very successful gallery and production studio in New Orleans. Significantly, his success has come about in spite of a conscious decision, taken in the early eighties, not to work with traditionally precious materials like gold and diamonds, in order to keep his jewellery more affordable, and therefore accessible to a broader audience. Mann has developed his own particular style, employing a unique design language which combines everyday, mechanical bits and pieces with universal symbolic forms to create pieces of jewellery which are instantly engaging, extremely expressive, and full of charm and whimsy. The term he coined to define his style - Techno-Romantic - perfectly embodies this marriage of seemingly opposite things: the nostalgia of old photographs and previously-owned objects is contrasted with the futurism of space-age plastics and machine parts; the fairly pedestrian way of attaching components to each other - with screws, bolts, rivets - is combined with a very refined technical capability; and an ephemeral sense of a human story in many of his pieces sits quite comfortably next to the strong impression of technology created by the materials used. What defines Thomas Mann's work is a creatively realised sense of juxtapositioning: by employing an assemblage technique, he skillfully turns the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life into wearable art. Indeed, he is the quintessential postmodernist – "pillaging the storehouse of memory, history and desire for images and objects" (Harris & Lyon 2003: 20), dexterously creating a sense of narrative and visual harmony through the often unexpected combination of disparate elements.

Although he works in a different medium, with its own set of parameters defined by the human body, Mann has a distinctly Cornellian artmaking sensibility. The basic raw material of his work is the found object, which falls into two categories: on the one hand, gleaned from junk shops and flea markets, are things once belonging to people and invested with the significance of their lives - old photographs, buttons, coins, shells, charms and other collected trinkets; and on the other are mass manufactured mechanical and electrical parts and industrial materials which are widely and cheaply

available - coloured plastics, screws, washers, bearings, cogs, dials and a hundred other components. Mann's particular skill lies in combining those different kinds of things – the machine-age, industrial techno with the emotive, human romantic - which would seem to be irreconcilable. The end result, expressed in the extremely personal space and on the intimate scale of jewellery, is a commentary on the limits of humanity in a world defined by its machines. As Codrescu suggests, remarking on the name 'Techno-Romantic':

> The label is felicitous, indeed; it expresses our human dilemma at a time when the very definition of what it is to be human is changing under the pressure of technology. As time speeds up and the technological future makes increasing demands on us, the past becomes more important, whether in the form of photographs or found objects. Even the past represented by fragments of now-obsolete technology, such as parts of linotype machines or discarded space junk, becomes oddly "human" when brought within the frame of a heart, a hand, or a crafted box (Codrescu & Herman 2001: 28).

The mass-produced, mechanical nature of many of the components in the jewellery does not in any way minimise the nostalgic atmosphere that the pieces generate: indeed, in works like *I Am Waiting for Love to Tell Me When* of 1976 (Fig. 20), the rainbow-coloured acrylic is an effective foil for the antique photograph and hand-written scrap of text. As in the similar brooches *Dreamscape* (Fig. 21) and *Blue Boy* (Fig. 22) of 1975, which are also framed around an individual portrait, the plastic seems to heighten the sense of memorialisation: although an impersonal and common material, it is used here in a decidedly singular way, holding together the tiny bits and pieces – the dangling charms of heart, whale, mummy – that are enough to signify the totality of an existence, the characteristics of a personality.

It is interesting to note here that after years of time-consuming scavenging for found objects, Mann started to manufacture his own: making components for his production work that looked as though they had been found – "an interesting cultural comment in an age where nothing is what it seems to be" (Codrescu & Herman 2001: 30). This practice provokes a whole set of compelling questions: have we been duped into believing that these fragments have been previously owned and cherished, when in fact they have been produced in a workshop?; how important is the issue of authenticity in

evaluating these works?; could we tell the difference between a found object and something fabricated to look like one?; does that difference matter? I would tend to agree with these writers, who suggest that it does not:

> Art is, after all, artifice. "Authenticity" is a red herring: Mann seeks to make these objects look as if they have back stories associated with them. Whether or not they have a real history is irrelevant. Their only role is to be evocative (Harris & Lyon 2003: 24).

It is a role they fulfill very successfully, these simulacra – encouraging an emotional response and attachment in the wearer in spite of their being 'fake'. In fact, these components should occupy a new category of their own, as they are neither serendipitously happened-upon things, nor mass-manufactured industrial objects, but a combination of the two: made by hand, in a small workshop, in large quantities, to appear as if they are singular bits and pieces, previously owned and then discarded or lost. These objects function in the same way as many of Cornell's objects do: purchased in dime stores, without a history of ownership, they become part of a story by virtue of their inclusion in one of the boxes.

Although made from metal and plastic rather than wood and glass, Mann's pieces contain many echoes of Cornell's work. These are not simply a function of a shared gift for assemblage, as mentioned earlier, but also of a common interest in the construction of a narrative. A clear example of this can be seen in Mann's *Blue Girl* collage box neckpiece of 1990 (Fig. 23), which makes reference to Cornell's *Untitled (Medici Princess)*. In it, a blue-tinted antique photograph of a girl, her face obscured by a square of scratched green plastic, is enclosed in a box with some white beads, surrounded by machined metal components: into this shiny matrix are set three other compartments, each containing a collection of unfixed objects – two red dice in one, some glass gemstones in another, and some watch parts in the third. The suggestions of childhood play, and perhaps also the loss of innocence, are just as evident here as in the Cornell work.

Indeed, it was the similarities between the works of these two artists that drew me to them as the chief subjects of this research, and I was hoping to interview Thomas Mann

to get his own perspective on that affinity. He did indicate a willingness to respond to my questions when I initially contacted him, but he has not replied to any of my subsequent messages: here is the questionnaire I prepared for him, unfortunately without his answering voice. (I have included my own thoughts on each question in parentheses, in order to suggest why I may have asked it).

A Questionnaire for Thomas Mann:

1. *You use collage/assemblage in your jewellery, and I am interested in trying to establish or explore links between your usage and that of Joseph Cornell. Can you comment on how you have read and used this aspect of Cornell's work?* (Here, I am concerned with finding out more about Mann's process, and whether his search for materials is similar to Cornell's: his use of found objects, such as old photographs, seems to indicate the same kind of approach to the sourcing of materials.)

2. *In your Techno-Romantic jewellery, you seem to be playing with opposites in your use of imagery and materials: highly symbolic forms such as hearts and hands are combined with machine parts; and a feeling of nostalgia, (created through the use of old photographs and found objects), is often contrasted with a futuristic sensibility. Are these juxtapositions a conscious decision?* (My reading of Mann's work is that, though the exact bits and pieces that he finds might be governed by chance encounter, his combinations of things that seem to be opposite are entirely deliberate: this makes his process strongly allied to Cornell's, and in contrast to the Surrealist project.)

3. *If so, are you making a connection between your work and Surrealism?* (Mann's work, like Cornell's, has a decidedly postmodern sensibility, although the disjunctions created through the collage/assemblage process often lend it a Surrealist spirit.)

4. *Many of Cornell's boxes could be read as fetish objects - especially those devoted to female personalities - and there is an element of voyeurism in looking at them. Do you see these (fetishism and voyeurism) as factors in the readings of your own work, (perhaps in your* Pin-up Series *(Fig. 24) in particular, but in other pieces too)?* (Mann's

jewellery – with its intimate scale, relationship to the body, and accessibility through touching as well as looking – certainly encourages such an interpretation: the old photographs he often uses create a slightly uncomfortable sense that the viewer is looking in on someone's private moment.)

5*. Cornell's works in general are on a very small scale, and many of them invite the viewer to pick them up and interact with them. Was it this aspect of jewellery that attracted you to it as a medium?* (I cannot guess the answer here, but those aspects of Cornell's boxes – intimacy and interactivity – are much more strongly present in jewellery, and considering the very personal narrative elements in his pieces, I would imagine Mann being drawn to the medium because of its close association with people and their stories.)

6. *The format of the box is perhaps the most essential element in Cornell's work, and it is something that recurs in your work too: can you comment on how you see the device of the box or frame operating in your jewellery, and whether there are any parallels with Cornell's usage?* (I definitely see parallels: both artists use the box as a container, which isolates its contents but at the same time confers preciousness. In Mann's collage box pieces, such as *Blue Girl*, tiny elements – dice, rhinestones, watch parts – are contained in their own boxed settings within the larger box of the pendant, which results in a kind of doubling of preciousness, a heightening of the sense that the enclosed objects are some kind of treasure.)

7. *Can you comment on the implications of some components pushing outside of the constructed frame?* (Here I would expect an answer that might touch on ideas such as the transgression of boundaries and the disruption of expectations: the frames in Mann's pieces are, unlike Cornell's, often irregular in shape - accommodating the outline of a specific object or person in a photograph - and have metal or plastic elements crossing their borders.)

8. *For me, a key aspect of Cornell's boxes is the glass, which both separates the viewer from the contents, and enables the viewing of the work. How do you see the glass, (or*

clear acrylic), functioning in your work? (I see Mann's clear acrylic functioning in much the same way as Cornell's glass, perhaps with the additional implication of filtering, as in many pieces the acrylic is coloured. Also, in many examples of Mann's work that clear layer is pressed flat against a photographic image, or only covers part of the piece, so its connotations may be slightly different.)

9. *There is a very strong element of nostalgia in most of your pins - is this simply a by-product of using found objects, or is it a feeling that you intentionally create or intensify in putting the work together?* (Here I would anticipate some kind of engagement with the issue of manufacturing components to look like found objects. I see found objects as inherently nostalgic and sentimental things: Mann exploits that in his combinations of components – putting photographs together with buttons or charms or heart shapes, for example – and creates it himself by manufacturing some of his 'found objects'.)

10. *Some of Cornell's boxes seem to function as shrines to specific personalities, triggering memories and evoking certain moods through their combinations of images and objects. Do you see your own work as functioning in a similar way?* (I see Mann's work as very personal: the fact that he does not use images of movie stars as subjects, but rather ordinary, anonymous people, actually intensifies the intimacy. His subjects do not come with biographical details or media personas, as many of Cornell's do, so the viewer has to imagine their lives and family connections. They are, however, treated with the same kind of reverence as the stars of Cornell's boxes, and the idea that the pieces function like shrines is equally applicable.)

11. *What do you think it is about miniature objects in general, and jewellery in particular, that makes them so enticing, such rich receptacles for storing memories?* (I would imagine here a response referring to the value of jewellery objects – in both material and sentimental terms – which makes them appropriate family heirlooms. Jewellery is already a locus of attachment for personal memories, and Mann heightens this aspect of it in his work by incorporating scraps of paper with handwritten text, such as in *I Am Waiting for Love to Tell Me When*.)

12. *Do you see your work in terms of a narrative - either contained within each piece or a function of your process?* (The obvious answer here is 'yes', though I would expect something more nuanced – an explanation of some of the complexities of the process. By using found objects, and photographs in particular, which already have stories attached to them, Mann is asserting a sense of narrative in his work: this is intensified when scraps of text are also included.)

13. *Many of Cornell's boxes are 'habitats' - constructed environments that provide a context for the objects they contain: is your design/construction process aimed at producing similar kinds of constructions?* (Here again, I would hope to get an answer providing some insight into his creative process of putting elements together. Mann's frames are not as rigid and formal as Cornell's – his pieces often have components sitting on top of or outside of the frames – so the way in which the subjects are contained is slightly different. Nevertheless, I do think each brooch functions as a little habitat, a specially created environment for the subjects to exist in.)

14. *In your more recent work, you seem to have moved away from the nostalgia of found objects to a more abstract aesthetic - is that a different way of expressing the same artistic intention, or something else entirely?* (I would imagine it to be part of the same project, as, although it is aesthetically cleaner and pared down, the newer work still expresses a reverence for humble found objects, such as pebbles and discarded bits of rusted metal. Mann also references the idea of found objects functioning as fetishes by labeling one of his new series the *Stone Fetish* series.)

CHAPTER 2: Jan Švankmajer

Although I am interested in the processes of animation in general, it is the work of Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer that I find myself particularly drawn to: his stop-frame animation of ordinary things and creation of fantastical hybrid creatures are evidence of a particular sensitivity to the world of objects that I find engaging. Influenced by the concerns of the artistic traditions of Mannerism and Surrealism, as well as eastern European puppetry, Švankmajer's films are a kind of *bricolage,* a manipulation of the real world and its objects to create a new and different space, where our expectations of order and coherence are radically subverted. His artificial imaginary worlds, with their disruption of reality as it stands, nevertheless depend on a sensuous understanding of that reality for their creation: "it is the real material world which provides the very stuff of which those animations or transformations are comprised" (O'Pray 1995: 54). These films are a kind of collage, making use of things or parts of things that are severed from their familiar contexts and reconfigured into new things: the irrational juxtapositions created produce an uncanny effect "by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality" (Freud 1919: 398).

This blurring between the real and the imagined is perhaps most clearly exemplified by Švankmajer's 1987 film *Alice,* which was inspired by Lewis Carroll's classic children's story *Alice in Wonderland.* Indeed, it begins with the girl of the title saying to the audience "You must close your eyes, otherwise you won't see anything": an appreciation of the film requires a victory of the imagination over the real world accessible through the senses. In this constructed reality anything is conceivable, and the most inert of objects are invested with movement and character. In one of its earliest sequences, we are introduced to some of the things in Alice's room:

> a button-box, a wooden darning mushroom, a row of jam jars, a magic lantern, a sun hat, a bottle of ink, some biscuits, a pair of scissors, two apple cores, a set of rodent skulls, a pair of white gloves, a mouse-trap, butterflies pinned beneath glass, a clutch of dolls or puppets, a picture of a rabbit and a fox by a stream, paper boats, a house of playing cards... (Cardinal 1995: 86)

These things become animated in the Wonderland in which Alice finds herself, a world in which the usual rules do not apply, and anything becomes possible: where a wind-up rabbit has tea with a wooden puppet, playing-card figures fight each other with swords, socks move like caterpillars, pincushions turn into hedgehogs and the key to a locked door is concealed inside a sardine tin. There are also dark and grotesque undertones to the child-like fantasy of this animated environment: the eggs in the pantry hatch into little skulls, cockroaches scuttle from an opened tin, a slab of raw meat crawls from one pot into another, and disembodied taxidermy eyes watch from their glass jar on the shelf.

Although extremely rich in imagery, almost bursting at the seams with all kinds of objects, this constructed world is also remarkably contained, with most of the action taking place in the confined spaces of rooms: indeed, it is how Alice gains access to these rooms through their doors and windows – by changing her size or finding a key hidden in a drawer – that drives the narrative of the film. These spaces, with their contained objects, are in fact quite reminiscent of Cornell's boxes, although in the former the potential of the things to come to life and tell a story has been manifested, whereas in the latter that energy is still latent. In the film, there is also a sense of profound interiority, as the artist plays with scale – taking Alice into and out of doll's houses that shrink and expand within the rooms, and having her peer into their enclosed spaces through doors and windows.

Quite simply, it is the alchemy of Švankmajer's work – the way he employs stop-frame animation and the medium of film to convert a domestic, everyday setting into a decidedly enchanting one – that is a source of inspiration for me: his transformative magic is of the same species as Cornell's.

CHAPTER 3: The history of collecting

The Dead Man
He is a fool who injures himself by
amassing things
And no one knows why people cannot
help but do it[10]

There is something quite curious about the activity of collecting: on the one hand, it speaks about adventure and discovery, the bringing back of exotic stuff from far-flung places, the desire to look at, examine closely and thereby gain knowledge of the world; on the other, it is motivated by an appetite for control over the unruly natural state of things, a yearning to tame and impose order, contain behind glass and categorize and assign nomenclature, and in so doing to stave off the inevitability of death. The compunction to collect dates back to the earliest civilizations of antiquity, but remained the domain of only the most powerful political and religious leaders until the sixteenth century, when the explosion of scientific inquiry – spurred on by the great voyages of discovery that expanded the limits of the known world – led to a mania for the acquisition of specimens by amateur naturalists and members of the emerging *bourgeoisie.* Displayed either in cabinets (*Wunderkabinette*) or entire rooms (*Wunderkammern*), the goal of these collections was nothing less than to represent the world completely: to be "A theatre of the broadest scope, containing authentic materials and precise reproductions of the whole of the universe", as the scholar Samuel Quiccheberg put it in the 1560's (Mauries 2002: 23).

As the name implies, these cabinets of curiosities, containing both natural (*naturalia*) and man-made (*artificialia*) specimens, were intended to inspire wonder, as well as indicate the wealth of their owners. This they certainly did, as the many accounts by visitors to some of the great European collections – Peter the Great and the Habsburg emperor Rudolf II had particularly famous *Wunderkammern* – attest. Here is one such description, made by Parisian art dealer Edmé-François Gersaint after a visit to the cabinet of wealthy Dutch cloth manufacturer Levin Vincent in 1736:

[10] From an anonymous Parisian pictorial sequence from 1485, known as a *danse macabre* – a genre that appeared after the Black Death in the fourteenth century, and was characterised by the depiction of a dance in which a skeleton led people from all levels of society to their graves (Blom 2002: 229)

> I admit that I was surprised by the quantity of rare things I found. This cabinet is composed of more than seven hundred vials filled with reptiles and other rarer and bigger animals that one can preserve in the spirits of wine; a considerable number of the rarest shells; an impressive quantity of corals, marine plants and minerals. However, what surprised me most was the never-ending display of all kinds of insects, perfectly preserved, whose variety of colors formed the most beautiful sight nature could offer (Gersaint in Stafford & Terpak 2001: 148).

The characterisation of the collection as a beautiful sight offered by 'nature' is interesting, as cabinets were often arranged in a lavishly decorative, highly contrived style – indeed, it was recorded that the insects in Vincent's collection formed its most impressive part because they had been positioned in a pattern on panels of silk by his wife, so that from a distance they looked like embroideries or tapestries (Stafford & Terpak 2001: 150). This anecdote I find particularly intriguing, as it is one of the few accounts of a woman being involved in what was, at that stage and certainly until the Victorian era, a decidedly male activity: a domesticating, feminine touch is here added to the overwhelmingly masculine narratives of conquest and possession. Another document, the guest book of the famous sixteenth-century collector Ulisse Aldrovandi, records visitors to his early museum: among those invited to sign it were "907 scholars, 118 nobles, 11 archbishops, 26 'famous men' and 1 single woman" – even one of Italy's most powerful women, Caterina Sforza, was not considered "of sufficient intellectual stature" to be asked to sign when she visited (Blom 2002: 14). Clearly, the domain of scientific discovery and its specimens was reserved for men.

Just how much curiosity the early cabinets contained is evident from this account of the extensive collection of John Tradescant the Elder – now housed at Oxford University in the form of the Ashmolean Museum – by a German traveller visiting in 1638:

> The hand of a mermaid, the hand of a mummy, a very natural wax hand under glass…a picture wrought in feathers, a small piece of wood from the cross of Christ…pictures from the church of S. Sophia in Constantinople copied by a Jew into a book…many Turkish and foreign shoes and boots, a toad-fish, an elk's hoof with three clawes, a human bone weighing 42 lbs, an instrument used by the Jews in circumcision, the robe of the King of Virginia…a S. Francis in wax under glass…a scourge with which Charles V is said to have scourged himself…(Stirn in Blom 2002: 56).

The peculiar and wondrous items listed here have a strange kind of power: severed from their 'natural' contexts, they become fetish objects, and seduce the viewer with their ability to invoke distant and mysterious times and places. It is precisely this quality of the things in these cabinets that interests me - their testament to the marvellousness of the world - which is perfectly expressed in this account of a twelve-year-old boy's visit to the recently established British Museum in 1780:

> The next room was filled with all kinds of serpents and lizards once alive, and some of them with wings. There was a pair of gloves made from the beards of mussels, also some snakes and rattlesnakes and swordfishes etc., and a crocodile, which was such a monstrous great thing, he could have eaten three or four men for a breakfast. There were thousands of other things, which I have not time to enumerate, and indeed, we could not stay to look at half of them (quoted in Blom 2002: 87).

CHAPTER 4: Automata

Representing a creative confluence of science and art, it is no coincidence that an interest in automata began to develop during the Renaissance period, as new lands were being discovered and the things encountered there brought back to fill the growing cabinets of wonder belonging to wealthy Europeans. Strongly influenced by the translation into Latin of ancient Greek texts – specifically on the subjects of hydraulics and pneumatics – by humanists of the time (Bedini 1964: 24), this fascination with building machines that replicated the movements of living things was an adjunct to the development of more utilitarian technologies. With all their complex machinery - the elaborate systems of levers and gears required to produce animation, which provoked increasingly ingenious solutions from clock-makers, instrument-makers and jewellers – it is their ability to replicate the simplest gestures of living beings that make them such awe-inspiring objects.

Several hundred years before the invention of batteries, some amazing individuals were creating clockwork figures that danced and played musical instruments for the entertainment of the public. One such individual was Jacques Vaucanson, whose three automata – the Duck, Flute-player and Pipe-and-Tabor player – earned him wealth and fame throughout Europe in the 1730s. They were extremely successful as public amusements, although this was not their only function: as Riskin notes, “their value as amusements lay principally in their dramatization of a philosophical problem that preoccupied audiences of workers, philosophers, and kings: the problem of whether human and animal functions were essentially mechanical” (Riskin 2003: 601). This problem was manifested quite differently in the two androids (automata in human form), as Wood points out: Vaucanson’s pipe-player represented an idea of perfection that could not be achieved by a living human being – its mechanical tongue moved far more quickly, so it could play the pipe at a much greater speed without tiring; the flute-player, on the other hand, needed to simulate human imperfection as closely as possible in order to play its instrument – its lips had to be able to change position to let varying amounts of air into the flute, and its wooden fingers had to be covered in skin, (whether animal or human is not known), so as to seal the holes effectively (Wood 2002: 23). For

its most successful replication of complex human movement, this mechanical object needed the addition of a fundamentally organic substance. Together, these two automata seem to blur the boundaries between man and machine, and highlight their respective limits.

Philosophical considerations aside, automata are perhaps the truest expression of machine-making ingenuity: freed from utility, they are embodiments of creativity and technical virtuosity, concerned only with provoking wonder and delight. Indeed, "amongst historians of technology there seems always to have been private, somewhat peevish discontent because the most ingenious mechanical devices of antiquity were not useful machines but trivial toys" (De Solla Price 1964: 15). The commercial success of Vaucanson's three automata – the third, a duck that swallowed grain and then defecated, was particularly popular with the viewing public – led to an explosion in the production of these kinds of machines: "there were birds that hopped from stick to stick in their ornate cages, a nimble mouse made of Oriental pearls, a caterpillar that fed on the foliage of a tree, and a 115-piece tarantula that simulated its living counterpart in many respects" (Stafford & Terpak 2001: 268). Miniature, bejeweled automata were also made, and became sought after and highly prized collector's items, particularly in the Far East. At the zenith of this kind of artistic production was Carl Fabergé – "the last great craftsman in the tradition of automaton making" (Bedini 1964: 40) – whose exquisitely constructed creations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like his famed jewelled Easter eggs, enchanted both the children of the Russian court and their parents. In these little things converge many of my interests: the miniature, preciousness, the animated object and the craftsmanship of the jeweller.

CHAPTER 5: Marriage Material

In his speech on opening night of the exhibition, Jeremy Wafer recited the following list of words rhyming with 'little':

> it'll, kittle (*Scot* capricious), skittle, little, spittle, brittle, tittle, victual, whittle.
>
> orbital, cubital (relating to the forearm), sagittal (resembling an arrow), vegetal (relating to plant life), digital, skeletal, belittle, Doolittle, remittal, committal, genital, Capitol, capital, hospital, lickspittle (servile person), acquittal, marital.
>
> parietal (anatomy term), varietal (relating to biological variety), noncommittal, congenital, basipetal (botany term), bicipital (relating to the biceps), occipital (anatomy term), premarital, extramarital (Ferguson 1985: 156).

As well as containing all the incantatory magic of similar lists quoted through this thesis, this verbal catalogue provides a nice frame for my practical work, as it touches on some of my chief concerns.

As mentioned at the start of this section, the form that the pieces ended up taking surprised me: at the start, coming from a background in jewellery design, I imagined I would be making jewellery, and perhaps engaging with the whole art versus craft debate. As it turned out, what I made was sculpture, which, though it was intended to reference certain aspects of jewellery – its preciousness and smallness – is decidedly non-wearable. So, although using metalworking techniques specific to jewellery manufacture to make the pieces, I was able to explore some themes and ideas without being bound by a consideration of the human body, which is of paramount concern for the jeweller. Initially at a loss as to what to engage with conceptually, my thinking eventually coalesced around the theme of marriage, as I put two found objects together and *The Gilded Cage* (Fig. 25) suggested itself.

Jewellery, in fact, turned out to be the ideal starting point for such an exploration, as it has "always carried the burden of communication" (Codrescu & Herman 2001: 40): the ring is a particularly loaded form, highly symbolic, representing the ideals of perfect union and everlasting love. For me, the wedding ring has other, much more cynical

implications – conquest, ownership, dependence, contractual obligation. Four of the works on the exhibition were rings that used the traditional wedding band form to subvert its traditional associations: *Happily Ever After* (Fig. 26) is a simple gold ring with the words "happily ever after" stamped onto its surface, presented in an extravagantly kitsch box in the shape of a red rose; *Terms and Conditions Apply* (Fig. 27) is another gold band, which has a silver tag with the word "wife" stamped on it attached; *Trophy Wife III* (Fig. 28) is a silver ring with a trophy on top, in the place where a diamond might normally be; and *Kiss Me, I'm a Prince* (Fig. 29) is also a silver ring, this time with a small silver frog sitting on top. In addition to questioning the conventional symbolism of the ring, these works are also meant to be a comment on the fairy tale that continues to be sold to young girls, in which the fantasy of being rescued from a dreary existence by a dashing young nobleman and riding off into a brilliant, happily ever after sunset works to undermine and devalue the goals of self-worth, personal achievement and independence. In fact, it is a critique of that fairy tale, and an exploration of how our language shapes our attitudes, that form the subtext of the exhibition: my intention was not to make an overtly feminist statement but rather to imply it, by employing a satirical approach.

The other two rings on the show are perhaps the best examples of this: *On the Shelf* and *Over the Hill* are rings that emblematize those figures of speech, (in the first, a tiny silver woman sits on a rectangular bar going across the top of the ring, representing a shelf; in the second the figure of a woman in silver is shown walking on one side of a curved silver bar on the top of the ring, representing a hill), in an attempt to unveil the pejorative nature of the language used to describe unmarried women 'of a certain age'. Precipitated by my own advancing age and persistent singledom – the spectre of being alone looming larger with every family celebration of other people's milestones, where questions like "So, when are you getting married?" are standard fare – these works are expressions both of a fear of being perceived in this way and an outrage that inappropriate and outdated societal perceptions continue to provoke such a fear. My point here was about the power of language in constructing and perpetuating those opinions, which was strongly influenced by a reading of Susan Sontag's *AIDS and its Metaphors*, in which she discusses that power (of language) in relation to disease: she

characterizes it quite bluntly, saying “The metaphors and myths, I was convinced, kill” (Sontag 1988: 14). Because it was the language that was the point here, I decided to swap around the conventional positions of artwork and title, painting the titles of the works in large, ornate silver script on the wall, and placing the rings themselves at the bottom right hand side, where the little card with the name of the piece usually goes (Figs 30 & 31).

That disruption of the usual modes of displaying artworks was one of my goals of the exhibition as a whole: I wanted to play around with the way the audience is conditioned to perceive art in the gallery. The huge, industrial space of Franchise proved to be a successful vehicle for this, as its enormity highlighted the tiny scale of most of the works, and its white cube impersonality in fact contributed to an intimate viewing of each piece (Fig. 32). Apart from a few that were put on the walls, like those mentioned above, the works were displayed on individual plinths, each with its own perspex box. These were meant to reference the glass vitrines of museum displays, along with the sense of value and preciousness that they convey – they also ended up isolating each piece, allowing for a focused contemplation. Adding to that was the height of the pedestals, which varied from just ten centimeters to over a meter. I wanted the viewer to have to do a bit of work to see each piece: having to crouch down to see something properly emphasizes its littleness; being put in a somewhat uncomfortable position turns the viewer into a voyeur.

The idea of preciousness was central to the exhibition, and was expressed in various ways. Indeed, the word has several shades of meaning, all of which add to the interpretation of the works: ‘precious’ is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as “of great value or worth...beloved; much prized (*precious memories*)...affectedly refined, esp. in language or manner...considerable (*a precious lot you know about it*)...expressing contempt or disdain (*you can keep your precious flowers*)”. Some of the pieces were contained in their own boxes under the additional display boxes, in order to appear as treasured personal objects, like heirlooms lovingly passed down through familial generations, usually by its female members. This association is asserted particularly in *Mini Wedding Couple* (Fig. 33)*, The Bubble, Burst* (Fig. 34) and *Groom in*

a Box (Fig. 35), where antique jewellery boxes are used to house the works. Of course, the association is intentionally double-edged, with the works exploiting that sense of heirloom preciousness to interrogate the marriage tradition. The implication of *The Bubble, Burst* is that, even though women have been questioning the sexism in our society in general, we still like to hold onto the fragments of the fairy tale, cherishing the possibility of the whole that they represent, reluctant to accept the fundamental brokenness of the idea.

Preciousness is also reinforced by the materials used – mainly gold and silver. Here again, that preciousness is equivocal: most of the works have been made through a process called casting, whereby an original plastic model is transformed into metal. The kinds of objects that I use in this alchemical procedure are in fact the plastic bride and groom figures that are intended to adorn wedding cakes – mass-manufactured, cheap, 'made in China' and decidedly kitsch, they are the antithesis of what defines something as precious. The act of conversion from one material into another becomes also an act of subversion and symbolic violence. Working in tandem with this commentary through the use of materials is, again, an exploration of language – indeed, the title of the show is intended to point to those two main concerns. In *Reliquary* (Fig. 36), the cast wedding cake couple has been turned into a box to hold a holy relic: its emptiness is a representation of the abstract nature of the institution, its ornate façade an indication of the disproportionate importance given to surface over substance. This is also the premise in the *Trophy Wife* series, which plays on the figure of speech referencing the male desire for a beautiful and unchallenging spouse: in *Trophy Wife I* (Fig. 37) – the central piece of the show, which was displayed on the only black plinth - the bride has been turned into pure objecthood, with her shiny gold surface corresponding to the hood ornament of a high-status car. *Knight in Tarnished Armour* (Fig. 38) is likewise about the overvaluation of an idea – the cartoonish style of the figure, and its diminutive size, are intended to diminish the power of the heroic, rescuing knight of girlhood fantasy. This notion, that traditional roles and the expectations created by fairytale are no longer appropriate, is taken to logical conclusion in *Artefact* (Fig. 39), where the bridal figure is presented as the product of archaeological excavation, with a satirical museum label that marks the object as something now obsolete, mysterious to a

modern audience because it is so outdated. Reminiscent of a wind-up toy, *Mechanical Bride* (Fig. 40) speaks about dependence, and invokes the sexist inequality that traditionally defines domestic married life. And continuing the reference to children's toys is *Do-It-Yourself Groom Kit* (Fig. 41), which takes the form of a model aeroplane kit, with all its component parts separated out and ready for assembly: although humorous, and intentionally so, this work also expresses a deep-seated personal frustration at the lack of control we have over meeting a significant other. It also references notions of the ideal, and how they might be untenable when applied to people: pressed from the same mould in flawless proportion, splendid in their plastic perfection, these mass-manufactured components leave little room for idiosyncratic assemblage.

That is perhaps the underlying theme of the work: although my intention was to examine and critique, poke fun at and provoke and expose, I have to acknowledge that the overwhelming cynicism in the show is perhaps the result of a profound disappointment at the stubborn refusal of an expectation to be met; and the satirical approach, which belittles the institution, an attempt to disarm the power of that emotion. The neon-pink "Vacancy" sign (Fig. 42), made as a reference to the loneliness, impersonality and transience of a motel room, may ultimately be the most potently symbolic work on the show, even though it is the small, precious objects – in terms of process, aesthetics and concept – which I see as my most important and satisfying artistic expressions.