Intuitive Flow of Determinate Form:
The Jewelry of Simon Cottrell

BY MARJORIE SIMON
Object: Awkward, 2005 (4 views)
Monel
6 x 6 x 5 1/4"
All perceiving is also thinking. All reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention. WALTZING MATILDA, MEGAFAUNA, marsupials, koalas in eucalyptus trees, vast deserts, bush, beaches, beer—Australia comprises these and more. Its many paradoxes include the cultural influence of Victorian England on an island continent in the southern Pacific Ocean. A young country freed from the burden of European tradition, Australia has nurtured innovation in art and architecture, cinema and craft.

The country’s abundant contemporary jewelry, skillfully made, seems to be of two complementary genres. One, represented at its best by artists such as Marian Hosking and Julie Blyfield, depicts beguiling native flora and botanicals; the other, structural and architectural, references an urban landscape. In the cities, eccentric multicolored structures share city squares with Victorian glass houses and gingerbread-encrusted dwellings. Swooping bridges exist side by side with botanical gardens in seemingly limitless space. Practitioners of this architectonic style include Carlier Makigawa and her students, as well as Robert Baines, Susan Cohn, Helen Britton, and now, Simon Cottrell.

Cottrell’s jewelry occupies a blur zone between biology and architecture, reflecting his ongoing interest in process, perception, and contradiction. If he seems oblivious to Australia’s unique Darwinian niche, it’s only that the forms themselves are not replicated in his work. The ontological energy that drives all creation interests him more than a specific outcome, such as the shape of eucalyptus. Three-Lobed Bell, for example, one of a series made between 1998 and 2007, and Six-Lobed Bell (1999–2009) vaguely reference floral forms but only in the most generic way; they’re not identifiable species. As jewelry, Cottrell’s intimate and complex metal constructions deal with issues of scale, rhythm, and perception, but not, primarily, the body, except on a cellular or phylogenic level—villi, buds, or nodules, consisting of a “sequential progression of many smaller works . . . interconnecting with major works.”

His convoluted forms reveal layers of detail and information: stainless steel tumbleweeds stagger into view, paired with drums, towers, or leaves; a group of lighthouses appear to back up to a cross-section of a corncob or magnified sunflower. Believing that people don’t pay enough attention to the world around them, Cottrell aims to give them plenty to look at. Just as one view begins to make sense, a twist of the wrist discloses another.

When Cottrell spoke about his work in 2008 at SOFA/Chicago, he was working toward a master’s degree at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). His thesis research gave him the opportunity to clarify his thinking about phenomenology, as expressed by two early twentieth-century European philosophers: Edmund Husserl, whose philosophical system can be briefly summed up as “experience is the source of all knowledge,” and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who applied Gestalt psychology to the
phenomenology of perception and concluded that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Both of these theorists influenced the thinking of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, now a professor at Claremont Graduate University in California, whose concept of flow had been very important to Cottrell.4

Cottrell based his master’s thesis—“Process and Progression: An Investigation into Provoking Curiosity by Challenging and Extending Perceptual Engagement”—on a phenomenological approach to his studio practice and through close examination of his own flow of intuition and creativity. The “ingredients of perception” enumerated by psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim provide a framework for looking at Cottrell’s thesis and understanding his work process: “active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving . . . combining, separating, putting in context.”5 The significance of all these philosophical underpinnings becomes obvious when Cottrell describes the way he works and the role of music in his art and life.

While constructing individual jewelry objects, Cottrell became conscious of the physicality of his own movements. This led him to consider consciousness itself. “I’m trying to materialize [make tangible] what is essentially intangible: mapping the progression of mental processes into the development and growth of physical form.” A graphic representation within his thesis project installation, Full Project Flow Map (2010), served as a two-dimensional chart tracing the process by which individual objects evolved through many incarnations, providing a real-life model of the maker’s mindset. The mutable installation becomes the embodiment of the maker’s supple mind. As if looking at the artist’s workbench containing several dozen meditations on form and material, the polygons, cubes, tubes, and doughnuts are all there, but their configuration is constantly reinterpreted. The process rendered on the large board invites as much scrutiny as the work itself, like hearing several related dialects of the same language, or overlapping tones in a musical composition.

As he probed the essences of things, Cottrell introduced more complexity into his work, and forms emerged that portrayed the interaction of dualities and oppositions. He
began to create “parameters,” or concepts, that drove his investigations. For example, his exploration into the concept of “simple forms with complex edges,” led him to break from simple cones to cones with a suggestion of unchecked growth, like a burl on a tree. Other such developments during the years 1998–2009 include “opposing dualities in form,” “soft forms rigidly held,” and “rigid forms held softly.” Cottrell’s closer attention to his own creative process led, unsurprisingly, to making more fluid and precise work. Gradually, the process became the subject of the work itself, and elements that have now become central to Cottrell’s jewelry began to appear. The geometric polygon remained a building block, but it began to multiply and gain movement even though individual elements were rectangular and landlocked. The simplicity and repetition of Cottrell’s basic form vocabulary—tubes, doughnuts, planes, cubes—have provided the foundation for nearly limitless combinations. Cottrell’s descriptions of creativity—the feedback mechanisms that bring an object into being—seem a dry science compared to the actual synaptic flash of inspiration. They certainly don’t convey the wit of brooches such as Circle on More or Lights On/Lights Off, whose Jekyll-and-Hyde personality emerges with varied lighting. Cottrell contradicts our expectations by using a gloss white, which makes the interior spaces appear brighter than the matte white on the exterior. Later, Cottrell replaced the interior gloss with a luminous, glow-in-the-dark white powder coating, making it even more mysterious. The otherworldly Circle on More resulted from nearly a year of experimentation with synthetic biophosphorescence, allowing for a successful granular texture with the green luminescent powder coat.

Though stationary, Cottrell’s objects are alive with implied movement. They are fascinatingly complex constructions, and despite their lack of color, they draw the eye all over the undulating curves, tubes, steps, and levels. Objects imply motion when they radiate from a central point, and Cottrell’s clusters appear to tip precariously as they push asymmetrically away from the center, or from each other. And since the eye and brain are exquisitely sensitive to movement, this excites the viewer’s perception sending neurons firing and blood coursing into the visual cortex at the back of the head. Without being consciously aware, the viewer experiences this zig-zag structure as a literally exciting, dynamic tension.

A self-described biology geek and avid hiker who grew up on the edge of the Australian bush, Cottrell has had a lifelong interest in the interrelationships of landform, plant, and animal life. “I used
to spend three months of the year in the ancient Gondwanan-remnant rainforests of East Gippsland,” he explains. His decision to make jewelry started with a teenage love of metal. He attended a secondary school with a strong technical program that addressed a technological shortage in the 1980s. Students built a working automobile engine, and metalworking, woodworking, textile design, and music theory (not band practice) were compulsory subjects. Here Cottrell was fortunate to connect with a career counselor who proposed that “there was actually career potential” for someone with his interests. Later, at RMIT, Professor Makigawa suggested he try Monel, a sturdy nickel alloy that resists corrosion and was used in the early to mid-twentieth century for ships’ hulls and musical instruments. Even for someone drawn to metal, Monel is an unlikely collaborator. Referred to as “more stainless than stainless,” it is unforgiving and difficult to form, but it fabricates beautifully, solders at a low temperature like steel, and polishes up to a warm mirror-like finish. Moreover, its highly reflective surface creates a range of tone in black and white as rich as any gelatin silver print. Cottrell found it a clean material, one that holds its polish and never oxidizes. He once accidentally drove his car over a finished brooch and needed only to repair a bit of chipped paint.

To watch Cottrell at work is to see Arnheim’s recipe come to life. He builds his pieces by constructing discrete, elemental forms and then assembling them. If he notices that a configuration is beginning to be representational—such as a tower or flower form—he may pursue that allusion and then contradict it by going in a different direction. What if one tower went up and another down? What if the areas you would expect to be dark were light? Working intuitively, he responds to the incremental changes he has made along the way. In the early 2000s these might have taken the form of direct opposition—formal elements that opposed each other or seemed to react to one another. Constantly turning the pieces over in his hands, he makes one axis bisect another in a way that’s complementary, not contrary. Once Cottrell completed his degree, his work began to open up a little, with more space between the elements. They appear to relax and look outward, instead of within.

Now teaching in the Gold and Silversmithing Workshop at Australia University School of Art (ANU), Cottrell still finds time to make jewelry. In the past two years, he has been more reflective, as revealed in two brooches from 2013 and one from 2012 in which conversations seem to be mirroring each other. Calmer, yet surer, the forms resemble a repeating musical motif, that ebbs and reappears, to be reinterpreted or

**Circle on More**, 2012
Monel, stainless steel, phosphorescent powder coat
2 3/4 x 2 3/4 x 1"
Shouldered Hipped Pruned, 2013
Monel 400, stainless steel
$4 \frac{3}{4} \times 4 \times 1 \frac{3}{4}$
“Music is probably the greatest influence on my work,” Cottrell states. Like music, “visual communication can work through . . . looking and feeling, or listening and feeling; . . . whether it is communicating from ‘note’ to ‘note’ or from ‘shape’ to ‘shape’ the same feelings can be directed in the same ways.” Attracted to the intangibility of music, and, arguably, the experiential, fugitive aspect, Cottrell taps into the spell created by abstract sound, not vocals or lyrics. A favorite composer is Belgian-Australian George Lentz, whose music ranges from ambiguous to mysterious and is always surprising and otherworldly. Cottrell’s 2008 trip to the US afforded him the opportunity to meet with North American and European musicians who were developing their own musical languages. With his emphasis on process, he finds musicians simpatico, since they tend to be “insightful of the connectedness between their processes, their outcomes and processes of perceiving them.”

Cottrell’s work, with its multiple viewpoints, seems to embody a postmodern posture: a distillate of individual, subjective experience, even to a neural, cellular level. Though some observers see his work as modernist, presumably due to its geometry and use of steel, it seems rather postmodern, in the sense of having no center, no central authority. Sleek, highly reflective surfaces give a nod to the mid-twentieth century, but their multiple viewpoints are squarely twenty-first century—contradictory, frenetic, restless and prickly, hyperactive yet inviting contemplation, the way gazing into a complex form forces you to slow down. It’s like taking the high-speed rail line to the country, using technology to peer into the past. So far Cottrell seems incapable of literally repeating himself. Movement is bound to be forward, although of course, he dips into a past motif for inspiration, or just to see it yield up something new.

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7. “Gondwana” is the ancient southern hemisphere supercontinent from which the continent of Australia was formed.
8. As a poor conductor of heat, Monel allows for construction of complex forms without the danger of melting previous solder joins.
9. Simon Cottrell, personal communications throughout Spring 2013. All unattributed quotes derive from these communications.