

# Robert Baines: Living Treasure and Fabulous Follies

Bakalar & Paine  
Galleries,  
Massachusetts College  
of Art and Design,  
Boston  
1.17.18 – 3.3.18

Arkansas Arts Center,  
Little Rock  
7.20.18 – 10.7.18

Eskenazi Museum of Art  
at Indiana University,  
Bloomington  
2019

By Joshua Fischer

We have all felt museum fatigue, especially in the encyclopedic museum. Precious artifacts have stood the test of time and traveled great distances to be available to us, yet they may feel distant, especially when entombed in vitrines. Robert Baines's exhibition fights such fatigue, injecting new life and humor into these antiquities. Baines has studied Bronze Age goldsmithing for more than forty years to become Australia's leading archaeometallurgist. A master of granulation, he manipulates impossibly minute balls of precious metal. Baines connects this technique, perfected long ago by the Etruscans, directly

to our present moment in his aptly titled exhibition, *Living Treasure and Fabulous Follies*—with much emphasis on *living*.

Just as it is in Baines's practice, history is an animating force in the exhibition. Two rows of vitrines lay out fictitious genealogies of objects that whimsically change form over time. In one section called "Armbandits," a series begins with a postcard from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's gift shop that pictures an Iranian gold armlet from the eleventh century. Baines asks: What if this photograph generated a set of copies? He then answers his own question by creating these forgeries, each of which he identifies as from a specific time period and place. Like a game of telephone, the end product

vaguely resembles its starting point. The armlet shifts scale from historic adornment to bracelet to finger-ring to brooch, then back to finger-ring and on to hair clasp and button. It somehow ends up as a classic Australian "Iced VoVo" cookie. Some of the mistranslations are playfully implausible, while others retain greater fidelity to their postcard source—already once removed from the original object itself—despite changes in size and material. Even with the unlikely progression from armlet to cookie, there is an underlying visual logic: the pink vertical stripes of the marshmallow and red jam center of the "Iced VoVo" echo the symmetrical composition of the armlet. Baines suggests that design

DNA passes from handmade artisanal objects to the routinized product for mass consumption as a matter of natural progression.

In the morphological approach to interpretation featured in the exhibition, Baines starts with a contemporary object: the compact disc. The CD does not change as wildly across time and place—never shapeshifting into a hair clasp or cookie—but Baines still finds plenty of room to play within the basic circular shape. He claims its primary ancestor to be a seventh-century Etruscan rosette from which spawn golden, bejeweled ornaments and fanciful brooches. A small, granulated gold disc, purported as being a Grecian piece from Madytos



Installation view of Robert Baines:  
*Living Treasure and Fabulous Follies*.  
Photo: Eduardo Rivera



Robert Baines  
*Compact Disc* circa 2000,  
2010. silver, glass powder  
coat, electroplate, compact  
disc. Photo: courtesy of  
the artist



Robert Baines  
*Official History of the  
Compact Disc, Giraffe* circa  
1620, 2010. silver. Photo:  
courtesy of the artist



Robert Baines  
*Official History of the  
Compact Disc, Etruscan*,  
circa 5th century BC, Greek,  
2008. gold. Photo: courtesy  
of the artist



circa third century BCE (but made by Baines in 2003), uses part of a thinly flattened Coke can as its base. Despite its surprising mass-market material, it could pass as an artifact.

In works like *Brooch, Meaner than Yellow* (2008), and the series "Hey True Blue" (2010), Baines's ancient doppelgangers morph from small and flat to dazzlingly sculptural. These pieces incorporate raucous colors like red, teal, and yellow that we might associate with garish contemporary plastics and children's toys. Baines coils, braids, twists, and loops metal to create intricate geometric forms that pile on top of one another, colliding and intertwining. These energetic wireframe abstractions read like architectural maquettes, reminiscent of Frank Gehry's precarious, undulating structures. In a final iteration, Baines uses the rainbow-metallic underside of CDs as

reflective bases, transforming these soon-to-be obsolescent technological relics into gleaming pieces of jewelry that simultaneously take us back to antiquity and into the future.

The exhibition concludes under the theme "Collecting: An archaeology of the smallest collection of large jewelry in the world." Baines offers his own inflated luxury goods, citing Etruscan tombs as his inspiration, and in particular the discovery of a gold Etruscan fibula as large as someone's torso. Using a white wireframe structure, one work enlarges an Etruscan baule type earring to the size of someone's head. In another, Baines adapts a beautifully delicate golden funerary wreath into finely coiled tangles of black powdercoated metal enmeshed with yellow, red, and black toy cars.

Baines's view of collecting is featured on the gallery walls: "Private collections tend to demonstrate idiosyncratic and

sometimes quirky preferences, while public collections appear more considered and a result of scholarship." This feeling of dichotomy between public and private also explains the beauty and fun of Baines's artistic practice, which takes the public, authoritative presentations of historical jewels in museums personally. His own rigorous scholarship and mastery of granulation does not result in a desire to retell an official story. Instead, it provides Baines license to invent a free-spirited new history, steeped *just enough* in fact. Baines makes the past more meaningful not by encasing it and setting it aside, but through its remaking, and creative leaps that connect to our contemporary moment.

Joshua Fischer is an independent curator and a masthead editor at *Big, Red and Shiny*, an online publication covering visual art in New England.

## JEWELRY OF IDEAS: GIFTS FROM THE SUSAN GRANT LEWIN COLLECTION

Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York  
11.17.17 - 5.28.18

CATALOGUE:  
*The Jewelry of Ideas: The Susan Grant Lewin Collection.*  
Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York, 2017

By Marjorie Simon

Susan Grant Lewin began collecting jewelry as a young journalist. She traveled frequently to Copenhagen, where she discovered the possibilities of modern jewelry in the sleek designs created for Georg Jensen by Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hube. In the 1980s, as global creative director of Formica Corporation, Grant Lewin helped promote their inventive new material ColorCore by creating a competition for designers, as well as an international exhibition, *Surface and Ornament*, which had its debut at the Art Institute of Chicago. It didn't take long for ColorCore, with its solid color throughout, to attract jewelers such as Thomas Gentile, Bob Ebendorf,



Robert Baines, *Ambandits Copy Iran (Gurgan)*, circa 11th century, 2009-2010, silver gilt. Photo: courtesy of the artist & Gallery Loupe