



PHOTO: SUSSIE AHLBURG

'Sound Vessel', 2009, 18 ct gold solder, stainless steel ball bearings, Britannia silver, diam. 9 x 7 cm. Goldsmiths' Company Collection



PHOTO: SUSSIE AHLBURG

'Oil Drizzlers', 2010, Britannia silver, 8 x 9.5 x 9 cm and 5 x 7.5 x 8 cm. Tallest drizzler in the Goldsmiths' Company Collection, 2010

A BOWL IN THE HAND THE TACTILE WORK OF ADI TOCH

Although Adi Toch can seem almost obsessive in her meticulous finishing of metallic vessels, fluidity, pattern and sound play a crucial role in her intriguing double-skinned "Tactile Series". Profile by Corinne Julius.

THERE is something about Adi Toch's metalwork that impels the viewer to pick it up. Unlike some contemporary silver which is angular and challenging, Toch's work is sensuous and sinuous, warm and somehow comforting. It is compellingly tactile. 'I like to provoke interactions. My work needs to be handled to come to life,' she says. Her pieces express a very personal voice, distinct from the current wave of hammered and rippled forms beloved by many silversmiths. Tactility is a major preoccupation that she explores not only through form but by filling her

rounded, smooth vessels, that somewhat resemble rather elegant donuts with bases, with sand, tiny gemstones, pearls or oil. The contents can be seen, felt and heard, but never emptied or spilt. This is mesmerising and contemplative, whilst at the same time intriguing and provoking. 'I enjoy the process of creating vessels and containers because it allows me to work both with metal and space as materials, redefining borders between inside and outside. My work invites the observer to touch, play and discover hidden spaces and unexpected motion. I try to create contemplative



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'Passage', 2012, patina on silver-plated brass, diam. 23 x 11 cm



'Reflection Bowl', 2009, patina on silver-plated gilding metal, 25 x 11.5 cm



'Balloon Vessels', 2011, gold plated brass vessel nestled inside a ring-shaped balloon, each approximate diam. 13 x 7 cm



'Inverted Volume', 2013, patina on silver-plated brass, diam. 22 x 10 cm

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objects, which communicate through their tactile essence,' says Toch.

It's a mistake however to ask Toch about her inspiration. 'I don't like the word inspiration. It's not a light bulb moment. Inspiration equals the energy to make. It's a process and it's play. Play is a very big part of what I do.' She laughs and adds in reference to paying for childcare for her young daughter, 'However, now I know how much I have to pay for that play time. I explore and test things and that triggers ideas. It's process that is important.'

As a relative newcomer, graduating with First Class Honours from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem and an MA from the Cass (London Metropolitan) 2009, she has been remarkably successful, attracting a growing band of collectors. But making isn't a new thing. 'I've always made things, rather than draw. Aged four, I built a doll's house complete with all the furniture. By 13, I was making jewellery and was an assistant to a jeweller at 14.' Born in Israel, both her parents had a scientific bent and her mother loved to fix things. Despite her mother's death when she was 12, Toch acknowledges her influence. 'I liked making and was really curious about fixing (like my mother), and wanted to know how things worked. What I liked was solving problems. If there was a function you had to make it with the materials and your ability; it was intriguing. I made quite a few things but some were never finished, because it was always the process that was important.' At school she was strong on sciences and it was a toss-up between Arts and Sciences, indeed when she applied to Bezalel Academy she was advised to pursue a career in science.

She completed her two mandatory years in the army, as a psycho-technic analyst of recruits, assessing their abilities and aptitudes, but still wasn't sure about her own. Having been rejected for Product Design at Bezalel, she travelled in Italy, taking classes in jewellery in Florence. She was subsequently accepted by Bezalel to do Fashion and Jewellery. 'I never made jewellery. You could choose jewellery or *Judaica* (artefacts pertinent to Judaism). I chose the latter because that was closest to what I wanted to make. Containers have fascinated me since the beginning. As I play with my daughter (she is always filling and emptying) I see that containment is the beginning of play – from cupped hands to objects. As human beings we are physical and mental containers of feelings and thoughts, as well as substances. It's very primal. You put things inside things and take them out ... It's the basic perception of the world from womb to tomb.'

A student exchange at the Cass in London was revelatory.

The hard discipline of her Israeli training was replaced with a questioning and openness, which after an initial struggle, she came to appreciate. 'In Israel, the Cass was considered the place. When I arrived in London I had no idea what a silversmith was; all I had made was a plastic dress. The UK was amazing. I loved it, but the best thing was being taught by Simone ten Hompel.'

Back home she supplemented her brief taste of raising by working in the workshop of an elderly refugee silversmith called Karol Hirtenschtein. 'He let me use his workshop, but gave no formal tuition. From his non-conceptual viewpoint, what I did was rubbish. He was very hard, but he did say something very important: 'The hand that holds the piece, that is the significant hand.' That's because it needs to be firm. It must never rock or it will distort the shape. I learnt to concentrate on that. It's something I pass on to my students at the Cass and Bezalel now.'

She worked on projects based on body parts involving plaster and bandages, that related to her preoccupation with containers and soon started working in copper, a material with which she has great affinity and has returned to again today. 'I have a very personal relationship with copper. I know it so well. I know the taste and smell of it. I know what it will do. It is like a friend. Today I still expect things from it, yet it still surprises me.' Her current pieces, many of which are quite large in scale, have swirling, merging and flowing sweeps of colour achieved through patination. 'The process is so spontaneous you can't repeat it exactly. I have some idea of what temperature to use to produce a more psychedelic effect – it's very hot and quick.' The making of her pieces is rather contradictory. Her method is very controlled; she spends much time raising the pieces before painting on the patinating to achieve the effect of a slowly spreading oil stain on a road. Then in complete contrast, she fires the pieces very rapidly, for as little as 30 seconds, to produce the desired, but not always predictable result. 'You need guts to do it, but in some way it counterbalances my obsession with the refined surface of my silver pieces, where I am so careful to get a precise smooth finish.'

During her MA at the Cass, Toch attended a symposium called "Bohemian Paradise" in the Czech Republic, which changed her work completely. It marked what emerged as her "Tactile Series".

'There were heaps of tiny garnets scattered on the bench and stored in plastic cups. I played with the garnets in the cups and was fascinated by their fluidity, pattern and sound. I wanted to make something to hold the stones and I came up with the idea of a double-skinned bowl – part raised and part spun. However, when I put the stones inside, I didn't realise what I had started. I tried to clean it and found I couldn't get the water out.' She developed the idea of tactile vessels to hold tiny pearls. 'I was fascinated by the way you could make a solid patch from liquid. It's the ultimate container – things can't get out, yet you can see, touch and listen to them but they won't fall out even if you turn them upside down.'

In "Tactile" Toch has used different media, including sand, pearls, garnets, cloves and oil. The result could have been gimmicky, but Toch worked to develop the shapes and to site the holes slightly off centre to give the vessels a different balance. The roundness is important and Toch refers to studies which indicate that food tastes sweeter from round forms and in white, rather than darker containers.

'Rose', 2013, gold plated copper, semi precious stones, diam. 8 x 4 cm



'Oil and Vinegar Pourers', 2012, Britannia silver with gold plated interior, diam. 15 x 7 cm and diam. 8 x 6 cm. Goldsmiths' Fair Best New Design Award 2012; Goldsmiths' Craft and Design Gold Award 2013



'Berry Bowl', 2010, Britannia silver, 9.5 x 17 x 16.5 cm



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'Room to Grow', 2012, Britannia silver, 9 ct gold spout, balloons, diam. 10 cm

'Little Beak Oil Drizzler', 2010, Britannia silver, diam. 11.5 x 9 cm

She then experimented with slicing the forms asymmetrically, creating *Berry Bowl* 2010 – a strawberry bowl with cream in the upper compartment. She went onto create her *Oil Drizzlers* 2012, a bowl with an almost closed top into which oil is poured for it to swirl down into the vessel and be poured out by a tiny spout like a robin's beak. It rocks backwards and forwards, teasing the onlooker that it will spill. She developed this into an "Oil and Vinegar" series, where the two vessels can be used separately or nestling one into the other. She discovered that the viscosity of different liquids affects the necessary angle and size of the spout. 'The inspiration was not the function, but the research into shape and physicality.' She adds firmly, 'If it has a function, it has to function superbly.' As she never starts with the utilitarian purpose of an object, her latest commission to make a teapot has proved challenging. After undertaking considerable research she is sure that it will function well, with no drips and a well-balanced handle, whilst maintaining her own aesthetic. In contrast her *Balloon Vessels* and *Room to Grow* in which she uses inflated balloons inside or around metal, have no obvious function. They deflate over time changing the relationship with the metal, so redefining their place in space and the spaces in and around an object.

Her design and making is process driven. 'It starts with lots of illusive thoughts, doodles on back of envelopes and flimsy paper models, then pretty quickly moves into metal. The best work happens when I enter a mode of flow and forget everything else that exists. Although I have a rough

idea of what I want the metal to do for me when I start making, things change a lot in the process and sometimes I let the material lead. For example, in my recent *Inverted Volume*, I was soldering a flat top which started to warp as the solder was running – the piece was dancing on the hearth as though it had life of its own and the result was exciting, it added a new aspect to the work. So there's sometimes an element of serendipity.' That serendipity however is often furnished by the objects and bits of things stored in her cupboards and on her bench, as well as what is lurking in the back of her mind.

Although a meticulous craftsperson, she views techniques as a means to an end; they simply serve the shapes she wants to create. However she can seem almost obsessive in her finishing, spending hours on hammering to get the perfect surface or removing the fire stain (layer of oxide left on the surface of silver after heating and soldering.) She has worked in other materials but views metal 'as an old friend'. She enjoys metal's reaction to the body, becoming hot when touched and cool when put aside. 'It is like fresh linen on your bed. The first impression is coolness and progressively it takes the temperature of your body.'

Toch shares her studio space with Simone ten Hompel and David Clarke, two of the world's pre-eminent and influential silversmiths, yet has resolutely carved out her own very distinctive path, with work in the permanent collections of The Goldsmiths' Company, Crafts Council and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Corinne Julius



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'Red Sand Bowls', 2010, Britannia silver, red sand, largest diam. 20 x 8 cm

'Pebble Bowl', 2009, silver plated gilding metal, diam. 11 x 5 cm