

Accessorising is the new art: Karl Fritsch retrospective rings the changes

By: Sarah Clare Conlon



Manchester Art Gallery's latest exhibition is all about wearable artworks.

“If I had to describe Karl Fritsch’s work in one word, I would define it as anarchic,” says Jo Bloxham, curator of the contemporary jeweller’s new exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery. And I’m liable to agree; for starters, unless you’re a Lalique collector, since when was jewellery art? Well, actually, that’s where I’m wrong. Bloxham explains: “Over the last 30 years there has been a movement within the jewellery world which has pushed the boundaries of what is possible to achieve within this practice. This has led to work being produced that has a narrative – a conceptual element to it. Jewellery should excite, surprise, intrigue and stand alone. There are many successful jewellery galleries across Europe and beyond showcasing this form of avant-garde jewellery, but sadly the UK hasn’t picked up on it.”

As if to prove the point, while Karl Fritsch has exhibited his jewellery from the States to Japan, and has work in many gallery and museum collections (such as Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam), this is his first UK solo exhibition. And while accessories as art might be news to us, this retrospective serves as an impressive introduction to a career that has spanned two decades. But back to the anarchy Jo Bloxham alluded to: Fritsch’s practice is to rebel against his craftsmanship. “As a trained goldsmith, Karl has taken his technical skills and used them to achieve a way of expressing his personality,” she says. “I particularly like the naive honesty of the pieces; the fingerprints and evidence of the making process are part of the concept.”

Others have spoken of a kind of “reverse alchemy”. Where alchemy takes base metals and attempts to turn them into gold, Fritsch takes precious materials – including diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds – and almost degrades them through processes such as oxidisation and by combining them with worthless “found objects”, such as rusty screws. A kind of most-modern upcycling, if you like. The results are unique and often quite bizarre: glittering gems piled high on a tin-can-ring-pull-a-like; tarnished ornate offerings that look as if they were trawled from the bottom of the sea. Some rings are miniature sculptures (though massive fingerwear!), including a roaring Godzilla-type lizard and a huge, jewel-encrusted bronze cow. On the other hand (sorry), there are more saleable “bread and butter pieces”, as Bloxham calls them. I fawned over a beautifully balanced piece, with a pink rhodochrosite stone in a traditional round gold setting, though at £1,365 it is slightly beyond my freelancer wages. Oh yes, most items are available to buy; if something in particular catches your eye, just exit through the gift shop and let a member of staff know...