

BOOKS



David Watkins Wendy Ramshaw: A Life's Partnership

Graham Hughes
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THIS eminently readable "gem" of a book provides a valuable insight into the private and professional lives and achievements of an exceptional couple who, together and separately, have made their mark in the world of the arts. Elegantly designed and lavishly illustrated with photographs of their striking and individual artworks,

David Watkins, 'In the Gardens of Arqua Petrarca: Approaching/Receding', 2003, plasma coated stainless steel, diam. 145 cm



Wendy Ramshaw, 'Double Screen EH9681', installed at the Victoria & Albert Museum, 1997, mild steel, optical glass, mixed media, 3 x 4 m

the book chronicles the dedication, support, provocation and catalyst for each other that has seen them become two of the most admired and sought after artist-jewellers in the world.

The author Graham Hughes has known both for most of their artistic journey and can portray an accurate picture of the drive and discipline, as well as the artistic talent that has seen Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins achieve so much. He documents their achievements and the courageous steps they had taken along the way to achieve their goals. Few artists would be brave enough to mortgage their house to pay the insurance premiums for transporting their exhibitions to other countries, yet this is what they did to fund their first exhibition in the US and also for the exhibitions they took



David Watkins, 'Large Pendant Bodypiece', 1975, aluminium, acrylic and gold, on painted wood relief, 65 x 27 cm

to Australia where they were both artists-in-residence at WAIT (now Curtin University) in 1978.

Neither Wendy nor David trained as jewellers, which has allowed them a freedom to explore as they will. David initially studied sculpture, which rather took second place to his music career playing with his own jazz group. Wendy's initial university degree was in illustration and fabric design. They married while David was still a student at Reading University. As with other young couples making their way in the world, life was a balancing act of various activities. They developed fashion jewellery ranges in perspex, sold in trendy shops in the Kings Road and Bond Street. Ample coverage in glossy magazines saw them invited to exhibit at the prestigious Design Centre. They had arrived. It was not economic, however, as manufacturers quickly copied their innovative work and the introduction of the GST scuttled a later successful paper venture. David returned to music and Wendy spent a year as a supernumerary at the Central School developing her skills. He ended 1970 with a song he had written in the top 10 and she had her first solo exhibition inspired by the space race.

The designer has laid out the book so that their parallel careers are described side-by-side. David, for instance, has a section entitled "Music, sculpture, cinema, jewellery", which discusses his career as a musician, his model-making for the film 2001: A Space Odyssey, which was an inspirational and formative experience that provided access to technology he wouldn't otherwise have encountered and paved the way for the making of his sculptural jewellery. Another section deals with the first Philadelphia and early London shows – four in one year, all thankfully sponsored by major industries and the Goldsmiths' Company.

"Australia and Inspirations" follows, then a section on the important large-scale works. Naturally one section covers David's influential two decades at the Royal College of Art. Wendy's career includes: "1970s and Goldsmiths Hall" and "Ring Sets and Ring Stands". The latter discusses her major innovation – the ring sets – a "typologically new" form of jewellery.

The family's six-month sojourn in Western Australia and Wendy's experiments with porcelain and emu feathers which set her on a new path, is discussed in a section

Wendy Ramshaw, 'Gold Neck Wire with Blue Feathers and Ornaments', 1982, cornelian, sapphire and enamel with turned and carved fine grained stoneware ornaments, 30 x 12.5 cm. Collection Inge Asenbaum



Wendy Ramshaw, 'Five Ring-Sets', 1989, 18 ct gold and semi-precious stones, four on her turned nickel alloy ring-stands inlaid with coloured resin, 16 x 3 cm

titled "Australia, Ceramics and Feathers". I can report first hand that this was incredibly influential to all who worked with them. A large cohort of students went on to make names for themselves, inspired by the couple's example.

Another section entitled "Gates and Screens" details Wendy's many commissions for larger works and "Picasso's Ladies" reveals the 10-year adventure to tell the story of Picasso's women that culminated in an exciting exhibition at the V&A Museum. There is also more – such as her knitting, colorcore, glass and her millennium medal; his neoprene and iron, his recent works, the books and his elegant Pool Pavilion in Hong Kong, and the representative galleries, such as Electrum and Lesley Craze in London and the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh that stock their work. Long hours and dedicated concentration on the project in hand are the hallmark of both artists. Each works on individual projects. However, separate though their work may be they are a mutual support team and enjoy cross-fertilization of interests. The strength of the relationship bolsters one or the other when times have been hard – for their eminent careers have been earned not handed to them on a silver platter and both have also had their health problems.

Honours accorded to them include being made Liverymen of London's the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths – Wendy in 1986 and David in 1989. Wendy received an

David Watkins, 'Kingdom – Day for Night', sculpture installed at Sutton Place in 1985, stainless steel, mild steel and brass, 2.5 x 5 x 5 m

David and Wendy enjoying life together at Haystack, US in 2007



David Watkins, 1989, 'Pool Pavilion', Kowloon Park, Hong Kong, stainless steel, 6 x 12 x 12 m



David Watkins, 'Pendant Neckpiece', 1974, ???



Wendy Ramshaw, 'Millennium Medal for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II' (detail), 1999

OBE in 1993 then a CBE in 2003. Her work is in over 70 public collections, including the great ones such as Goldsmiths Hall, V&A, and British Museum in London; Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim in Germany; the Cooper Hewitt in New York; the Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

David's work is also in many of these major collections and others beside. He became Professor of Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork and Jewellery at the Royal College of Art in 1984 and guided that department to new levels of achievement. Indicative of their temperaments, Wendy's delicate necklaces and rings con-

trast with David's strong sculptural shapes, yet their marriage of 46 years is, as Graham Hughes concludes, a duet. This remarkable book, published by Starcity in 2009, can be taken as the notes to accompany that performance.

Dorothy Erickson

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