

Dichotomies of Form and Color: The Work of Annamaria Zanella



It was little more than a year ago that I saw Zanella's work for the first time. It was in a small collection exhibition at the Goldschmiedhaus Hanau held concurrently with a major survey of Herman Jünger. I believe the work that caught my eye was *Oltre il Blu/Beyond the Blue* (2015), or a similar neckpiece, and what impressed me was the intensity of the lapis pigment and the precise irregularity of each element. I thought, if Yves Klein had made jewelry, this is what it would look like. While each organically shaped component was formally unique, there was nonetheless an uncanny symmetry in how they were arranged. The work also appeared modest from a material point of view, when in fact it combined precious metals (gold and silver) with cork, wood and acrylic. While this is not necessarily a unique strategy, the resulting work had an identity all its own, one which seemed both classical and ornamentally irreverent at the same time, and it was utterly beautiful.

Later that year, I happened to be in Venice and decided to visit her studio in Padua, where she lives and works with her husband Renzo. They both had taught at the Pietro Selvatico State Institute of Art, which has ushered in three generations of metalsmiths dating back to 1944 and gave birth to what is known as "The Padua School", making the city the virtual capital for art jewelry production in Italy, if not periodically all of Europe.¹ My initial impressions of her artistic practice were immediately blown wide open by the broad range and contrasting approaches to jewelry making that Zanella has undertaken for several decades. I immediately understood how her work could appear intuitive yet was clearly and carefully articulated. Her trajectory since 1992, starting with a neckpiece such as *Modulo/Modulus*, uses a non-precious material whose patina appears manipulated in much the same way that Richard Serra manipulates the surface of his Corten steel sculptures and follows a strict geometric and minimal formal symmetry. Only a year

later, Zanella created a ring made with glass, iron, and gold that is diametrically opposed to the previously discussed work. The glass flows like blue ice through a gold bracket. This dichotomy of styles is at the very root of her practice, where there is a constant experimentation with offsetting material combinations, formal dissimilarities, and surface treatments. She has the ability to make works containing gold look rustic and weathered. In this regard, as is astutely pointed out in Nancy Olnick's essay elsewhere in this book, her work periodically shares an aesthetic connection to Arte Povera, both by incorporating materials not traditionally used in jewelry and periodically making work look like it was made from rubbish.

But in the end, Zanella cannot avoid the seduction of beauty, even when it looks like she is trying to make something brutal. Her *Graffiti* broaches of 1997 exemplify this, with surfaces that bring to mind the early work of Cy Twombly. On the other hand, her bracelet *Corallo/Coral* (2007) is an exercise in pure elegance. Obsessively fabricated to look utterly simple, the contrast between the silver interior of the cuff and the red of the coral are visually dynamic. Her more recent work has continued this pattern of stylistic discontinuity, although as a matured artist, she now returns to formal strategies used before but has mastered them and finds new ways of articulating them, such as the coils in her bracelet *Cuore Rosso/Red Heart* (2016) or the overlapping geometric planes in her brooch *L'isola Che Non C'È/Neverland* (2017), which employs lapis powdered material (a color which has recurred throughout of a lot of her recent pieces) with gold and ebony, all arranged in what looks like a haphazard manner. But like everything Zanella produces, it is carefully thought through and skillfully fabricated. Indeed, she is a purposeful, pensive, and remarkable artist.

¹ Sadly, this important chapter is coming to a close soon, since the municipality has decided that it lacks the funds to make solely needed repairs to the building and has refused to provide an alternate location for the institute.