





THE JOINT WINNERS OF THIS  
YEAR'S JERWOOD PRIZE TALK  
TO EMMA CRICHTON MILLER  
ABOUT MATERIALS, THE BODY,  
AND WHEN A PIECE IS FINISHED

**EMMA CRICHTON MILLER:** We might start by talking about how each of you came upon the materials you have chosen to work with.

**ADAM PAXON (AP):** I did a placement with Martin Adams when I was studying at Middlesex...

**SUSAN CROSS (SC):** ... which is a placement I actually discovered! During your third year at Middlesex, you go and work out in industry or another workplace. As it was a jewellery course, most people tended to go into the jewellery business. For me, at that point, as I am interested in a broad range of materials and ways of working, including sewing, knitting and so on, not particularly jewellery making, I wanted to do a placement that was more interesting. I came across this prop-maker, Martin Adams, and did an interview with him. I spent six months with him, which was great, working in teams, doing film work, working for opera, television, all sorts of varied things. Because at that point I was thinking prop-making was what would I do.

**AP:** Interestingly, I had a very different experience, after you'd started this, because I was mixed in with students from all over the place, a lot of London colleges, students from the Royal College. As a third-year student I was exposed to all kinds of fascinating people, all sorts of different skill bases, not all jewellers. Something I find fabulous about prop-makers is that they are incredibly knowledgeable and creative in the way they approach things, and it's a pressured environment and

that's what drives this team to achieve all kinds of things in very short time frames. So the things that I was doing were silicon moulding, casting in epoxy, for helmets for an awful Judge Dredd film. That was a lovely thing I remember about Martin as well, that things had to be really well-made.

**SC:** They had to survive, being thrown around, going on tour, so there was a real emphasis on making things very well.

So what materials had you been using previously?

**AP:** I did a lot of work in paper, paper that I was making and recycled paper – I think that by the time I was at Middlesex the course had significantly altered from the time when Sue went through.

**SC:** We were taught metal. Obviously you could work in other materials but there was a fundamental metal-based teaching, which was fantastic, because if you can work in metal you can transfer your skills to other materials. And metal is still the core of my work.

**AP:** I'd had a lot of metals experience, all the way through from being a child, so I was looking for something new. And beforehand I'd been trying desperately hard not to be a jeweller, because that was the path my parents had taken. So I suppose one way of doing that would be to work with completely polar-opposite materials. The interest in plastic materials started with working with Martin, and I knew afterwards when I finally started to work by myself that I wanted to work with

IN CONVERSATION

ADAM  
PAXON  
AND  
SUSAN  
CROSS





BELOW

'Orgasmaplode' brooch (rear left), acrylic, epoxy and lacquer, 7 x 12.8 cm; brooch (rear right), acrylic, ink, and lacquer, 3.5 x 10.2 cm; 'Drop Down' ring (fore left), acrylic and lacquer, 2.2 x 3.5 cm; brooch (fore centre), acrylic, ink and epoxy, 4.2 x 5.2 cm; brooch (fore right), acrylic, ink and epoxy, 4.9 x 3.9 cm extended  
All work this page by Adam Paxon, 2002

a case of trying to combine it all together, and then you might actually get to another point, not where you were thinking of, but you might end up somewhere else, which can be quite exciting.

AP: Yes, you know loosely when you go in, and I'm not suggesting that you might get distracted. It's just it's ever beyond, and that's what kind of drives you, you're always going to go the various stages further. Maybe what you need to make you comfortable is to know that there's a route over there somewhere, and sometimes that's all I feel I need, to just feel that there's something profitable in this, not to feel completely lost, but not to have any strong direction.

SC: I often work in books, drawing ideas – not jewellery, but ideas in a loose way. It will then take about three years actually to get to make that.

AP: I think there are probably rhythms for all of us and I've certainly experienced a similar thing. At other times things just slot into place in my mind. Then I'll have a very industrious, busy making-period, with longer-term things alongside it. This thing about the off-shoot, the aside: you're aiming to do something and hell, the material doesn't behave, it does something else. That is always recorded, put on the side, as 'Well, that's a definite option.' Then it's time to make a decision: 'Is that something that I want to do now or is this more exciting?'

Is it tricky to decide when a piece is finished?

AP: It takes time to be aware of, and comfortable with, a piece being finished. I don't think there's a destination, and then you arrive. I don't use casting, everything is hand-made and individually done, so there's this continual assessment of things as they are going. It's gradual. Sometimes, also, I think we have to go past the point where things are finished. I trip myself up even now about that, overworking something, because I like the work to have a sense of life about it.

SC: I think that comes through experience, knowing yourself.

AP: I think it's one of the biggest questions, that point of knowing when a piece is finished.

SC: You have to be brave to stop, and not overload something.

How important to you is the idea of the wearer?

AP: In the main I am completely inconsiderate of the wearer while I am making the work, in the sense that they are not a real person. I have ideas, fictitious people, in my mind, but thankfully of late I've started to meet collectors who've started to replace these fictitious people. And I'm very conscious of a dotted line between the two, between the maker and the wearer. I think that we don't have control of that, of that other side of the dotted line – we have to be aware of that. But on the other hand, I am always looking at how pieces are worn by people, how they are changed and altered by people.

SC: I am quite different. I work with myself. I put the pieces on. I work with my own proportions. And I'm very interested in how people wear pieces. Jewellery more than other art forms has that agenda, of course, it has to work, the opening, the catch. I quite like that part of the whole thing, you know, making it work.

AP: When it comes down to it, I constantly ask, 'Am I a jeweller?' – because really I'm seeking to make objects that aren't in any way disabled without the body, and yet are fully functioning, wearable objects. Wearability is not a secondary quality. But also I'm very interested in the posture of things, even when they are just lying on a surface. That's something which is important to my work.

So what makes the difference for you between a created object and a piece of jewellery? Is there no difference?

AP: Well, no, there are always those elements that have to be there – the catch, the method of fastening – but I'm looking for the piece not to give away the fact that it is wearable, for it not to be immediately understood.

SC: I've always considered myself a jeweller, and my pieces are quite accessible in that way, although I think of them as objects as well. It's interesting that in photographs they are hardly ever shown on the body, but almost always photographed like an object. I do very much think of them as jewellery pieces nonetheless.

AP: Curiously, when I'm doing a photoshoot I always have pieces shown on the body as well as off the body. I feel that's quite important for our field, how we place the object on the body.





PREVIOUS LEFT  
(CLOCKWISE from  
TOP) 'Chroma Series'  
brooch, oxidised silver,  
crystalline, 2005;  
'Loop Series' brooch,  
oxidised silver, linen,  
2003; 'Concentration'  
brooch, paper  
cord, thread, 2001.

All by Susan Cross  
PREVIOUS RIGHT  
Bangle, Adam Paxton,  
acrylic and polyester,  
15 x 8.5 cm  
BELOW Neckpiece,  
acrylic, 35 cm diam.  
BOTTOM LEFT  
'Rings with Tails',  
acrylic, 7.5 x 5.5 cm,  
6.5 x 5 cm  
BOTTOM RIGHT  
'Urchin Brooch',  
laminated, thermo-  
formed and carved  
acrylic brooch, lacquer  
and epoxy inlay,  
10 x 5 cm, 2002.

All work this page by  
Adam Paxton, 2007

colour, and colour in a three-dimensional sense, not colour as a surface. So I started picking up pieces of acrylic and torturing them basically, trying to find out where the limits of the material were. Conveniently, several people told me, when I started to formulate ideas, that they were not necessarily achievable, which caused me to dig my heels in. I was seeking to be innovative and to explore new things that I had discovered, new techniques and processes that I had developed. And also colour and light and translucency, and the three-dimensional forming of plastic materials, moving them away from their sheet origin.

A lot of this stuff I do is actually very simple. Students often expect me to work in a lab, but I don't work in a lab. I approach the material very much by working immediately into it. The thing about plastic being throwaway is fabulous for me, because people would throw it away and I'd go and pick it up and work directly in the material rather than make a model. It suited me to work with a material which isn't precious compared to other materials and to work with it in a non-precious way, so that I can sample the material endlessly. Of course since then I've realised that certain colours I like to use are difficult to get hold of nowadays. There are sheets of material that they stopped making in the 60s, because they were 50s colours. You come across small examples of them, which then become these precious things in the studio.

Susan, you do have a precious metal base, so how did other materials come into your work?

SC: It just evolved naturally.

The hierarchy of materials never troubled you?

SC: No, not at all, they are all equal. It's about whatever I am trying to express really. I work in metal, it gives me what I want, as a core framework. The thread goes back to when I was at college, when I was working in a very similar way, having metal, a lot of wire predominantly, which gives a strong line, and then bringing in textiles, which could bring in colour and other contrasting qualities. The metal is very controllable and I can get it to do what I want, but thread

isn't that controllable, which I like. So it's laying down the structure say with wire and then overlaying it with the more unstructured thread, to free it up.

How much does technical expertise matter to your work? Does the desire to solve particular technical problems drive the inspiration or the other way about?

SC: I think you can't have one without the other. It's all about finding the right level to realise what you're trying to say.

AP: I'd agree with that. If you were completely technically driven the work would be cold and inhuman, but I suppose sometimes I am more aware of it than at others. There are these little challenges, kind of 'I wish I could do that' – and at the weekend I'll find half a day to try and shunt that forward a bit. But equally I could spend time pursuing balance or colour, or I'll be looking at proportion or weight on the body, or looking at the way light travels through pieces. I'm interested in working with light and colour in such a way that it informs the actual form of the work. In the main, I'm interested in transparency and translucency, and generally the two materials which offer that are glass and plastic. But when we think about subtlety and sensuousness and those kinds of words, we associate them with glass and not plastic. I suppose I'm just trying to find some of those things in the plastic material.

You've spoken about how important it is for you to get a very highly polished look.

AP: Yes, the 'wet-look' finish that makes it look as if it's just been extracted from water. Water is very important for me. I grew up next to a river. What might be under there might be important.

To what extent are your pieces designed?

SC: I don't actually design as such before I start. One thing just leads onto another. I'll gather together lots of bits, and I'll play with them. Other elements come from drawings, but that's all kind of feeding in on an unconscious level. For me the design comes through the doing, though I do set out with a vision of where I am trying to get to. I can sort of see it in my mind, what I am trying to make, and then it's just



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ADAM PAXTON



It's one of the things that makes an exhibition like the Jerwood quite odd, where you see everything in cabinets and not on people.

AP: But curiously there's something that happens when people approach these cabinets – do you not find that you are almost wearing these objects? You are making assessments of how heavy that might be. We are very aware of our bodies when we see an object which is being displayed to us as being wearable, we can't help but imagine wearing it.

SC: You project yourself into it to some extent.

AP: And I think there are ways of displaying it that encourage this.

SC: It's also quite nice to leave room for the imagination, to make the audience work a bit too, not making it too obvious how a piece should be worn. I've certainly seen people take pieces I have made and wear them in a completely different way to the way I had thought about it, and that's really nice. It becomes something else.

So why jewellery?

SC: It just happened very naturally, it grew out of my way of working, my way of thinking.

AP: There's something about making objects with reference to the body's scale. They are not larger than the body. They are within the body's parameters somehow, and that I think is part of the reason that it drew me.

SC: Because the body is jewellery's fundamental material, because if you think about it, jewellery isn't defined by one type of material, we don't have a material, which is actually quite liberating.

AP: I think it's also something to support ideas with.

And so what sort of role do ideas play in the whole process?

AP: They are quite important. The whole notion of plastic is an idea. Plastic is a mimic, it is generally used to mimic materials of a culturally perceived higher value or rarity. But technically I don't think I could produce the work in any other material. It's not a mimic in that sense at all and it's this potential for people to be negative about this material that I find very interesting. But it's not that I love the stuff – sometimes I think I actually hate it, and I think we need to be a lot more careful about the plastics that we use.

SC: For me the ideas and the materials go hand-in-hand.

It's hard to find words for the ideas.

AP: Words aren't my primary sphere but words can open up worlds. I find I do a lot of note-taking. It's very rarely sentences or paragraphs, or I might use words to help me understand a quality I am looking for, I might examine something in words in the same way that I'd examine something through drawing it: 'What do I mean here? What kind of delicate am I looking for, what kind of sensuousness am I looking for?' I wanted to say something about the word 'plastic'. In French, it refers directly to the chemical use of the word: *plastic* as against *elastic*, when a material goes through its elastic stage, it will reach its point of plasticity, in other words of stasis. I'm very interested in plastic in that sense. I'm very aware that I'm trying to animate this inanimate, man-made, inhuman material, to give it a sense of life. Sometimes I'm quite deliberate in that I'm trying to give the illusion or impression that even though this is carved from a solid chunk, it has actually been stopped in motion, freeze framed, in that position.

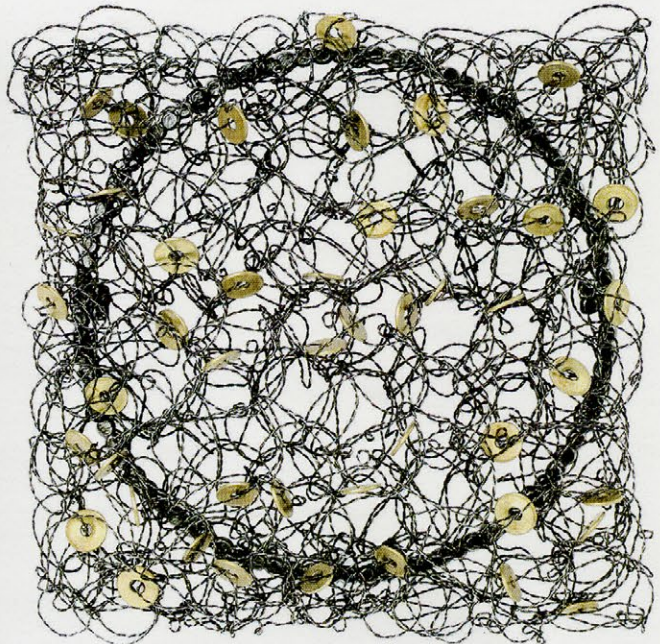
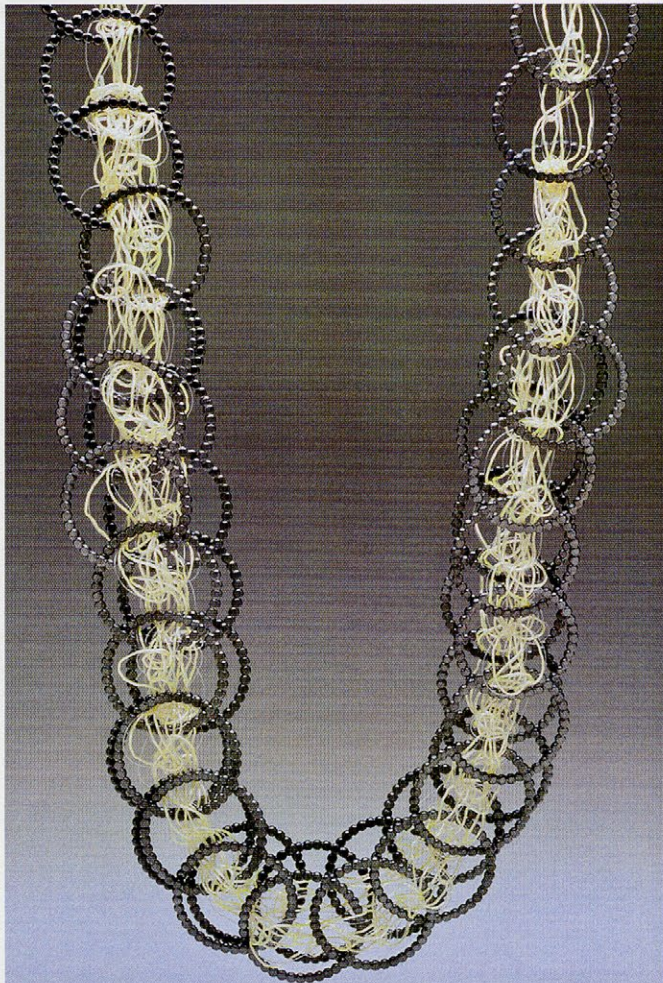
SC: Even with metal, it's quite hard and unforgiving, and some of the processes are quite cumbersome. To keep the ideas fresh, and to keep the outcome fresh and spontaneous, is quite difficult. I don't often use words, and particularly with my work, it speaks for itself.

AP: I think that sometimes when we talk about things, especially unscripted, unprepared, we realise with hindsight that we touched on something important. I think that talking is important for our own development as well as for communicating and disseminating. I've benefited a lot from it.

*The exhibition for the Jerwood Prize for Applied Arts 2007, Jewellery, tours to the Collection, Danes Terrace, Lincoln, until 30 September 2007, then on to Edinburgh and Bradford. Adam Paxon shows in 'Contemporary Jewellery from MIMA's Collection' at Middlesbrough Institute for Modern Art until 11 November. For details of show and tours, and stockists, see Crafts Guide. [www.craftscouncil.org.uk/jerwood](http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/jerwood), [www.jerwoodvisualarts.org/appliedarts](http://www.jerwoodvisualarts.org/appliedarts)*



THIS PAGE (ANTI-CLOCKWISE from TOP) 'Crossover' neckpiece, oxidised silver, 2001; Untitled neckpiece, oxidised silver piece, thread, 2005; Untitled brooch, 18ct gold, oxidised silver, 2001  
OPPOSITE Untitled neckpiece, oxidised silver, crystalline, 10 x 7 cm, 2007.  
All work this spread by Susan Cross



*'It's nice to leave room for the imagination. People wear pieces I've made in a completely different way'*



