

Munich-based jewellery artist David Bielander's work has a mercurial quality that makes it difficult to pin down. Like souvenirs brought back from Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, his pieces are both childlike and sophisticated in their simplicity, playful visual puns executed with the precision and logic of an engineer. A rubber seal makes a perfect, pleasing pair of lips; a teaspoon becomes the dusky carapace on a beetle's back. Sometimes the creations are surreal, like the amorphous, Dalí-esque football created from an ivory seashell. Others are irresistibly cute. A pig crafted from pearls has soft, floppy ears; a collection of rock faces beams up at you guilelessly. They make you smile and they surprise you, joyfully transposing things that furnish our everyday lives into objects that are anything but ordinary.

'I was suffering in the beginning. I thought: I don't have a recognisable style. Other artists have a very distinct style, you see it and you know who it is. I always start from scratch,' Bielander explains during our interview. 'It's called *falsche Fährte*. You know: misleading. I want you to put things in a drawer, but it's wrong. Or maybe it's right? I play with that. And in an exhibition like this, there might be 20 genres.' Indeed, his pieces riff on numerous idioms and traditions – 'there is mannerism, fair trade souvenirs, slick design, handicrafts', he agrees. If Richard Slee is, in Oliver Watson's words, the 'Grand Wizard of Studio Ceramics', Bielander must surely be contemporary jewellery's counterpart.

The exhibition he refers to, and the context for our interview, is *Carte Blanche*, a major solo show at the Musée de Design et d'Arts Appliqués

Contemporains (mudac) in the picturesque city of Lausanne in his native Switzerland, and the venue for our meeting. Mudac is seated high above Lake Geneva's edge, next to the city's famed cathedral. It is a fittingly prominent location for a design and applied arts museum that has earned a reputation as one of Europe's most incisive in terms of programming, and houses two major jewellery collections (its own, and that of the Swiss Confederation). It is, Bielander confesses, a rather special place to be invited to show work.

When we meet, the exhibition install is still very much underway. The rooms are empty, though Bielander and curator Carole Guinard, who oversees mudac's jewellery collection, have worked out many of the finer points. It follows a significant touring exhibition of Bielander's output, the product of his winning the Françoise van

# DAVID BIELANDER ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY

David Bielander's designs are humorous and surreal, often inspired by humble materials. *Imogen Greenhalgh* met up with the jeweller to discuss his major new show in Lausanne, the extraordinary precision of his work... and the pursuit of the perfect sausage



PHOTO: DAVID BIELANDER / SIMON BIELANDER



den Bosch Award in 2012. Bielander’s work is, the jury ruled, ‘completely unique’ in its working methods, themes and materials, ‘referring’ to Pop Art, but ‘rising above it’: ‘Good watching, observing – that’s what it’s about’, the verdict concludes.

For his awarded exhibition, Bielander conceived of a show which would bring together pieces drawn from throughout his career, and he named it *Demiurg*, after the demiurge figure, the maker-deity of the material world. ‘But’, he clarifies, ‘he or she is only a semi-god. He can only create from the things that he finds, things that already exist, and because he is only a semi-god, he fucks things up. That’s why the world is not perfect. I thought it was a nice metaphor... He’s a maker, but he screws things up.’ Either way, he seems to stand for the transforming power of the human imagination.

Acknowledging the self-reflexive nature of such an exhibition, and his chosen title, Bielander created a kind of self-portrait with his brother, Simon Bielander, a photographer based in their hometown of Basel, composed from his previous creations. It cleverly encapsulates what the show hopes to achieve – a portrait of the artist shown through the prism of his own work – and playfully alludes to the Mannerist works of Arcimboldo.

The portrait, and the work it comprises, will appear in one room, with another given over to more recent pieces, including his celebrated paper bags and corrugated cardboard works fashioned from patinated silver and white gold. Though they are recent, these are fast becoming the works for which the jeweller is best known, earning him a major award at the International Silver Triennale last year. They offer what Bielander calls ‘the magic moment’ when they are picked up: ‘You look at them and you might think they are cardboard, or perhaps fake cardboard, but, in the moment you pick it up, you feel the weight, how cold it is, how warm it is. *That* is applied art.’

When Bielander explains his work, it is these evolutions, or revolutions, in his audience’s

perceptions that animate him most. One of his favourite pieces, which has appeared in different iterations over the years, consists of a machine that produces smoke rings on demand. He delights in the thought that it is jewellery that can only be experienced in the moment. It comes as no surprise to learn that he is the son of a philosopher and a psychologist. Both professions seem to activate his approach, though, he suggests with a smile, perhaps he became a maker so he can hold something in his hands at the close of a working day.

The road that led him to becoming one of Europe’s best renowned art jewellers was not without humps along the way. Having trained as a traditional goldsmith, he spent a decade shaking off what he calls ‘the dogma of the guild, the dogma of how things must look, and the affectation of showing what a virtuous craftsman you are.’ Before this, he couldn’t make jewellery: ‘It always felt like it had this affectation, it was not free.’

So what changed? One major seam running through Bielander’s output is his extraordinary approach to the most humble materials, able to conjure a shoal of fish from a box of thumbtacks. It was this gift for transformation that helped him ‘escape’, he explains: one of the first pieces of jewellery he made that he now recognises as a part of his oeuvre is a folded bottle cap resembling a cheeky, tongue-baring mouth, dating from 1998. It’s an unlikely piece to herald such a step change. He moved on to rubber mouths made from seals: ‘They defined the playground. I made a very strict regime for myself – I can’t cut anything off, I must use the whole thing. Because the material was strong and resistant, I could go crazy.’

For Felix Flury, the director of Gallery S O, which has steadfastly championed Bielander’s work, these lips illustrate the jeweller’s genius: ‘A mouth showing an open tongue – it’s quite a frank and almost naughty gesture. The rubber is so common; everybody knows it well where I come from... The association is sweet, the confiture not far. I was fascinated by the way the brooch

Previous page: *Demiurge* / *Demiurg*, Simon Bielander and David Bielander, 2013, C-print on Dibond.  
Below, left: *Cardboard (Crown)* / *Wellpappe (Krone)*, 2015, yellow and white gold.  
Below: *Paper Bag (Wine)* / *Papiertüte (Wein)*, 2016, silver patinated.  
Opposite: *Cardboard Crucifix* / *Kruzifix*, 2015, cardboard and staples



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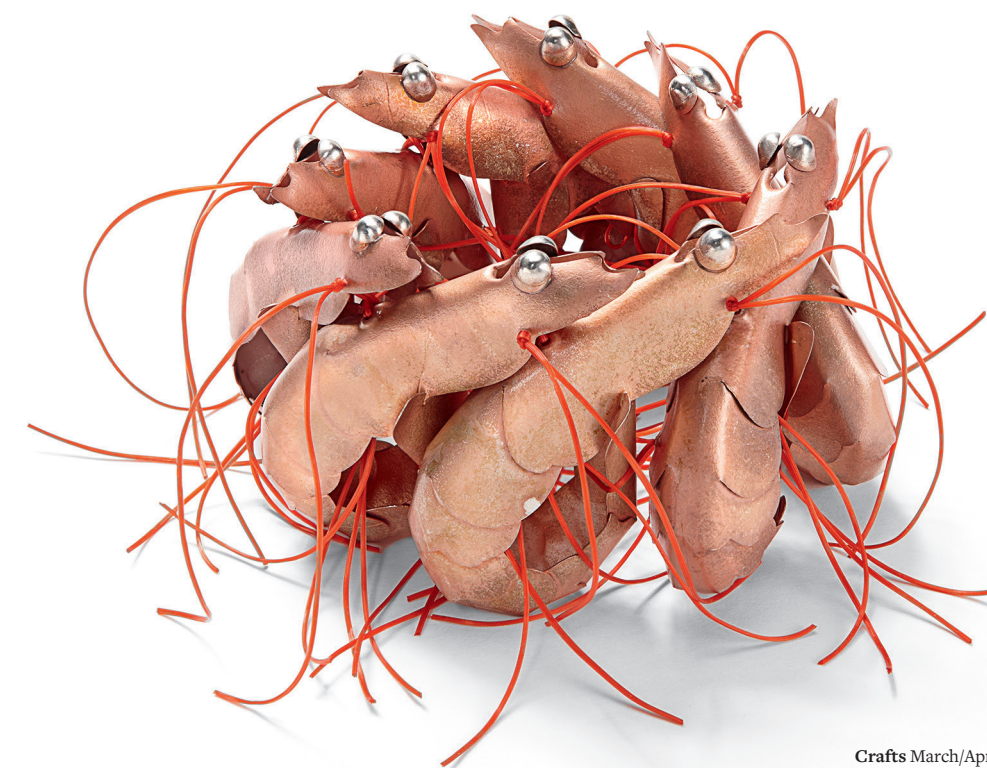
**'I know all the work  
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Above: Slugs (Family) /  
Nacktschnecken (Familie)  
2004, brooches, silver  
repoussé, patinated





Opposite: *Koi of Joy*, 2012, thumbtacks, leather, silver. This page, clockwise from right: *Garlic* / *Knoblauch* 2009, pendant, silver; *Scampi*, 2007, bracelet, silver (copper-plated); *Pearl Pig* / *Perlensau* 2003, brooch, freshwater pearls and gold

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DAVID BIELANDER

was made. Simple, obvious, but really clever; material, function and form well-balanced.’ A traditional goldsmith no longer, maybe, but still the owner of a keen eye for an object’s integrity.

Though frequently humorous in outcome, these rules point to an intensive perfectionism in Bielander’s approach to his craft, with a profound commitment to plugging gaps and problem solving. He works in editions, often of 12, as he seldom releases new pieces – ‘two or three, sometimes five works each year, sometimes none... If it was all one-off I would starve’ – and the gestation of each piece is arduous. He falls first, he explains, upon an object entirely unassuming its familiarity, for instance a sausage, after which the pursuit of his elusive final material begins (in this instance, a Thonet bentwood chair). ‘It’s a very frustrating process: you want to do sausages, and you know out there is the right sausage. But you cannot access it,’ he sighs, smiling with me at the improbability of this sentence. ‘I know all the work I will make until the end of my days, but it just takes me so long to find the right solution.’

His wife, Australian jewellery artist Helen Britton, captures this all-too-consuming approach rather wonderfully in a new book on his work, *Twenty Years*, which comes out alongside the mudac exhibition: ‘There is an idea flitting around, floating past, stopping occasionally to show a little of the pattern of its wings,’ she writes. ‘The signs appear, first the stomping and walking to and fro, hectic movements, chaos and distraction, and seemingly a great deal of inner restlessness. And then it starts seriously, the focus can no longer be redirected...’

What keeps him going is the knowledge that the pay-off will, eventually, come: ‘It appears unexpectedly, but it can only appear after all the work. The work is very tedious and annoying, because I know it’s not the solution – I make the

sausage out of silver, because I need to make sausages, I need to read about sausages, I need to get silly photos from the internet, to fill that reservoir.’ When the ‘solution’ appears, he explains, ‘it *must* surprise me, and be different to what I expected. If that’s not happening, it’s a shitty work... If I can describe to you a complete thing, why should someone make it?’

It’s this idea-first, material-second method that means he approaches the tradition of artists working with *objets trouvés* sidelong. In

*Twenty Years* he discusses this chicken-and-egg scenario with fellow practitioner Bernhard Schöbinger, via email: how, when working with found materials, does one avoid triteness, Bielander asks in his message. ‘The *objet trouvé* is a very tricky thing,’ he continues, during our discussion. ‘Everyone looks at a rock and sees a face, that is something everyone does as a human, [but] I’m doing it the other way around.’

Before it’s time for my train, we sift through his pieces laid out on a table ready for installation, trying on a few, and discussing their individual characters. Is there, I ask, something underlying each that he hopes to achieve? Does he aim, for instance, to change through his *trompe l’oeil* the way people inspect materials, and inject a little more wonder? ‘I don’t hope anything,’ he replies, with a shrug. ‘It is just fun. I don’t mean this in a superficial way, but it is fun. To be able to make this work, and someone buys it, and to be able to live solely from work... To achieve that – well, I didn’t achieve it. It has achieved itself, that I can make pieces however I like. It’s fabulous, it’s very luxurious.’ It’s not the answer I expected – having become acquainted with Bielander and his inner demiurge, that suggests it’s the right one.

*‘Carte Blanche to David Bielander’, mudac, Lausanne, Switzerland, 8 February – 30 April. <http://mudac.ch>*  
*‘David Bielander: Twenty Years 2016-1996’, published by Arnoldsche, €34*