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Bernhard Schobinger has been called a 'rebel' and a 'wild man'. As the jewellery artist's first show in a British public gallery opens, he speaks to Grant Gibson. Portrait by Tina Hillier

ANARCHY IN THE UK

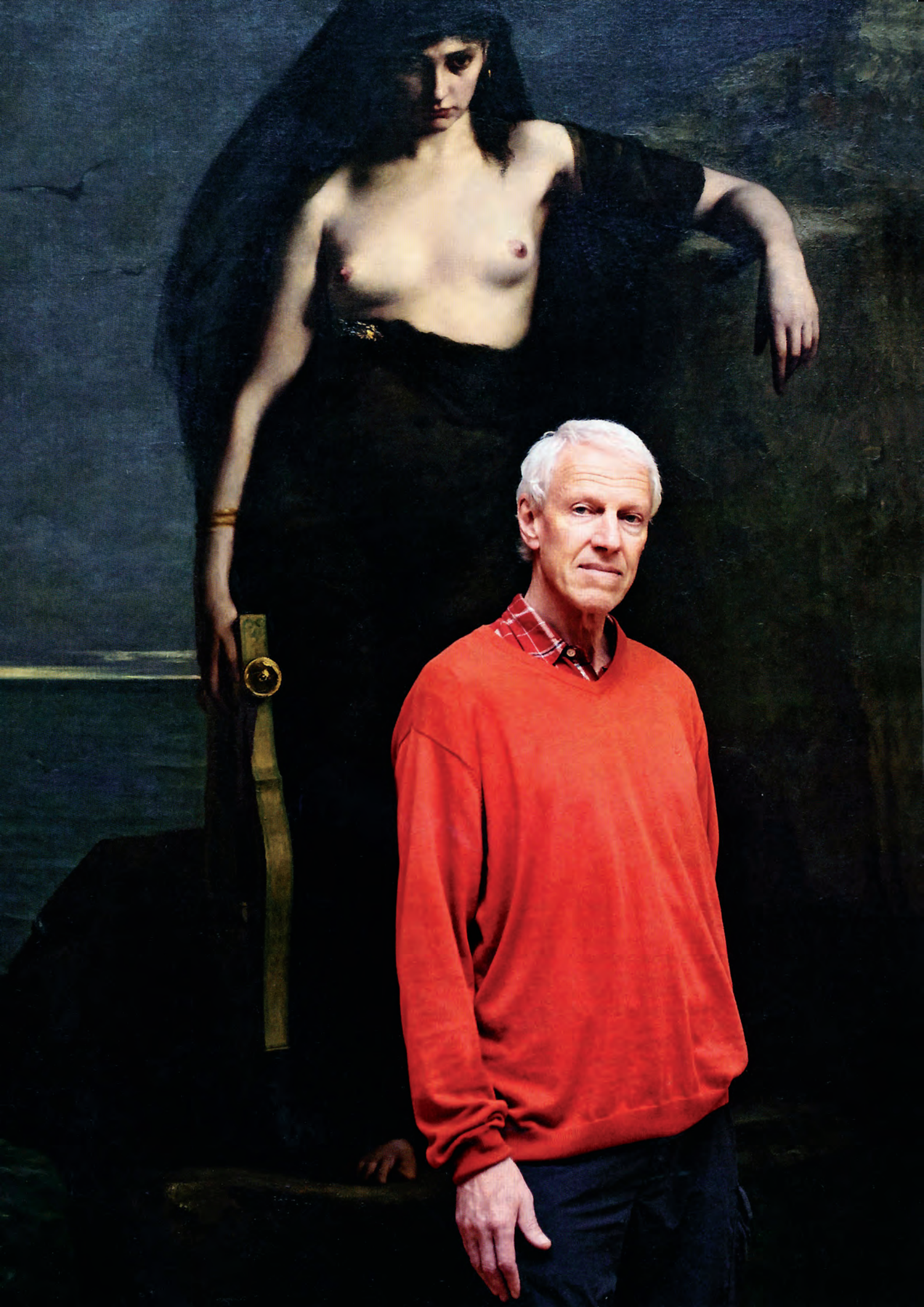
It's fair to say that Bernhard Schobinger is an artist who knows what he wants and is unafraid to speak his mind. There's a fascinating moment in his new book, *The Rings of Saturn*, for instance. After Professor Florian Hufnagl, director general of the International Design Museum Munich, writes the kind of warm and heartfelt foreword that's typical of monographs, which by their nature tend to be acritical, the jewellery artist spends the next chapter mounting a two-fisted response, taking Hufnagl's assumptions to task.

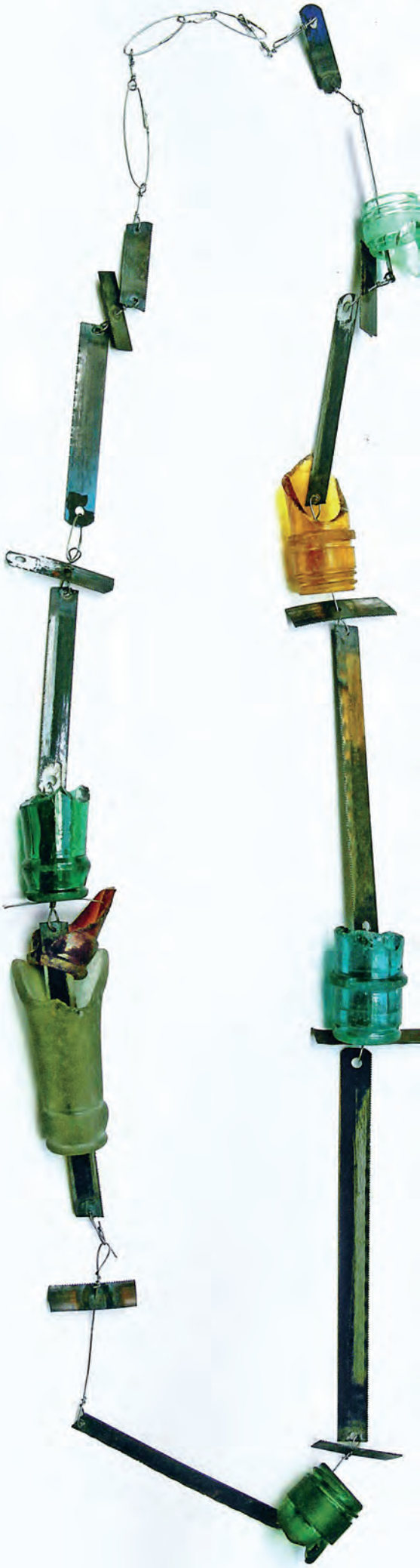
He disagrees with the observation that while his early work was forged in the fires of the 1968 riots, his life is influenced by Zen Buddhist ideals. As he writes: 'In the reality of my life, life and work have never been worlds apart but rather a unit; everything lived through and experienced has a close connection with work.' And adding later, for good measure: 'The opinion that my work "is still shaped" by the above events is in principle not right.' It's a confrontational and enjoyably dramatic opening exchange.

Likewise when *Crafts* photographer Tina Hillier attempts to persuade him to have his portrait taken alongside his work currently on show at the Manchester Art Gallery, her request is met with a polite but firm refusal. Schobinger has other ideas. Instead he'd much rather be shot standing with the Pre-Raphaelite paintings upstairs, alighting upon *Sappho* by Charles August Mengin. When I ask him what it was about the image of the Greek poet that caught his eye, he isn't entirely certain, eventually offering that he liked the contrast of colours, the painting's black backdrop against his orange jumper.

It's precisely these juxtapositions that the Zurich-based artist enjoys playing with in his work, nibbling, sometimes none-too-delicately but often delightfully, at the outer reaches of jewellery's possibilities. So precious metals are mixed with base or found materials. Perceived hierarchies are turned on their heads as broken bottle necks or a collection of scissors are transformed into extraordinary necklaces. His work mixes a dash of wit with a distinct undertow of violence. It's undoubtedly *outré* yet at the same time accessible and easy to grasp. As Felix Flury, owner of Gallery S O – which represents Schobinger and played a huge role in putting on the exhibition with curator Jo Bloxham – explains: 'There are artists who really touch your brain, and some are more to the stomach. He goes straight in your stomach, and you don't know exactly why. He has brutal work, very emotional work, expressive work. You don't really need a lot of explanation but it touches you.'

He's quite challenging to interview, too. When I turn up, my welcome isn't exactly effusive. I'm a little early, and Schobinger obviously has other things to do. When he speaks, his sentences are





punctuated with long, long pauses. Occasionally you think he's finished, only for him to continue his point. Flury is on hand to help with translation issues, while Bloxham is assiduously taking notes. Once we get into the interview, though, he begins to open up, talking fluently and insightfully about his work. By the end he's even telling me about his love of diving and archeology.

Born in 1946, Schobinger's interest in jewellery started early. 'Maybe it was connected with the church,' he tells me. 'My mother came from a Roman Catholic family and we always had to go to church on Sunday. I was fascinated by all the tools from the liturgy, and I always thought this I would like to make. Not jewellery for people, holy jewellery. Holy things.' It was an interest that didn't go down well with his textile-merchant father. 'My father didn't like this. He wanted me to be like him. Art? That's nothing serious. That's not possible.' Instead he was sent

This page, clockwise from top left: *Mr K*, brooch, ferrotype with urushi lacquer, coral 2009; *Bottle & Saw Blade Chain*, necklace, glass, saw blades, stainless steel, 2013; *Gift*, bracelet, glass Opposite, clockwise from top left: *Nail Ring*, amethyst, white gold, 2011; *Poison Necklace*, glass, yellow quartz, amethyst, smoky quartz, red gold, 2011; *Pillars of Wisdom*, bracelet, rock crystal, cobalite, 1994 Previous spread: *Sunset Ring*, rock crystal, steel, diamond, silver, cinnabar, 2013

'My father wanted me to be like him. Art? That's nothing serious. That's not possible'

BERNHARD SCHOBINGER

off to Maria Hilf College in Schwyz, a Catholic boarding school where, he says, he 'felt a lot of pain'. You get the sense he was relieved as his father died when he was 12 years old. 'The pressure was gone,' he says, 'but I was still at a boarding school.' Eventually his mother agreed that he could do a foundation-type course at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich. 'Maybe this year was the happiest of my life.'

However, his career path did not run smoothly. A year later he failed his test to get into the school's metal class, and was forced to take up a four-year goldsmith apprenticeship at one of the biggest jewellery factories in Switzerland. 'It was quite hard,' he remembers. 'I learn a lot but the regime was mid-19th century.' He tells me of a time on Christmas Eve when he was eating a sandwich at the work bench. His boss saw him and 'Bam bam bam!' He swishes his hand around my face to indicate that he was beaten.

It hardly takes a psychologist to see that the combination of a strict father, a boarding school that he loathed, his failure to get into art school and then a Dickensian apprenticeship might foster a deep-seated mistrust of the establishment. 'My motto became to neglect all kinds of authority.' Hufnagl describes him as a 'wild man' in his book, but the words most readily attached to him down the years have been rebel and anarchist. Is that, I ask, a fair description? He considers the question for a moment. 'I was nearly a terrorist but my choice was the art field, not political.' I laugh, thinking he's pulling my leg, until I catch Flury's eye. He raises his eyebrows and nods to indicate he's not joking. 'In Japan during a lecture a student asked me if I was an anarchist. Not in a political way. In an aesthetic way? Yes.'

His first pieces were made in the factory when no one was looking, but in 1968 (the year of riots across Europe, including in Zurich) he opened his own goldsmithing workshop – and that same yea met his wife, photographer Annelies Štrba, whos representations of his work, often using thei daughters as models, have become part of his lore

As has been well documented, his initial inspi ration was Max Bill and the Zurich constructivis movement, founded on a rational, mathematical anti-hierarchical view of the world. He describes i now as a 'safe' option. 'At the same time there wa surrealism and Pop Art. I said: "That's nothin safe. I need serious foundations." I felt unsaf in the surrealism and the Pop Art. And then afte some years I saw the end of the evolution [o constructivism]. There was no more possibility t develop. It was the end of an art revolution. I changed more and more.'

There were two key factors in the developmen of his work: his meeting and subsequent two-yea collaboration with the Bernese artist and sculpto Franz Eggenschwiler in 1976, and the emergenc

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'He goes straight in your stomach, and you don't know exactly why. He has brutal, expressive work'

FELIX FLURY

of punk rock. Between them, these two let loose his inner Dadaist (Dada being another art movement in which Zurich played a key role). Interestingly, the Manchester show's earliest piece is a silk-bobbin pendant dating from 1977, a fact that he insists is merely chance.

As you wander around the exhibition and leaf through books on his work, certain motifs have a habit of cropping up. There are saws, snakes and – perhaps most intriguingly – the skull-and-crossbones found on old-fashioned bottles of poison. The story behind this goes back to his youth. 'I was fascinated as a child by poison bottles. It was a trauma. I was six or seven years old. My mother gave me the order to buy acid for cleaning. At home it fell on the floor on the street. And then whoosh!' He excitedly raises his hands. 'I was afraid but at the same time I was also fascinated... I always had that impression with me, and I saved all these bottles.'

The poison bottles aren't the only family heirlooms he's used in his work. He's recently produced a trio of necklaces largely made from scissors that his mother, aunt and grandmother used in their embroidery. 'I had a case full of scissors. I always thought I don't want to do embroidery, so what should I do? I like it and it's connected to my family. Then one day I say, "Why not make a piece with it?" And I was wondering how I didn't have the idea earlier. Why now? Why this year? Why not 10 years before? And why haven't other people made it? It's so simple.'

The beauty of Schobinger's Duchampian approach to jewellery is the narrative that comes with each piece. There's the striking necklace made out of lightning conductor rods that he discovered on the top of a building about to be demolished, and cut down during 'daring raids'. Or another piece, made of shells he found on a beach in Japan. Or the story of the original bottle necklace made in 1988 (a version with added saws – which he describes as a 'quote' – is included at the show). 'I discovered it in the forest,' he tells me. 'It was a place where nothing was growing. No shrubs, no trees, nothing. I thought: "Wow! I will plant a tree there. I don't like this empty space." I dug out and what's this? Glass, glass, glass, glass, glass. This is trash from a nearby hotel from the 1920s.' Trying to work out how to take all the broken bottles home, he attached them to a loop of string and had a Eureka moment. 'Without any intention. That's the best.'

Importantly too though, as Felix Flury is at pains to point out: 'He's a wonderful craftsman. I think his skills are really good. Even if sometimes you feel he's rather impatient.' He's not afraid to experiment with technology either. For a ring he made in 1991, for instance, he took a polycrystalline diamond and drilled a hole with a YAG neodymium laser (for this highly experimental

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: *Rosary Ring*, oxidised and enamelled chromium steel, silver, diamonds, 2008; *Saws That Saw Up Themselves*, ring, steel, Akoya pearl, malachite pigment, 2013; *Flotsam & Jetsam*, ring, gold, enamel, 2011; *Car Crash*, ring, gold, enamel, diamond splinters in bronze, 2008
Opposite centre: *The Interior of the Outside*, ring, silver, steel, malachite pigment, 2008

Above: *Lightning Rod Chain*, necklace, copper (lightning rods), fire gilding, patina, rose quartz, gold, stainless steel, 1990
Right: *Sea Shell Ballet*, neckpiece, four trochus niloticus, one turbo marmoratus, malachite pigment, krapplack pigment, shoelace (c.1950), 2013

process he had to source a firm in Belgium willing to take the risk). Subsequently the diamond was linked with an Egyptian scarab-style ring. 'It looks very primitive, archaic, but it's connected to absolutely the highest technology of the time.'

An exhibition such as this and the publication of a major book often denotes a turning point in an artist's work. Is this, I wonder, as our conversation draws to a close, the case for Schobinger? 'Yeah,' he says. There's a long pause. 'You think no?' I explain that I have no idea, but I'm keen to hear his thoughts. 'I don't have plans. Maybe it's finished. I always say I work for so many years, maybe next year I have some possibilities but I have a lot of interests.' It's a gloriously opaque response to finish a fascinating interview.

'The Rings of Saturn' is at Manchester Art Gallery, Mosley Street, Manchester M2 3JL, from 5 June – 19 October 2014. Schobinger's book of the same name is published by Arnoldsche, hb £35. www.schobinger.ch