

Shining examples of the latest bling

John Windsor goes in search of the best in 'studio' jewellery, and finds nylon, plastic and cloth being used in the place of gold, silver and gems

SHOPPING FOR bling? Think twice before you head for those Bond Street emporiums. In this autumn's contemporary jewellery fairs and exhibitions, art-school talent is sweeping away the traditional notion of jewellery as factory-made sparklers. The new jewellery is studio jewellery - as different from high-street trinkets as a Lucie Rie bowl is from a department store dinner service.

The arrival of one-off pieces of jewellery made by a single named artist has not happened overnight; it can be traced back 30 years or more. But until recently, even the most creative rings, brooches, necklaces and earrings were seen as design objects made by craftsmen - not as art. However, it will be a while before 'studio jewellery' trips off the tongue as easily as 'studio ceramics'.

As if to finally rebuff the trinkets idea, many of today's artists make 'non-precious' jewellery out of plastic, resin or even fabric. Jewels? What jewels? There were none in a sensational choker by Royal College of Art graduate Kate Wilkinson worn by Joan Bakewell to present the Turner prize. It was made of dyed nylon wire, tinplate and velvet flowers, and helped to awaken the public to jewellery as art.

The boundaries of studio jewellery have expanded into what has become known as conceptual clothing. Consider Guildhall University graduate Claire Robinson's transparent bolero jacket in silver, gold, pearls and jade, and works by two Edinburgh College of Art graduates: Kathy Vones's ear conch and Aki Nakayama's 'untitled' headgear.

To get an idea of today's wearable art-works, visit the Crafts Council showcase at the V&A shop, showing jewellery by three legendary old-stagers, billed as 'pioneers of contemporary British jewellery' (7 September-19 November). Then visit London's Electrum Gallery, Britain's leading contemporary jewellery gallery, to see the work of three former students of one of these pioneers. David Watkins retired this year after 22 years as professor and head of goldsmithing, silversmithing, metalwork and jewellery at the RCA.

One of Watkins's students, Lina Peterson, 27, dips intriguing little tangles of wire into brightly coloured plastic to form brooches. In another series, her 'stitched brooch' looks like a fragment of a child's brown pullover covered with a landscape of naive green stitches. 'No metal, even?' I asked. 'It's on the back, with the pin,' she said.

The Battenberg series of brooches by Polly Wales, 30, embeds semi-precious

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stones in slices of resin and plaster. Jo Hayes-Ward, 28, winner of this year's New Designer of the Year award, does use gold and silver for her bangles and rings. Their mathematically intricate designs, which interlock when combined, are computer-generated.

Peterson's pieces cost from £100 to £700, Wales's £400-£700, while Hayes-Ward's earrings go for £200 (editions of three or four), £400 for a unique piece and up to £8,000 for an 18-carat gold bangle.

'Although "studio jewellery" is not a commonly used term, it does distinguish artist-makers - those who use jewellery as a free art form - from designer-makers, who use design to solve problems,' says Watkins. Polly, Lina and Jo have all come into studio jewellery at a time when it has become fully established as an influential art movement. Lina's jewellery, for example, is playful. There's a strong element of intuition. Polly's work

is a series of wonderful, uncontrolled accidents, so far from the design process that they are unthinkable conclusions. Her whole expression is anti-design.'

Watkins's own work, which has been acquired by public collections in Europe, the US, Australia and Japan, includes a 30cm white acrylic neckpiece with a trellis of two interlocking computer-generated radiating patterns cut out by water jet. He will continue at the RCA, doing technical research. 'I'm always looking for different materials and technologies

Among his pieces is a diamond-encrusted Helix Ball in gold wire, mounted on a ring

with which to express myself. Getting the material to speak is critical.'

Also in the V&A showcase is work by Watkins's wife, Wendy Ramshaw, 67. She has had a studio in London for over 30 years, made the Millennium Medal presented to the Queen at the British Museum, and is well known for rings that form little towers when not being worn. Also featured is Gerda Flockinger, 78, regarded by many as the key figure in the revival of both jewellery making in Britain and the jewellery-as-art debate.

Flockinger designs cost from £2,000 to £15,000, Ramshaw's £1,700-£10,600, Watkins's from £1,000 (£2,500 for necklaces). Their work is also available at the Adrian Sassoon Gallery in London.

Flockinger established an experimental course in jewellery at Hornsey College of Art in 1962. She and Watkins are highly regarded as teachers. She uses sophisticated technologies of precious metal fusion to embed sumptuous scatterings of pearls and gems - diamonds, tourmalines, topaz, moonstones and amber. The effect has been described as 'cultured opulence'.

'I studied painting at St Martin's School of Art and showed in art galleries,' she says. 'I've always seen myself in an art situation - never questioned that I was doing anything else. Applied art does not express human emotion - it's abstract - but it is still a branch of art.'

Not all young jewellery makers describe themselves as artists. David Goodwin, 28, another of Watkins's former pupils, who was the Business Design Centre's New Designer of the Year in 2004, describes himself resolutely as a designer. Among his pieces is a fabulous diamond-encrusted Helix Ball in 18ct gold wire, mounted on a ring, computer-designed and built up in photosensitive liquid resin in tiny cross-sectional slices before being cast. His prices start at £450, going up to £6,000 for the Helix Ball. He will be showing at the Goldsmiths' Company's Fair, Goldsmiths' Hall, London, from 2-8 October.

'People may see the ball as art - it's quite pretty. But I'm more technically minded and design-led,' he says. 'I like to design things that couldn't exist without new technology. David Watkins is very forward-thinking technologically - he pushed students in directions they might never have considered. Most art schools have a certain style, but David encouraged diversity.'

But are people really buying this diversity of new jewellery? They are. Of the four young jewellery makers to be showcased as Bright Young Gems at the trade fair International Jewellery London at Earls Court in London from 3-6 September, two, Ruth Tomlinson and Tomasz Donocik, are RCA graduates, and Ana De Costa graduated from Central St Martin's. Emma Chapman drew inspiration from her travels in South Asia and South America. Her aim is to produce 'living art' which 'brings out the goddess in you' - which is a big clue.



An 'ear conch' by Kathy Vones, right, and two brooches by Lina Peterson.

All four have a quality that is sometimes missing in studio jewellery - glamour.

Janice Hosegood of Electrum says clients' taste has become braver, bolder, more colourful. 'There has been a return to the romantic, narrative and figurative,' she says. The Goldsmiths' Company's director of promotions, Paul Dyson, says women go for big jewellery that they buy for themselves. Big, interesting stones with inclusions such as coloured bars are in, he says, as is yellow gold.

Besides RCA graduates, watch out for 'Dorothy's girls' - pupils of Dorothy Hogg at Edinburgh College of Art, where she has become a living legend on a par



Main photograph by John K McGregor

with Flockinger. The girls' signature is black silver with dramatically contrasting pearls and stones. Besides Vones and Nakayama, names include Marianne Anderson, Hannah Lamb, Grainne Morton and Grace Girvan.

They are among the favourites of contemporary jeweller Dazzle, which has held more than 100 exhibitions since 1981, selling 350,000 pieces totalling about £12m. Their biggest new seller is Alena Asenbryl, a Manchester Metropolitan University graduate whose necklaces, brooches and earrings with shards of coloured plastic fetch prices in the high hundreds. The next Dazzle

exhibition is at Manchester Town Hall from 6 November-31 December.

More young jewellers will be among 300 exhibitors at the Crafts Council's Origins fair at Somerset House, London from 3-15 October. Look for the plastic, leather, rubber and recycled gramophone vinyl of An Alleweireldt (£195-£415), Yoko Izawa's fine knitted mesh stretched over acrylic (rings from £250, necklaces about £600), Sarah Lindsay's silver and heat-pressed 'acrylic dust' (earrings from £95, brooches and necklaces £850-£1,125) and Japanese origami paper set in silver by Naoko Yoshizawa (from £65 for brooches to £900 for necklaces).