

# SPAZIO —NOBILE

CONTEMPORARY APPLIED ARTS, DESIGN, PHOTOGRAPHY

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Adi Toch listens to her materials, drawing out their inherent characteristics to create vessels that often respond to the viewer, says *Isabella Smith*. Portrait by *Thom Atkinson*

# GOOD VIBRATIONS

Metalsmith Adi Toch treats her materials as if they were human, imbuing each with its own personality and behaviour. The concept of anthropomorphism comes to mind time and again as we discuss her work. 'Each metal has its own character – you choose the right one for the particular project,' she tells me. 'Copper is very soft. It's submissive. There's no resistance, so working with it is not about dialogue. Silver is different: it has more opinion and is very communicative. Brass is even more opinionated.'

The Israel-born artist, now based in London, transforms these materials into objects that range from the functional – cups, oil drizzlers and pourers – through to participatory works combining vessels and sound equipment, which she sees as all belonging to the same continuum. 'I don't think they're different,' she muses. 'A teapot is also interactive.' For Toch, almost everything is personified. Take her collection of silver *Satiated Vessels*,

which she jokingly describes as 'self-portraits'. The mouths of these rounded pourers seem to sigh with satisfaction; some slump, as if over-full.

Even with her static objects the focus is on the experience. While we talk, we sip wine in cups from her *Segmented* series, each of which has been shaped, cut, then re-joined at an angle, making the asymmetric patterns created by the pooled wine change as the level of the liquid lowers. These cups rest on nipple-like feet, reminiscent of three-footed tripod jars: ancient ceramics are a key influence on her vessels.

'Museum visits and handling sessions are a great inspiration – I like pottery from the Mediterranean,' explains Toch, who will show new work inspired by artefacts from the Dead Sea at the State Museum of Archeology in Chemnitz, Germany, later this year. 'There is one particular piece in the V&A that I'm obsessed with: a solid gold ewer from Anatolia, from 2500 bc. It looks like it's been hand-raised,

which is a technique I use. I find the thought of making in a way that is over 4,500 years old very inspiring.'

Interactive sculpture by Anish Kapoor is another big influence. Her latest series, *Plump Wall Objects*, combines inspirations old and new: Renaissance convex mirrors and Kapoor's monumental steel mirrors, which invite audience engagement. In September, Toch's wall works will be shown by Spazio Nobile at Brussels Gallery Weekend in a display that will include a specially commissioned wall object – the largest she's ever made. Unlike Kapoor's outsized sculptures, however, Toch's usually remain small, their material precious: silver polished from matte to satin, encouraging the viewer to move around and notice changes in their softened reflections.

Sometimes her pieces react to people, such as her *Vessels on Stilts*, which tremble at the footsteps of passers-by. And occasionally they even ask you to speak to them. For her 2017

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installation, *Talk to Me* – commissioned by the Crafts Council for the Cheongju Craft Biennale – she collaborated with musician Moshi Honen, incorporating microphones into the work to translate viewers' speech into vibrations. These caused the vessels to quiver in various ways, depending on their height, weight and placement. 'I was trying to provoke contemplation about the relationships we form with objects around us,' she explains.

People often respond to these installations with surprised chatter and laughter; some even break out into song. In a video of her 2017 work *Receptive Vessels* – created with sound specialist John Henry's Ltd – a puzzled child commands: 'Stop it! You're not alive, you can't move!'

The unique appeal of Toch's work is, in part, thanks to the way she restlessly defies expectations about both objects and craft skills. 'Adi breaks the boundaries of what it means to be a silversmith,' comments Christina Jensen, managing director of The Scottish Gallery, which represents the much-in-demand artist. 'She's one of the most exciting voices to have emerged from the metalwork scene in recent years – and her practice is always evolving.' Toch's work, which is held in public and private collections across the world including the V&A and the National Museum of Scotland, has won a host of international awards, most recently the 2018 European Prize for Applied Arts. She made the shortlist for the Loewe Craft Prize in 2017 with a piece from her *Whispering Vessel* series, which rocked and rattled when touched.

Where did this ongoing fascination with sound come from? 'It's to do with how vocal metal is,' Toch explains. 'Listening is an innate part of the making process. You can feel changes in vibrations, too. Sound is how metal communicates: it lets you know how to treat it.' Much of her work is hand-raised: a slow process of bringing a flat sheet of metal into a hollow form through the rhythmic blows of a hammer. The moment for annealing – heating metal with a blowtorch until it becomes more malleable –

Previous page: *Talk to Me*, Toch's 2017 mixed media installation that translated viewers' speech into movement. This page, from top: *Satiated Vessels*, 2017, Britannia silver, *Melting Pourers*, 2016, silver and red gold-copper bimetal, and *Plump Wall Objects*, 2018, Britannia silver. Opposite: Toch working on a *Plump Wall Object*



WORKS: PHOTO NICOLA TIRI | TOCH MAKING (AND OVERLAY): PHOTOS THOM ATKINSON

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ADI TOCH

WORKS: PHOTOS NICOLA TIERI | TOCH: MARINE (AND OVERLEAF) | PHOTOS THOM AKTINSON

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is indicated by tone changes. 'The sound becomes higher and higher if you hammer for too long. It gets pissed off.'

Toch's surfaces are painstakingly hand-filed, sanded and polished: she rarely uses machines. Vessels are sometimes adorned with a coloured patina ('a skin', as she puts it), which can range from vivid peacock hues to darker tones. 'Initially I used a lot of chemicals for patination, but I began thinking: "What am I teaching the next generation?" So I started experimenting with less harmful, more accessible materials.' Nowadays, her palette can derive from, say, a boiled egg – chosen for its sulphur content, which creates an iridescent or dark grey patina on silver – or rice with soy sauce, which creates a dappled green-brown on brass.

The artist shares her studio in a rambling Victorian factory in Hackney with fellow metalsmiths Simone ten Hompel and David Clarke. 'While we each do very different work, I think it's really important to swap knowledge,' says Toch. The theme of sharing recurs as we discuss her teaching – she lectures at many institutions, including both her alma maters: Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem and The Cass in London.

This openness to dialogue is finding new expression in Toch's latest project, a collaboration with the glass artist Edmond Byrne. Together, the pair hope to find innovative ways of mingling their disciplines. 'There are things in common between metal and glass,' she tells me. 'It's the alchemy, the solid and liquid states, the need to work hot.' Byrne agrees, adding: 'This collaboration will stretch and challenge our specialist knowledge and skills in a dynamic way. We're very excited about the dialogue created when substances and forms are merged and by the confluence between us as makers.'

Both agree on the importance of art history in their work, and are now exploring this interest together. 'I'm intrigued by objects that have a resonance from the past,' says Byrne. 'I add patina and cracks



TOCH MAKING: PHOTO THOM ATKINSON | VESSEL: PHOTO NICOLA TREBBI | BOWL: PHOTO VAL TOCH

to glass surfaces to recreate the weathering of ancient Roman glass.'

So far, their project is in its exploratory stage – but the first results are promising. 'We've discovered that you can actually form metal with hot glass and have also explored colouring glass using metal,' says Toch. 'For example, we found that copper oxide can be transferred to glass and colour it bright red.' Another happy outcome emerged when experimenting with fusing metal and glass. 'Through a lot of testing, we've managed to make the two materials bond,' she says. 'We fused it into a silver bowl – and it created a hologram-like effect.'

This discovery provoked an ongoing look at making lenses. These have historically married metal and glass, whether for magnifying glasses, spectacles or windows. Usually, however, this joining has been done cold, but Byrne and Toch are aiming to work hot. The pair design metalwork together, allow time for Toch to hand-raise, then meet

at a hot shop – a workshop for glassblowing – for Byrne to blow the glass. The contrast between the processes is marked. 'With glass, it all has to be so quick,' says Toch. 'Three hours in a hot shop is a very long time, but three hours in a silversmithing workshop is nothing.'

The pair aim to create a series of vessels and lenses for a UK-wide touring show in 2020. 'Collaboration is new to us and it was tricky at first,' she says. 'We don't know yet what the result will be.' There are clearly challenges here, but the possibility of great rewards. Christina Jensen, whose gallery represents both artists, agrees: 'Each discipline requires an extremely different approach, but in the hands of such craft masters it will be fascinating to see the end result. Will touch and sound still prevail within Adi's work, or will the addition of glass lead to a new sense of interaction?'

Either way, the offspring created by these two makers will be full of character.

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Above: Bowl, a work in progress made in collaboration with glass artist Edmond Byrne. Left, top: Adi Toch finishing the surface of a Whispering Vessel. Left, below: Vivid Whispering Vessel, 2019, silver-plated gilding metal with a patina

**'There are things in common with metal and glass – the alchemy, the solid and liquid states, the need to work hot'**

ADI TOCH