

SIMONE TEN HOMPEL CONVERSATIONS WITH METAL

As she prepares for her major retrospective at Ruthin Craft Centre, influential artist Simone ten Hompel tells *Imogen Greenhalgh* why silver is her first language. Portrait by *Jenny Lewis*.

The figure of the craftsman tends, traditionally at least, to be a solitary one. Unlike the painter or the poet, whom we expect to find in earnest discussion of their art, the craftsman, so the cliché goes, speaks with his hands, breaking the silence only with chorus of his tools. For the influential metalsmith Simone ten Hompel, this perceived silence is a shame. 'Craft is also in the articulating,' she tells me, as we talk in her airy north London workshop. 'Not a lot of people in the craft world are willing to because it's supposed to be about tacit knowledge. I think through studying or teaching you learn to undo that tacit knowledge, you turn up the volume so it's no longer tacit, it's broadcasted. That's important.'

We are, at this juncture in our conversation, considering *Confluence – A Life with Metal*, a major solo exhibition of ten Hompel's work at Ruthin Craft Centre. While it is too soon for her to confirm the exact shape of the show, she has decided it will include some kind of seminar, or symposium. 'I'm calling it a study day for now,' she says.



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Previous page: Simone ten Hompel in her studio, which she shares with fellow metalsmiths Adi Toch and David Clarke. Clockwise from right: *Posse*, 2004, 12 silver beakers; *Speck series 2*, 2015; three silver spoons from a series of 108; *TT*, 2008, teapot made from basalt and silver



Craft, it seems, is all about connections for ten Hompel, and as we talk, we often meander back to the rewards of dialogue and discussion, be it with a collaborator, her students at The Cass design school where she teaches, or simply with her material. With metal, she explains, 'we have a conversation. It's not the kind of conversation we're having right now, but it is a conversation – about how far I can go. The metal says "if you do this, then you can do that". And if you overdo it, the metal will crack.' For ten Hompel this resistance, or 'feedback' as she calls it, is part and parcel of an ongoing exchange.

Ten Hompel first played around with metal when she was a child, in the machine repair workshop of her father's weaving factory in Bocholt, in North Rhine-Westphalia. 'It wouldn't be allowed today, of course,' she laughs, 'playing in a factory, picking up bits of tin, welding rods, wires.' When she was about 11 the material was introduced to her again, at school, alongside



wood and ceramics. While she recalls liking the piney scent of the woodworking shop, and enjoying the malleability of clay, it wasn't the same – with metal something had clicked: 'It was chemistry. With metal it just worked.'

A year or so later she began to work with the material in earnest, beginning apprenticeships as a blacksmith and locksmith alongside her schooling. She was only in her early teens when she took up small bits of teaching, offering classes on things like enamelling. 'It might be irritating,' she smiles, 'but I can't keep my mouth shut when I see someone doing it wrong.' By the time she completed school and her apprenticeships, she was raring to move on from metal's practical applications, and won a place on a jewellery and silversmithing degree course at the Fachhochschule (university of applied sciences) in Düsseldorf. A Masters at the Royal College of Art in London followed, by which point she knew with some certainty that it was the art of

metalwork, not jewellery, that made her tick.

'I always say metal is my first language, because I'm such a good dyslexic,' she tells me with a wry smile. Growing up in the 1960s before there was a comprehensive understanding of dyslexia made her experiences at school far from straightforward. She remembers, rather poignantly, realising in only her second year of primary school just how far her talents had diverged from her those of her classmates. 'I came back from summer holiday and we were all asked to draw the autumn trees outside the window. When the drawings were hanging on the wall, I just couldn't understand it – these guys can make noise out of *this* stuff, these symbols,' she explains, her hand resting on a text on the table in front of us, 'but then they look out of the window at the trees, and they draw a rectangle with straight lines coming out of it. It was then that I understood there were differences.'

It does not seem far-fetched to see in this

childhood appreciation of form, and the way we interpret the world, the seeds of her adult practice. What makes ten Hompel's work so immediately distinctive is the way in which she reworks objects we encounter every day and makes them new. Largely working with a vocabulary of domestic tableware – spoons, jars and other vessels – she does little in the way of ornament. And yet they are exceptional, an exercise in understated beauty. Often made in silver, and almost rudimentary, they chafe against your definitions for such humble objects. The challenge is in their simplicity. 'I tell my students, as makers, you have to find your good problem and then work through your life to solve it eloquently. With the spoon, I found my good problem, but I don't think I've solved it eloquently yet.'

If she hasn't solved the spoon quite yet, she's certainly on her way. She admits she must have fashioned several hundred in her lifetime – 108, for instance, were laid out at her solo show *The*

Stuff of Memory, at CAA, arranged, as she puts it, in 'paragraphs'. 'I do occasionally make individual pieces, but even with teapots, I keep finding myself making two or three at a time. You need to consider how it works, how it pours, the handle... Even while you're making one, you wonder "well, what happens if...". Objects, it seems, find their fullest expression in groups. But there is also something profoundly human in it, as if ten Hompel sees her works as belonging to clans or cliques. One work, *Posse*, derives from exactly this. Cycling home one day she noticed a group of youths. 'They were wearing hoodies and jeans, and all looked the same at a glance,' she explains, 'but when you looked carefully they were making slight differences. They had a system – sneakers, denim – but within this system there were variables.' In response, she constructed a series of silver beakers, seemingly indistinguishable. But beneath, each has a different bottom, an individuality privy only to those that stop to look.



Freestanding vessels,
1995, from a solo show
of ten Hoppel's work
at the Scottish Gallery,
Edinburgh



'I tell my students, as makers, you have to find your good problem and then work through your life to solve it eloquently'
SIMONE TEN HOMPEL



Clockwise from top left: Cup, Spoon and Base, Julian Stair and Simone ten Hompel, 2016; Red Square, 2014; The Stuff of Memories, group of six spoons. Opposite: Spoons, silver

When I look again at them in light of the story, I can almost see their awkward teenage slouch.

Another maker that deftly explores three-dimensional form through groupings is ten Hompel's recent collaborator, the potter Julian Stair. The pair came together for an exhibition, *Renaturing the Vessel*, at Galerie Rosemarie Jäger in Hochheim, Germany. It was, in Stair's words, 'a meeting of two minds'. Initially conceived as a chance for them to juxtapose their works, they decided after some discussion to produce collaborative pieces instead, some of which will appear in the show at Ruthin. 'There was just such a synergy between the work,' Stair tells me, 'and some extraordinary groupings, almost as if they were making themselves. It was quite unnerving, like there was a third force at play.'

Stair's surprise stems from the fact that the pair worked remotely, for the most part, only uniting the pieces just before the show began. They had, however, swapped examples of their

work – a cup of his, and a spoon she had helped him make. These were to provide the show with its conceptual limits, and the objects became, in the absence of their makers, interlocutors. Ten Hompel produces Stair's – a slate grey cup and saucer – when I visit. She grew fascinated by the swirl in the centre of the saucer 'where his fingermarks start', and created bottomless vessels in reply.

It's a lovely notion, to think of this cup and spoon acting as material go-betweens for the collaborators, and it's one, I think, that gets to the heart of how ten Hompel sees her work. Her finished pieces, she explains, allow her to have conversations 'around corners, and over space and time and distance'. They tell you things if you are prepared to listen. Take the placement of handles, for instance – these might only fit just so. She also uses recesses, so that when you pick up a part of a work to feel its weight and texture, you know where you are meant to replace it.

With this internal logic she can 'negotiate' with you – a conversation initiated through objects.

Before I leave we discuss a new collaboration that is still underway, with the film-maker Matt Hulse. Together, they are working on a 20-minute film that will form part of her show at Ruthin. So far, only a short teaser clip is ready, but it lays promising foundations for what's to come and ten Hompel has clearly relished the opportunity to work with a partner in a different discipline. Like her, Hulse shapes things. They both give, she puts it rather modestly, 'gestalt to stuff'. Gestalt: that wonderfully compact German word for when a whole is greater than the sum of its constituent parts. It's a poetic idea, I think, but a practical one too. Well suited, then, to the silversmith.

'Simone ten Hompel: Confluence – A Life with Metal' is at Gallery 1, Ruthin Craft Centre, Denbighshire, 1 October – 27 November. ruthincraftcentre.org.uk www.tenhompel.com

