

Companionship and conversation

Juliette Bigley

The silversmith tells Teleri Lloyd-Jones about her love of words. Portrait by Trent McMinn

Makers coming to their discipline as a second career aren't unusual in this magazine, but at 34, Derbyshire-born Juliette Bigley is a rarer beast, a third-career maker. 'I've done quite a lot of studying!' she laughs, as she talks me through the circuitous route that brought her to silversmithing.

Following a degree in English Literature, Bigley completed a Masters at London School of Economics in voluntary sector policy. But after a year working in a youth organisation, she went to music college and trained as a classical singer. Music had always been close to her heart. Her father, a viola player, was a founding member of the Lindsay quartet and Bigley and her sister grew up on tour: 'As a young child, I'd slept in most of the concert halls in Europe.' After this foray into music, she returned to the charitable sector and worked for seven years with the Terence Higgins Trust, beginning on the helpline but ending up running THT's clinical services in London, where she still lives and works.

During a holiday to Greece, Bigley and her partner visited a small contemporary jewellery shop and the trip got her thinking. 'I always knew I was looking for something else,' she explains, and back in London she began an evening course at Central St Martins; a natural aptitude confirmed when she moved on to a B.Tech at Kensington & Chelsea College.

Bigley began her metalwork education knowing she wanted to focus on silversmithing rather than jewellery: 'I knew I wasn't interested in jewellery. Objects are endlessly fascinating,' she explains. 'I think there's something very practical about the way we structure our world with them. Objects are our everyday companions. They mirror what's going on inside and exploring that is really exciting.' On her silversmithing degree at the Cass she was taught by David Clarke, Wayne Meeten and Simone ten Hompel, the latter's influence most easily discerned in Bigley's work with their soft surfaces and interplay of volumes. 'She's a really exciting maker,' Bigley says of ten Hompel, 'She has an incredibly precise way of thinking and working'.

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Right: *Salt and Pepper Split Bowls*, gilded Britannia silver
Below: *Conversational Vessels: Water and Wine Carafes*, silver plate, 2013



Bigley herself exudes a quiet determination, and you can see why she might respond to such precision; you get the feeling that this is a maker with a plan. Perhaps this is in part because she came to silversmithing as a mature student, but there were her years as a project manager, too: 'It's easier to be selective and strategic about what you want to do. I entered my third year with a really clear picture of where I wanted to be at the end of it. That really helped, it allowed me to focus.' The challenge to develop and push her making ability is one she enjoys. 'The quality of basic skills is important to me,' she says. 'I want to make well. And even if I don't use them, I think there's an integrity you get through practise in your making that is really important.'

Her graduation piece was a series of silver vessels, and since then she's begun a new set of more affordable ones made, rather ingeniously, with powder-coated plumber's copper piping. For a maker who demonstrates such thought and consideration within her work, it's little surprise to hear that the part of the process she struggles with the most is that first moment, the process of designing what you will go on to make (Bigley admits she's no good working in 2D, preferring to model than draw). 'It's like a magic wand, waiting for it

to strike and that makes me uncomfortable because if it doesn't strike then you're goosed,' she explains. At the Cass, however, ten Hompel directed her student to find a good question and set about answering it. This was music to Bigley's ears: 'I thought, "OK, we have control over this process." It's not waiting around for the muse and that suits me well.'

Bigley is a maker who begins her process with words. A love of literature has never left her, and writing is still a big part of her practice. Her graduation work, a series called *Conversation Pieces*, began as a series of questions about how objects interact with each other, what happens when two static things begin to talk to each other.

It has been four years since Bigley first sat at a metalwork bench, and her progress has been impressive. In 2013 she won the Cass Award for Excellence and this year took home the Gil Packard Post-Graduate Bursary at the Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Council Awards. Despite the momentum in her practice now, the studying hasn't stopped. She has begun a research Masters at Cass under the supervision of ten Hompel, and her future practice will surely benefit from the many questions she'll find. www.juliettebigley.com

BOWL PHOTO: TRENT MCMINN | CARAFES PHOTO: SUSSE AHEBURG

