Inheritance

Jewellery and the sculpture of Mikala Dwyer

Helen Hughes

Jewellery by Dorothy Dwyer from the mid to late 1900s

Mikala Dwyer believes that certain of her aesthetic predilections are hardwired – a continuation of the practices of both her father, industrial chemist Peter Dwyer, and mother, modernist jeweller Dorothy Dwyer (nee Ellen Dorothy Bjorn).[1] In conversation with the curator Robert Leonard in 2014 she stated her belief that: 'Knowledge gets passed down in your DNA. Whether you know it or not, you are often just riffing off your parents.'[2] Where her father's work involved melting and forming plastics and polyurethane, Dwyer has used hot-air guns to craft hollow sculptural objects from sheets of transparent plastic.[3] These forms either hang weightlessly from the ceiling like mobiles (as in **The hollows** for the 2014 Biennale of Sydney), or prop up other objects like ashtrays, chairs and houseplants as if they were being cradled by invisible poltergeists (as in the **Smoking and drinking** sculptures from 2006). And where her mother's work involved mixing, casting, filing and hammering metals to create necklaces, earrings and bracelets to adorn the body, Dwyer frequently works with metals and has produced massively scaled-up 'earrings for ceilings' (mobiles – such as **Diviner** 2012) and 'wall necklaces' (such as **Wall necklace** 2012) to adorn the architecture of art galleries and museums.[4]

In an earlier, pre-industrial era intergenerational family craft practices were commonplace, but today, under the signs of neoliberalism (with its cult of the individual) and globalisation (with its mass-production of consumer goods), such formal relationships are fast becoming rare. Parental influences instead sneak into Dwyer's practice – and they often do so subconsciously, rather than as the result of direct instruction or intention. Intergenerational and, more specifically, matrilineal relationships can be traced between Dwyer's works that reference her mother's practice, as well as collaborations with her own daughter Olive (such as **Olloodoo** 1998). By considering the nature of these parental influences we can gain new insights into Dwyer's work and her methodology as an artist. For instance, thinking through Dwyer's assertion that she has 'inherited' forms and processes from her father's work as an industrial chemist and her mother's jewellery practice helps Dwyer to consciously build a picture of herself as an artist-as-medium, as opposed to artist-as-author. Put another way, this genealogical determination of artistic tropes and techniques partially diminishes Dwyer's authorial agency and makes space for the artist to instead channel other voices and processes through her work. The act of channelling rather than creating allows for new and unexpected forms to appear in Dwyer's work, thereby minimising the risk of falling into a stylistic or conceptual groove.[5] To take another example, the paradigm of jewellery (which is the focus of the remainder of this essay) presents us with a useful framework for understanding important aspects of Dwyer's work and its relationship to the body, which is frequently discussed in terms of its absent or spectral presence in her sculptures and installations.[6] In many cultures jewellery developed as a means of portraying status – whether via the use of precious metals and gemstones, or codified

ornaments. Indeed, at different moments and in different places throughout history, sumptuary laws have been introduced to regulate the wearing of jewellery and to reinforce its symbolic social function (perhaps most forcefully in medieval Europe). However, as the modernist project unfurled throughout the western world, and against jewellery's by now almost complete assimilation into capitalist industry, a strand of avant-garde jewellery became concerned instead with more conceptual modes of self-expression, uncoupling jewellery from expensive materials. In 1927, for instance, the French modernist designer Charlotte Perriand famously designed her ball-bearings necklace, or *collier roulements à billes*, which was a collar of chrome silver balls that imitated a traditional pearl necklace in shape and sheen but instead expressed an affinity with the modernist industrial project.[7] Such avant-garde jewellery practices quickly developed a strong critique of preciousness (rejecting the use of materials such as gold and gemstones in many cases) and embarked on a critical exploration of jewellery's orientation to the body, its time and place.[8]

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Dorothy Dwyer fits into these (oversimplified) narratives of avant-garde jewellery as a mode of self-expression, a critique of preciousness, and as a means for exploring the scale and form of the body. Her jewellery was an expression of her Danish heritage (her parents were émigrés from Denmark and, although born in Australia, she lived in Denmark and Sweden between ages four and twenty-seven). Dorothy gravitated towards modernist Scandinavian design tropes in her work, such as simple curved forms and clean surfaces. As well, her jewellery was typically executed in non-precious metals, which she would often mix to form new alloys and patinas like an alchemist. The art historians Damian Skinner and Kevin Murray have argued that modernist jewellery design was introduced to Australia, in large part, by twentieth-century European migrants. Again, this rings true in the case of Dorothy, who studied silver smithing in Sydney in the 1970s under the instruction of the modernist Dutch jeweller Walraven van Heeckeren. Van Heeckeren trained in Rochester in the United States under Hans Christensen, who, in turn, trained in Denmark under the instruction of the renowned modernist Danish jeweller Georg Jensen.[9] As Skinner and Murray explain, van Heeckeren migrated to Sydney in 1968 and quickly remedied the lack of opportunities to train as a jeweller in the city. He started his own workshop, ran a private school in St Leonards (which Dorothy attended in the 1970s), and opened a shop in Argyle Arts Centre (where Dorothy later gave working demonstrations).

Packing up Dorothy's jewellery studio after her death in 2010, Dwyer found numerous objects that caused her to feel like 'we were working on the same forms but at different scales'.[10] The following year, Dwyer incorporated parts of her mother's jewellery into her own artwork for the first time. The resultant work – **Necklace for wall (silver)** 2011, now in the Michael Buxton Collection in Melbourne – was her first wall necklace. It comprises a steel chain more than two metres long with dangling pendants made of moonstone, turquoise, a shell, leather, copper and hand-modelled clay ornaments. It also includes scraps of silver that Dorothy left unfinished in her studio. Nailed to the wall in two places, the centre of the necklace slumps in an inverted arc, recalling the sagging felt wall works of Robert Morris, which Dwyer referenced more explicitly in **Neoprene work** 1995 – a fluorescent yellow rectangular fabric wall hanging with horizontal ribbons cut into its centre, which droop to reveal an orange verso. Pushing a consciously feminine post-minimalist modality even further, **Necklace for wall (silver)** references the jewellery tradition of wearing charms and talismans, with the individual charms functioning to denote significant life events (such as mourning the death of one's mother), and the talismans functioning to bring their wearer good luck or ward off evil.[11]

opposite:
Charm for wall 2016
ceramic, wood, modelling clay, moonstone, philosopher's stone, turquoise, Midori, synthetic polymer, brass wire, string, acrylic, glass, chain

In 2012 Dwyer made another wall necklace titled **Methylated spiritual**. This version contained a bottle of her mother's whisky as one of its oversized charms, as well as a bottle of methylated spirits, a number of large, hand-shaped ring forms, sheets of brightly coloured hanging acrylic and other handcrafted ceramic objects – including one with a rolled-up $100 note stuck through it, like a prayer wedged into the Wailing Wall. The gently shifting acrylic squares reflect different surfaces and angles of the gallery's interior architecture, as well as fragments of the viewer's body, thereby mangling the spatial properties of the gallery space in their reflection. For **Mikala Dwyer: A shape of thought**, Dwyer presents a new wall necklace – **Wall charm** 2017 – this time in significantly enlarged proportions. At nine metres long, its charms have also grown in size to include large-scale readymade objects, such as a chair. The intention of this work is not to animate the building or treat it like a body by adorning it with human ornaments (Dwyer would be much more interested in what she would term 'building consciousness' than in anthropomorphising a wall). Rather, she prefers to confuse and blur the distinction between the two. As the artist explained in a 2004 interview:

> To me, a sculpture, an object, a body, a building, are all quite connected – they're all 'porridge-y'. I try to make it as fluid as possible. So that the edges to things get quite porous. If you're standing in front of one of those sculptures, and if it's doing its job, you'll be getting a bit of an identity crisis with it: you're not quite sure where you begin and it ends.[12]

In this respect, Dwyer not only scales up jewellery from body- to building-size but scales down architecture from building- to body-size too. She has described her hooded costumes, such as those exhibited in her 1999 Sarah Cottier Gallery exhibition **Uniform**, as an architecture of the body – 'a sort of cubbyhouse' that creates an 'elsewhere'.[13]

In addition to making wall necklaces that reference the broad tradition and symbolic function of charm jewellery, Dwyer has re-created specific items of jewellery made by her mother as large-scale sculptures. In 2013, for her major solo exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, **Goldene bend'er**, Dwyer scaled up one of Dorothy's rings (one that she wore regularly) to form a series of three abstract sculptures, titled **Hollowwork (ringing)**, made from Corten steel and polished aluminium. (A small mirror-polished stainless steel version of this work was included in the exhibition **A shape of thought**.) At their newly enlarged scale, presented as discrete and monumental sculptures rather than finger adornments, the **Hollowwork** sculptures and their voids are more reminiscent of the smooth, carved forms of Isamu Noguchi or Barbara Hepworth than the abject or formless sculptures of Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis, with whose work commentators more readily compare Dwyer's. Indeed, as the curator Linda Michael has observantly noted, the **Hollowwork** sculptures sit at odds with Dwyer's typically 'grunge' or handmade aesthetic, and instead bear the 'precisely articulated, clean lines of modern design, purged of ornament'.[14] Unlike the wall necklaces, which are inherently slack, tensioned only by gravity and two nails in the wall, these ring forms maintain their structural integrity. Curiously, the necklaces that Dorothy designed typically took the form of solid neck cuffs, which also maintained their shape independently of the body, whereas Dwyer seems to be interested in materials losing their shapes then finding new ones.[15] The channelling of Dorothy's modernist Scandinavian aesthetic in the **Hollowwork (ringing)** sculptures therefore operates as a circuit breaker in Dwyer's installations – or at least as a point of tension.

Ring by Dorothy Dwyer and **Hollowwork (ringing)** 2013
see pages 74, 119–23

What, finally, is the significance of jewellery for a sculpture practice? Due to its shape, scale and function, jewellery can be understood as a strong index and metonym of the body. A ring implies a finger, a bracelet a wrist. Moreover, an historical or second-hand item of jewellery not only implies the body part on or around which it was once worn, but also the specific person who wore it. Take, for instance, the earrings Peggy Guggenheim wore at the opening of her New York gallery Art of This Century in 1942: on one lobe an earring made by Alexander Calder and on the other an earring by Yves Tanguy, signifying her equal commitment to abstraction and figuration. People often wear the jewellery of a deceased loved one – for example, their grandmother's ring, which they frequently refer to as 'my grandmother's ring' as opposed to 'my ring', thus signifying the importance of their relationship to the deceased person. At other times an engagement or wedding ring, despite its financial value, is buried with its deceased owner as it considered to be an extension of their body – having been worn continuously by them from the moment of their wedding ceremony until

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their death. In these ways, jewellery can powerfully evoke the imagination of both a general and a specific body, and come to signify life after death. Dwyer's adaptation of certain jewellery practices into sculptural forms summons and confuses the contours of the body by virtue of the scale of her work and its relation to space. In so doing she creates a distributive consciousness among her sculptures, their environs and viewers. Dwyer's more specific invocation of her mother's jewellery practice creates a distributive authorship among her works, one that – true to the artist's slightly magical form – manages to both time travel and to transcend the distinctions between life and death.