

David Bielandr Man of Ideas

BY LIESBETH DEN BESTEN



Still Life diorama, from the
"Demiurg" exhibition installation
view at Artothek & Bildersaal,
Munich, 2014
mixed media
PHOTO: DIRK EISL



Still Life (detail), from the “Demiurg” exhibition installation, 2014
mixed media
PHOTO: DIRK EISL

POSTERS FEATURING A STRIKING self-portrait of David Bielander decorated advertising columns all around Munich last March, during the city’s two most important jewelry fairs and events: “Inhorgenta” and “Schmuck.”

“Demiurg” presents Bielander’s versatile jewelry and objects in a exceptional new way.

The artist’s bust is depicted in full color, his semblance completely composed of his own jewelry pieces: sausages, berries, pearl pig, banana, scampi, slugs, shells, owl, stone face and

Mund (brooch), 1998
steel crown cap, coral cabochon, red gold
1 3/8 x 3/4 x 3/4”
PHOTO: SIMON BIELANDER



rat all artfully arranged in a tribute to the 16th-century painter Arcimboldo. The poster advertised “Demiurg,” David Bielander’s most recent exhibition, which has been traveling in Europe since 2013. It opened at the Museum of Modern Art Arnhem (NL), touched the Munich Artothek (a city-run art space) and Gallery Format in Bergen (Norway), and will end its tour in the MUDAC (Museum of Design and Contemporary Applied Arts) in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2016.

“Demiurg” presents Bielander’s versatile jewelry and objects in a exceptional new way. Five different



DAVID BIELANDER
“Demiurg” exhibition
poster, 2013
composite of artist’s
jewelry pieces



Dummy Heads (pins), from
“What are you gawping at?” series, 1999
pacifier tips, akoya pearls, silver
each approx. $\frac{3}{4}$ x $\frac{3}{4}$ x $1\frac{1}{8}$ "
PHOTO: DAVID BIELANDER

Pink Snail (brooch), 1999
rubber glove, snail shell, gold pin
 $4\frac{3}{8}$ x $1\frac{1}{2}$ x $1\frac{1}{2}$ "
PHOTO: DAVID BIELANDER

dioramas were created to enhance the experience and understanding of his work. The title of the show references *Demiurg*, the Platonic philosophical concept of the artisan, a figure charged with the responsibility of creating and maintaining the physical universe. The *Demiurg* creates the material world after “the model of the *Idea*,” which in Plato’s philosophy is the most fundamental kind of reality. The title of the exhibition is more than just playful. Indeed, one could say that for Bielander, the *Idea* is his utmost reality. While it can take years before he finds the right way to realize an idea, the idea is always a reality in his mind.

Both the “*Demiurg*” exhibition and the Arcimboldoesque portrait were conceived in response to the Françoise van den Bosch Prize in contemporary jewelry, which he received in 2012. It was Bielander’s wish to present his works in an entirely new way and avoid a conventional overview of his work; hence the specially designed dioramas that provide thematic context to the pieces. The five worlds—Still Life, European Forest, Snake Pit, Hall of Mirrors and Koi Pond—were developed in partnership with the Dutch design studio Aandacht. Wallcoverings, made from collages of details of his jewelry, form the backgrounds and create the atmosphere of each world. The effect is mesmerizing; a treat and a challenge to the eye.

The international success of David Bielander is intriguing. It is as if he has been around for decades, but in fact the Basel-born artist established his studio, together with Helen Britton and Yutaka Minegishi (the three continue to share space), in Munich only in 2002. His work has been appealing and remarkable since the very start, beginning with the cheeky *Smoke Ring Machine* (1996) made while he was a student of Otto Künzli’s at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich. As an installation, the piece has now gained a new life in the “*Demiurg*” exhibition.

When Bielander started his studies in Munich, he already had a “history” as a goldsmith, like many of Künzli’s students, having worked in a goldsmith’s studio in Switzerland. Says Bielander, “I was not interested in jewelry at all, but I enjoyed the resistance of metal and the fire. I did a four-year apprenticeship in this studio, but as a matter of fact I wanted to study fashion.” At a jewelry fair in Basel he met Georg Spreng, of Frog Design, the high-end fashion jewelry brand that specializes in colorful precious jewelry. Bielander felt attracted by the skills of this designer, who was washing gold and platinum with gems in an incredible way. “Spreng had a fearless approach,” says Bielander, “which also showed in the way he dressed, for instance in flowered stockings.” Possibly more impressed by Spreng’s fancy character than by his jewelry, Bielander went to Schwäbisch Gmünd to work in the Spreng Studio where jewelry was designed and produced. “Making jewelry was a hindrance,” he recalls. “I found the idea of showing off skills in my own work appalling.” In talking with Bielander, he makes it clear that contemporary jewelry can require effort. It’s not a thing you adopt just

like that; you have to understand, to commit, and to make it your own. In 1989, during the first year of his apprenticeship with Spreng, he visited the “Ornamenta” exhibition, in Pforzheim, but as he states: “I couldn’t bring together what they were doing and what I was doing. I saw a Nel Linssen piece (a simple paper construction) and found it beautiful but foreign. I couldn’t connect it with what

I was doing at that time. It was like two completely different occupations.”

In 1995 Bielander visited the Haldenhof (now called the Zimmerhof)

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symposium, organized by Ruudt Peters and Iris Eichenberg, (both from the Rietveld Academy’s jewelry department in Amsterdam). This introduction to the contemporary jewelry scene convinced him to leave Georg Spreng and to continue his studies either in Amsterdam, London or Munich. He chose Munich after exploring the work of Künzli, whose ideas, he determined, were very near to his own. At his Munich interview he presented his *Navel Watching Piece*, a work that later formed the basis of his “Teats” brooches (2002).

Bielander entered Künzli’s jewelry class armed with a sketchbook, which he had titled “*How can I prevent jewelry from being worn?*” In this notebook he collected



Slugs, 2006
oxidized silver
dimensions variable



Scampi (bracelet), 2007
silver (copper anodized), elastic
4 x 4 x 2 3/8"
edition of 12
PHOTO: SIMON BIELANDER

various ideas. One of his first pieces was *Little Porthole* (1997), an object to be integrated in a hole in one's clothing. Obviously, Bieler had ambivalent feelings about jewelry during his first two years in Munich. But, as a result of continuing discussions at the jewelry department and the creation of his first genuine piece of jewelry—the folded bottle cap *Mouth* brooch (1998)—he eventually overcame this drawback by taking a different approach, working only on transforming found materials rather than fully fabricating pieces. His “What are you gawping at?” brooches (1999), made from baby pacifiers with pearl eyes, and the *Pink Snail* (1999), from a rubber glove, snail shell and gold pin, are examples of his first such transformations. The *Lip* brooch (1999), made from a rubber jar seal, is another case of his method, which he describes as follows: “Suppose I want to make a mouth, and then I find this rubber ring. That's my playground. I don't have to create, I react.” Through this approach jewelry became acceptable for him—it was his entree into jewelry design.

Bieler's “Slugs” brooches of 2006, were conceived as a family—Mom, Dad and two children —and produced in an unlimited edition, and his first pieces using sheet metal. Other examples of jewelry constructed from metal are his *Scampi* (2007) and *Tyre* bracelets (2010), the *Garlic* necklace (2009), *Gentian* brooch (2011) and the titanium *Python* necklaces (2011). Bieler either transforms existing materials or starts from scratch by cutting and folding metal sheet.

Over the years Bieler has become more and more interested in jewelry per se, often wondering, for example, why certain items should or shouldn't become a brooch. Like a slug, for instance. Bieler is very much aware that some themes such as the snake, the flower and the mouth are well researched within jewelry. But this does not hold him back from attempting his own version. On the contrary: the more familiar, the greater the attraction. As Bieler says, “It is so important to overcome this resistance and then to be persistent, to have a vocabulary of skills to get over what already looks closed. How can I get it to this first spark, that's the challenge.”

Around 2000, figuration was quite unpopular in European contemporary jewelry; practice was based on abstraction and conceptualism. Therefore, Bieler's “Stone Face” brooches (2003) were met with disbelief and rejection at the time. Today, these brooches sell, thanks to the fact that Bieler created a larger figurative context for them but also because people have come to understand that figuration doesn't preclude conceptual thinking. It's now widely understood that Bieler's work encapsulates the general world and mores of jewelry in an unparalleled way.

As mentioned above, certain themes can sit in Bieler's mind for quite some time before they are resolved. An example is his sausage necklace (2009),



Python (necklace), 2011
titanium, silver
length 98 1/2"
edition of 12
PHOTO: DIRK EISL

which is made in three variations: *Weisswurst*, *Frankfurter* and *Wienerle*. For someone unfamiliar with living in central Europe, it might be difficult to understand what makes a sausage such an appealing subject. It may help

to explain it as a typical cultural property, with each type of sausage having its own recipe, form, structure and color, its own rituals and its own place of origin.

Bieler developed the idea of making a sausage necklace that would refer to banal popular items such as dogs' leashes made from plastic sausages and traditional real sausage decorations as they are used in folk culture. The idea was born and then the sausage was researched. What makes this slightly bent form? How do they move? In what kind of material could this be realized? Until one day he suddenly saw them in a bentwood Thonet chair. Bieler bought 12 chairs and cut them up—because, in his view, the form of the sausage was there already, it only needed to be released.

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Tyre (bracelet), 2010
patinated silver
4 x 4 x 1 1/2"
edition of 12
PHOTO: SIMON BIELANDER



Face of Rock (brooch), 2003
agate, amethyst, silver, steel
PHOTO: SIMON BIELANDER



Gentian (brooch), 2011
titanium, gold 750
3 x 2 3/4 x 4 1/3"
unlimited edition
PHOTO: DAVID BIELANDER



Koi (bracelet), 2012
thumb tacks, leather, silver clasp
5 1/8 x 4 3/8 x 3 1/2"
PHOTO: DIRK EISL

Bielander can take years exploring materials before an idea for a piece of jewelry is realized in the most perfect way. The first snake necklace, for instance, was made in silver and although it was short it was still too

“I’m not interested in provocation... and I’m not interested in making something ugly.”

heavy to reach the python length he envisioned (more than two-and-a-half yards long). Therefore he put the idea aside for some time. But when he was creating the *Gentian* brooch from

a sheet of titanium, a material he’d never worked with before, and which can be anodized in an intense blue color, he knew he had found the perfect lightweight material for the python as well. Technically, the *Python* was first made using a hand saw and a blanking tool; but Bieler switched to laser cutting, an important advance that facilitated producing work in editions of 12 (unless indicated differently). He believes that the actual production should either be fun, as with the *Koi* bracelets (2012), which are made in unlimited editions, and of which the pattern of every piece differs, or it

should be efficient, enabled by the use of molds, laser cutting or other specialized tools. Bieler describes the making of the *Koi* bracelets, with thumbtacks individually pierced through the leather form, as some kind of adventure: “You can’t envision how it will be, but I know what I do. I can play with these tacks and if I don’t experience that feeling of surprise, then it goes in the drawer and has to wait.”

For Bieler it is very important that people like to wear his jewelry, that it is attractive and “that people look great with it; they shouldn’t look odd.” He likes to observe people wearing his work, who they are and how they do it. Some people manage to make the perfect match, such as a certain well-dressed elderly gentleman Bieler noticed in Munich wearing the *Lip* brooch on the lapel of his well-tailored suit. Bieler sees this as a “very positive” implication for jewelry. The man “is not suffering under his suit, his first mask,” says Bieler. The jewelry is something extra, very personal, a very tiny social sign.”

Bieler finds it a matter of importance that his pieces are robust and made to be used, without too many limitations. Therefore his works are “solved as a piece of jewelry, not as a sculpture you can also wear,” as he states. Although he often works in quite large editions, which is the exception in the world of contemporary jewelry, every piece has a unique character, and is made by hand. For him there is not a huge difference between contemporary jewelry and traditional jewelry; in principle it is all the same, but he likes the metamorphosis and dislocation achievable in his own way of working.

One such transformation involved taking an African-made aluminum teapot and changing it into *Hannibal* (2011), an awkward elephant vase. He calls it “a play with the genres,” taking something that is so close to souvenirs bought in trade fair markets, which “show us a rather stereotype notion of Africa” and bringing it into the context of his gallery. His “macramé” *Owl* (2005), a necklace made from brown-patina silver chain, embodies a similar dynamic. “It is so possessed with all that meaning, all those times you’ve seen [an owl] in books, films etc,” he says, “then it becomes interesting to me. I’m not interested in provocation... and I’m not interested in making something ugly. It is the the fact that we have seen it so many times, together with the transformation, that makes it beautiful.”

It is exactly this play with the jewelry genre that makes David Bieler such a consummate 21st-century jeweler. His concepts are not too obvious in the sense of being ironic or topical. Instead they are complementary to what we know, yet they are saucy. Saturated in traditions, skills and imagery, David Bieler is still able to tweak jewelry with his very own ideas.

Amsterdam-based Liesbeth den Besten is an independent art historian, writer, curator and teacher.

Hannibal (Baby), 2013
altered aluminum teapot
5 1/8 x 4 3/4 x 8 1/4"
edition of 37
PHOTO: DIRK EISL



Northern African aluminum teapots from a trade fair market.



Gentian (brooch), 2011
titanium, gold 750
3 x 2 ¾ x 4 ⅓"
unlimited edition
PHOTO: DAVID BIELANDER



Koi (bracelet), 2012
thumb tacks, leather, silver clasp
5 ⅛ x 4 ¾ x 3 ½"
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