



Left: bone cockerel (detail), artist unknown (showing in *British Folk Art*)
Below: *Lightning Rod Chain*, Bernhard Schobinger, necklace, copper (lightning rods), fire gilding, patina, rose quartz, gold, stainless steel, 1990

excavated from an abandoned hotel rubbish dump, strung tightly on a red cord. Those glass shards looked sharp, an impression of risk accentuated by a large 1988 black-and-white photograph of the piece being worn by his bare-breasted daughter. Awkward. This was in-your-face jewellery: risky, aggressive, a bit punk.

This substantial semi-retrospective of Schobinger's work provoked similar first impressions of consternation, almost bewilderment. Here is another bottleneck necklace, the sharp-edged green and brown glass interspersed by steel saw blades. Another necklace is an anything-but-straightforward strung sequence of used saw blades, while a third is formed of a series of open small scissors, joined together at the finger loops, with delicate pink tear-drop Akoya pearls suspended from bloodied (lacquer) blade tips. A variant on this theme has lilac tourmaline droplets instead of the pearls. Danger and defiance spring to mind.

But no: I'm wrong. A closer look at this extensive show of 64 works, focused on rings and with key pieces covering four decades, suggests that this isn't bad-boy jewellery. It's not enough to see it as petulant or argumentative. The visceral feeling I first had is still here, but tempered by many other reactions, including moments of humour and irony. See, for example, a pretty and precious necklace made of 13 historic gold coins cut in half and strung pair-wise, showing the obverse side: here are kings, emperors, and such, but at the pendant-point what looks like a Diana or some Greek goddess. This is *A Young Lady Surrounded by Old Men*. It's witty, making something entirely new out of the familiar. Another piece: a chunky necklace featuring five radiating oxidised spikes comes alive through its origins as



Retrospective of wit and sincerity

Bernhard Schobinger: Rings of Saturn

Manchester Art Gallery, M2

5 June – 19 October 2014

Book: *'Rings of Saturn'*, Arnoldsche, £35

Reviewed by Shane Enright

My Schobinger 'moment' came the very first time I encountered his work, just 18 months ago, at the wonderful, and instructive *Unexpected Pleasures* exhibition of contemporary jewellery at the Design Museum in London.

There was a lot of interesting work: Otto Künzli's sleek conceptual pieces; Warwick Freeman's play with indigenous New Zealand materials and symbols; a grotty ring made from (rusted?) screws by Karl Fritsch; Lisa Walker's plastic works; and a variety of slick inventive Dutch makers. But it was Swiss jeweller Bernhard Schobinger who stole the show for me, with a long necklace of broken bottle-necks,



salvaged lightning conductors: This is storytelling, not statement. At the centre of the show is a case displaying a necklace of five large conch shells, with crude pink nipples and green marks in children's powder-paint, strung together on shoelaces: What is all that about? I imagine Gaultier's corset for Madonna. What at first seems awkward now appears absurd.

It is this narrative quality, generated by the contrasts and contexts of his materials and forms, that sets him aside from his peers. He repurposes and reimagines what he uses, notably in the 'nail rings' (precious stones, amethysts and the like, pierced by bent nails) and in the rings made from meteorites; but the outcome is more evocative than provocative. This isn't like so much self-referential contemporary jewellery-about-jewellery; nor is his work drily conceptual; instead it's expansive, generous, witty and sometimes wry. This is more than 'salvaged' art; materials are appropriated, but so are ideas and emotions, combined in ways that look accidental or incidental. There's a *wabi-sabi* sensibility; an air of impermanence, of flawed beauty, a naturalism that comes across as sincerity or authenticity to his sources. All this makes his work, to my eyes, eminently wearable and wonderful to look at up close.

Manchester City Art Gallery has curated some significant jewellery shows over recent years, but this is surely the highlight to date; a truly original, substantial and influential maker brought to public attention via a comprehensive presentation. The accompanying book surveys Schobinger's entire output of rings, including earlier neo-concretist pieces. This and an earlier volume *Jewels Now!* give ample evidence of the well-crafted gathering of unexpected or unintended combinations of materials and ideas that mark Schobinger's jewellery out as both questioning and conversational. *Shane Enright is a freelance writer on crafts and contemporary culture*

Sea Shell Ballet, Bernhard Schobinger, neckpiece, four trochus niloticus, one turbo marmoratus, malachite pigment, krapplack pigment, shoelace (c.1950), 2013
Below: *Remnants*, Caitlin Heffernan, 2013

