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Fusion: Contemporary Enamels from RAM's Collection

February 17 – October 6, 2019

With an ever-growing collection, RAM is consistently acquiring examples of contemporary jewelry and metal hollowware, incorporating a range of styles and techniques. This exhibition offers a brief survey of the enamel works available in RAM's holdings.

In the context of objects, enameling is the fusing of fine glass particles and, most often, a metal surface at very high temperatures. Enameling can be used to coat functional items, such as cooking ware, yet it can also be used to embellish and decorate. With its origins centuries ago, enameling offered the means to add color to certain materials and was reportedly used in place of rare gemstones as needed.

For contemporary jewelry and metalwork, enamel is used to create objects that play into theoretical, aesthetic, and practical explorations. For example, **Jamie Bennett** expands the possibilities of enamel by challenging expectations—he investigates the “visual and tactile breadth” of the medium through painterly compositions and innovative techniques. Inspired by the human form as well as technology and nature, **Katharine Wood** was introduced to enameling by her mother, **Antonia Schwed**, who also created enamel jewelry. RAM has examples from both, allowing for the unique opportunity to see the influence of family on creative pursuits. **Zachery Lechtenberg** draws on his interest in “collectible” culture and his love of toys to create enamel objects and jewelry populated by cartoon-inspired characters. While he uses enamel to add color to small-scale decorative objects and wearables, Lechtenberg overturns the traditions of the medium by infusing his work with his own special brand of humor.

Biographies and statements from select featured artists highlight a range of approaches and interests:

Jamie Bennett, retired after three decades teaching in the esteemed metalsmithing and jewelry department at SUNY-New Paltz, New Paltz, New York. He is widely regarded as one of the most important contemporary jewelers who works closely with enameling. A relentless explorer and analyzer of jewelry history, form, and function, Bennett plays with colors, surfaces, and settings while emphasizing the painterly possibilities of enamel. His work is exhibited frequently and collected internationally with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California; Museum of Art, Oslo, Norway; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England as well as Racine Art Museum representing him with one or more pieces. Bennett is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including three National Endowment for the Arts Individual Fellowships and three New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships.

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British artist **Helen Carnac** uses vitreous enamel on steel (more commonly used for bathtubs, pots, and pans) to create thoughtful, layered, and engaging works that emphasize drawing and mark-making. Throughout her work, she highlights the act of making as well as the relationship between maker, material, and process. Through jewelry, drawings, objects, and installations, Carnac traces time, place, and meaning. She also works with dancers, architects, and designers on various large and small-scale projects. Deeply committed to learning, Carnac has worked in higher education since 1999 and currently lectures at Middlesex University. About her work, Carnac states: “My primary material is metal and from this I take my position of understanding, of not just other materials but of the world we live in... Recently I learnt that many generations ago some of my maternal line of family were master engravers. I was taken aback by this and felt a certain recognition that one of my primary interests – scratching with metal on metal may be hardwired in me.”

Drawn to pop culture as well as contemporary cartoon imagery, **Zachary Lechtenberg** creates enamel objects that he populates with colorful characters and almost fantasy-like scenarios. Lechtenberg addresses a range of issues through an aesthetic inspired by street art, comic books, and cartoons. Favoring *champlevé* (a technique in which troughs are carved, etched, die struck, or cast into the surface of a metal object, and filled with vitreous enamel) enameling, he transfers his illustrations onto jewelry, cups, and plates, and also designs t-shirts, stickers, ashtrays, cutting boards and skateboards. Often challenging expectations, Lechtenberg has been known to engrave on the reverse sides of pieces as well as the front. He earned his BFA from Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville, Illinois, and his MFA from East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina.

Assistant Professor of Jewelry and Metals at Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Sharon Massey currently creates work that addresses man-made patterns such as those of roadways, nets, and brickwork. Often employing the *champlevé* (see Lechtenberg bio above) enameling technique, Massey explores the visual and tactile possibilities of material and form. She received her BFA from Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina in 1999 and her MFA from East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina in 2006. Winner of the esteemed Art Jewelry Forum’s Emerging Artist Award in 2009, she currently serves on the Board of Trustees of The Enamelist Society. In addition, Massey’s work is included in the collection of the Enamel Arts Foundation, Los Angeles, California; Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England; and RAM.

The son of two artists, **Tod Pardon** was raised in a home that emphasized art and culture—indeed the home itself was constructed with the input of his mother, Eunice, a fiber artist and his father, **Earl Pardon**, an artist internationally known for his experiments with and manipulations of enamel. (RAM owns a distinctive necklace and earring set by Earl from the late 1980s). Tod Pardon apprenticed with his father and learned time-honored enameling techniques. However, he most often chooses an original inlay process that

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combines unfired enamel with various materials. About his work, Tod Pardon states: "Over the past twenty years the content in my work has been influenced by many elements that are vast, varied, and personal. I see it as an expression of life's inherent duality and instability. There are contradictions of anxiety and humor, good and evil. The humor and color play an important role in contrast to the sometimes screaming pieces...the character I'm drawn to most is Rangda, Queen of the Leyaks. A bloodthirsty, child-eating, witch-widow mistress of black magic. She is feared and nasty but is portrayed and acts in a comical way. It's like you can't see the light without the dark..."

Currently, RAM has eight brooches by Tod Pardon in the collection, most with bases that support the pieces and emphasize their nature as sculpture. Pardon has his BFA in Painting and Drawing from Alfred University, Alfred, New York, and his MFA in Painting from Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. His work has been shown internationally and is in numerous collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York; and Newark Museum of Art, Newark, New Jersey, as well as RAM.

June Schwarcz (1918 – 2015) is widely regarded as a pioneer in modern craft. Her experimentations with and manipulations of enamel over six decades challenged how the media was understood. In combining enameling with electroplating, She was able to create unexpected abstracted vessels. Schwarcz responded to the vessel shape implicitly, stating: "It has been a very basic form for all mankind with a rich history." She first worked in fashion and package design in the early 1940s. More concerned with the enamel than the form, Schwarcz would use preformed vessels until she discovered copper foil, then electroplating. These techniques allowed her to shape her work before applying layers of enamel and ultimately baking the pieces in a kiln. Inspired by a variety of artists, as well as textiles and African design, Schwarcz also responded to things in the everyday world, such as the pleats of her grandson's baggy jeans.

In addition to numerous other acknowledgments, Schwarcz was designated a Living Treasure of California in 1985 and received the James Renwick Alliance Masters of the Medium Award in 2009. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; and the Museum of Applied Arts, Zurich, Switzerland. RAM currently holds six of her works, the earliest from 1984.

Not formally trained as an artist, **Katharine Wood** forthrightly acknowledges her mother, **Antonia Schwed**, as the source of her interest in enamels. Schwed, who is also featured in RAM's concurrent exhibition, ***Treasure Trove: Establishing Jewelry and Metals Archives at RAM***, created enamel jewelry, and shared her passion and interest with her daughter. Through her experiments, Wood has worked her way through various techniques—cloisonné, grisaille, champlevé, limoges, and plique-à-jour—to find the process of making that suits her. Indeed, she often combines certain approaches. RAM has acquired multiple

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pieces of her jewelry that depict anonymous people going about their daily lives, such as a necklace comprised of portraits of public transportation. For an example, take a look at Wood's work in the concurrent exhibition, **Represent: Exploring Portraits in RAM's Collection**. Wood also owns and operates Antonia Tile, where she focuses on creating custom enamel accent tiles, murals, and jewelry.