

Introduction

The golden rings in the new collection by Johanna Dahm are impressive by their idiosyncrasy. Entirely gold, solid, big, primitive and self-confident, they seem to conspire against the latest trends toward sophistication in jewelry design. They display so much gold, so much material, and so much soft, amorphous, unidentified form that it is overwhelming. After her recent explorations into the field of light projection and light reflection in jewelry, the effect of these solidly material rings is astonishing. Suddenly, they lie before you, like strangers from nowhere, unfamiliar but with an irrefutable naturalness. Your first urge – apart from wanting to feel and play with the near-massive forms – is to learn about their roots, so obviously non-Western are they.

It is interesting to note that most forms reveal their origin. Of course, there are neutral forms without a signature, forms that leave us cold and indifferent, but most forms catch our attention because they appear to be representative of a particular culture, a particular historical period or a particular artistic trend. When you see Johanna Dahm's most recent rings, you recognize their origin immediately: Africa. The soft and solid forms that rest gently over the finger, their imperfect and organic character, their wrinkles and holes – they are imbued throughout with the spirit of Africa.

Then again, one might argue that there is no style or method which can be called 'African.' What is Africa, after all? Not a country or a culture, but a spacious continent, with many different nations and cultures. So perhaps 'African' is a less intelligible meaning, unfit to clarify these rings. And too, there is something more about these rings. They are not what they pretend to be at first sight. They show a tendency towards stylization and composition, a refinement that is typically European; to be even more specific, Western-European. It is precisely this crossbreeding of cultures which makes them so intriguing.

These rings, obviously the result of a pitched and intensive struggle with the simple goldsmith's craft, seem remote from everything Johanna Dahm has ever made before. Her growth has paralleled the developments in mainstream avant-garde jewelry. From 1974 till 1976, she and a colleague ran a studio for the production of serial jewelry in aluminum and synthetics. Series running to a hundred pieces were not unusual. During this period, her work became dominated by abstract design principles such as the line and the spiral. Her interest in the connection between jewelry and clothing led her to discover new ways to fasten brooches through the fabric, without using pins. Her intellectual and investigative approach eventually led to immaterial 'jewelry happenings' and experiments with light, such as light projections which fleetingly adorned the visitor. In addition, she explored the possibilities of anamorphic distortions and light reflections in three-dimensional brooches.

Around 1992/1993, she returned to simpler forms, this time with hollow spaces: these were the 'Reflexion' brooches. The inside of these silver brooches was colored with acrylic paint, meant to capture the light in this small concentrated space and to reflect the color on the inside. Their tempting holes and their shimmering light effects give these brooches a mysterious character. Until then, her work had everything to do with seeing and observing. She did not seem to be interested in the plastic qualities of the materials she used; she used them for their functional qualities or for their capacity to capture and reflect light.

It seems that Johanna Dahm is highly sensitive to experiences with light, whether in South Africa, where she spent her youth, in the mountains of Switzerland, where she spends a lot of her time, or in the jungles of Venezuela, where she has traveled many times, creating beautiful pictures of the incidence of light and shadows. It is precisely this — light — which appears to be the connection between the 'Reflexion' brooches and the rings. She explains: "I wanted to work with the light itself. Gold is the light, the light of the sun. I wanted to work with fire and the melting of gold. Not with silver. Silver is like the moon; silver is the reflection of light."

It is remarkable that many contemporary artists are captured by this mythical aspect of gold. They know of course about the ethnological meanings of gold. In many cultures, from pre-Columbian South America to Asia and Africa, gold symbolizes the sun and the upper world, the world of light, the gods, the souls, the ancestors. Thus gold had a magical meaning in many cultures. In contemporary European jewelry, gold is an emotionally charged material, loaded with negative notions about the burden of its intrinsic value. Many artists try to escape this pitfall by using either gold in conceptual jewelry or for commentary, while others choose it for symbolic reasons.

To Johanna Dahm, gold is light itself, and the best way to work with it is by melting and casting it directly in an open fire. In the 1960s, at the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich, Max Fröhlich taught his students, among them Johanna Dahm, the old Asante casting technique, a technique that she in turn explores with her own students at the German Hochschule für Gestaltung in Pforzheim. In 1997, she decided to spend her sabbatical leave in Ghana, West-Africa, in order to learn this ancient lost-wax technique from the Asante people themselves. She had always been fascinated by their control of the rather archaic technique by which they make extremely thin-walled hollow jewelry. It was a unique experience to work as a white European woman in a small community of traditionally male craftsmen (it is forbidden for Asante women to do casting work, or even to touch the materials). She was accepted for two months as an apprentice to Nana, a chief and goldsmith to the king of the Asante, who lived and worked in a palace in Kumasi. Nana specialized in making rings with animal figures on top, so "Sister Johanna," as she was soon called, also concentrated on rings.

From the beginning she decided not to copy the Asante figurative forms, but to design her own. She thought this to be correct, intending to show the people that she did not want to steal anything away from them. Ultimately, though, this turned out to be a misconception. When, at the end of her stay in Kumasi, her rings were cast, all 15 pieces were failures; perhaps one should say they were bound to fail. Today, Johanna Dahm perceives that it was better after all that her rings in Ghana failed, for sake of the Asante community as well as for her own. "I lost the forms in Africa and I found them again in Switzerland. There, I was a foreigner and an outsider; I succeeded in my own environment with the aid of my own equipment and my own solutions." At home, after overcoming her disappointment, she took the only ring that was more or less a success and sawed the sprues off. She looked at the big hole that was the result of a false flow, and she observed that it was not all that bad. She would make use of these imperfections, even regarding them as something special. But there were other problems to solve as well. Here, in Western society, she had to look for ways to adapt the time-consuming nature of the archaic technique. At last she found the solution — not in the jewelry industry, but in the high-tech

laboratory of a dental technician, where she made two-thirds of the present 43 rings. She calls it “my leap to the technical possibilities of our time”.

It is typical of Johanna Dahm’s rational attitude that she transformed the archaic into the technical. She is not a person given to fleeing from reality. Her reality is the society she is living in, although the Asante and her African experiences were necessary to find a new direction in her work. “These organic forms have more to do with the human body and with the things people are wearing and carrying around their body in Africa, like sacks filled with rice that hang over the head, but also the forms of overripe fruits. These rings are sensual; you want to feel them. They offer both sensory as well as optical phenomena.” Johanna Dahm never made rings before. She appreciates them, especially since they rest directly on the body, just as did the sculpture-like body-pieces she made some fifteen years ago. No need for pins, no need for fasteners, and no front and reverse side, just a threedimensional form made as a whole. For Johanna Dahm, her journey into history and tradition has led towards a new beginning.

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