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WILLIAM HARPER

His Search for Beauty and Truth
through Dichotomy

LINDA HOWLEY

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Linda Howley

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PREFACE

Coming across William Harper's work for the first time while leafing through books on modern jewellery, it struck me just how individual his work was compared with his contemporaries. However, in any of the general works which feature him, there is never anything more than a tiny paragraph to be found on his work and for a while he remained an obscure yet intriguing figure.

During 1992, Joan MacKarell, a designer based in London, was teaching at the college for two weeks. She had with her a copy of Harper's retrospective catalogue Artist as Alchemist (1989) and only then did I realise the sheer diversity of his work. During the summer, I obtained my own copy of this catalogue along with the more recent Self-Portraits of the Artist/Sacred and Profane (1991) from the Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York. Resuming college in October, I gleaned all the articles I could from the library and I wrote countless letters to various newspapers and also to galleries asking for texts of catalogues. While writing initial letters to some of the larger galleries I enquired if it would be possible to obtain Harper's address. The Orlando Museum of Art replied to this enquiry stating that it was the Museum's policy to keep lenders' addresses confidential. Nevertheless, they forwarded my letter to Mr. Harper and to my surprise I received a prompt reply. He sent me an assorted batch of information and said if I needed any more help not to hesitate to contact him. I continued on with my research and my supplementary reading and devised a questionnaire which I sent to him early in January. Again, he replied without delay and expressed an interest in exhibiting his work in Ireland. Hopefully, this will materialise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
(1) Changes in the American college system during the late Fifties/early Sixties - William Harper's first experiments with enamel - The incorporation of the notion of the Primitive into his work.	9
(2) First explorations with jewellery - Begins to use gold; influenced by pre-Columbian metalwork - Cross-cultural influences displayed in <u>Saints, Martyrs, Savages</u> (1981/1982) - Blatant sexual imagery in <u>La (sic) Fleur du Mal</u> series (1980) - <u>Pentimenti</u> series (1987): Harper's notion of 'preciousness', his assemblage aesthetic.	20
(3) Harper's theme of dichotomy; best illustrated by his self-portraits begun in 1987.	63
CONCLUSION	88
NOTES	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY	94

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Pagan Mamu #1 - The Serpent, 1979.
2. Pentimenti #11: The Courtesan, 1987.
3. Self-Portrait of the Artist with a Migraine III, 1989.
4. The Last Fake Maharajah, 1987.
5. A Personal Geography, 1971.
6. Rattle for a White Witch, 1972.
7. Fetish Sistrum, 1974.
8. Talismanic Beads #1, 1975.
9. Fetish Pin #1, 1976.
10. Amuletic Beads #1, 1975.
11. Bib of Charms #1, 1980.
12. Pagan Baby #6: The Scarab, 1977.
13. Pagan Baby #11: Blue Scarab, 1978.
14. Ghost Oracle, 1978.
15. Kabuki Boogie I-V, 1980.
16. Nail Figure, Western Kongo, 1875 - 1900.
17. Saint Sebastian, 1981.
18. Savage IV, 1982.
19. The Archangel Shiva Sebastian, 1982.
20. The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa II ... and the darkness of the mystery was felt within her ... 1985.
21. Nightshade Long, 1980.
22. La Fleur du Mal I, 1985.
23. La Fleur du Mal II, 1985.
24. La Fleur du Mal VIII, 1985.
25. La Fleur du Mal IX, 1985.
26. La Fleur du Mal XI, 1985.
27. Nine Sketches III - Sapphire, 1980.
28. Nine Sketches V - Saffron, 1980.

29. Nine Sketches VIII - Tongue, 1980.
30. Pentimenti # 10: Stigmata, 1987.
31. Kurt Schwitters: Merz 25: A Painting with Stars, 1920.
32. Pentimenti: # 5: The Veil, 1987.
33. Pentimenti: # 3: The Harem, 1987.
34. Pentimenti: #12: The Empress, 1987.
35. Pentimenti: # 4: Gemini, 1987.
36. Pentimenti: # 2: Grey Gardens, 1987.
37. Three aspects of Grey Gardens, 1987.
38. Pentimenti: # 9: The Second Horror Vacui, 1987.
39. Three aspects of Second Horror Vacui, 1987.
40. Pentimenti: # 7: The Chamber of the Bride, 1987.
41. Friedensreich Hundertwasser, A Raindrop Falls into Town, 1955.
42. Gustav Klimt, Judith (II), 1909.
43. Wand I, 1986.
44. Self-Portrait of the Artist as St. Sebastian, 1987.
45. Phur-bu, Tibet, 18th Century.
46. Self-Portrait of the Artist with a Migraine # 2, 1989.
47. The Temptation of St. Anthony, 1986.
48. Self-Portrait of the Artist as St. Anthony, 1987.
49. Funeral pole, Konso, Ethiopia.
50. Grave Figure, Kambe, Kenya.
51. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Oracle, 1989.
52. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an 'Enfant Terrible', 1990.
53. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Alchemist, 1990.
54. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Alchemist II, 1990.
55. Mercurius as the sun-moon hermaphrodite, Mylius, 1622.
56. Alchemical woodcut of the seventeenth century showing the androgyne composite of man - woman.

57. The Androgyne, 1986.
58. The White Hermaphrodite, 1987.
59. The Virgin and the Unicorn, 1988.
60. Modern representation of the Goddess Kali.
61. Various depictions of the Gorgon.
62. The Dark Archangel, 1982.
63. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as the Goddess Kali, 1990.
64. Self-Portrait of the Artist as Icon, 1990.
65. Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Pagan Baby, 1990.
66. Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Haruspex, 1990.



1. Pagan Mamu # 1 - The Serpent, 1979

Neck Piece

Gold Cloisonné enamel on fine silver and fine gold; 14k gold, sterling silver, snake rattle, pearl, snail shell, 17.8 x 6.8 x 3.0cm; Chain, 46.0cm

I N T R O D U C T I O N

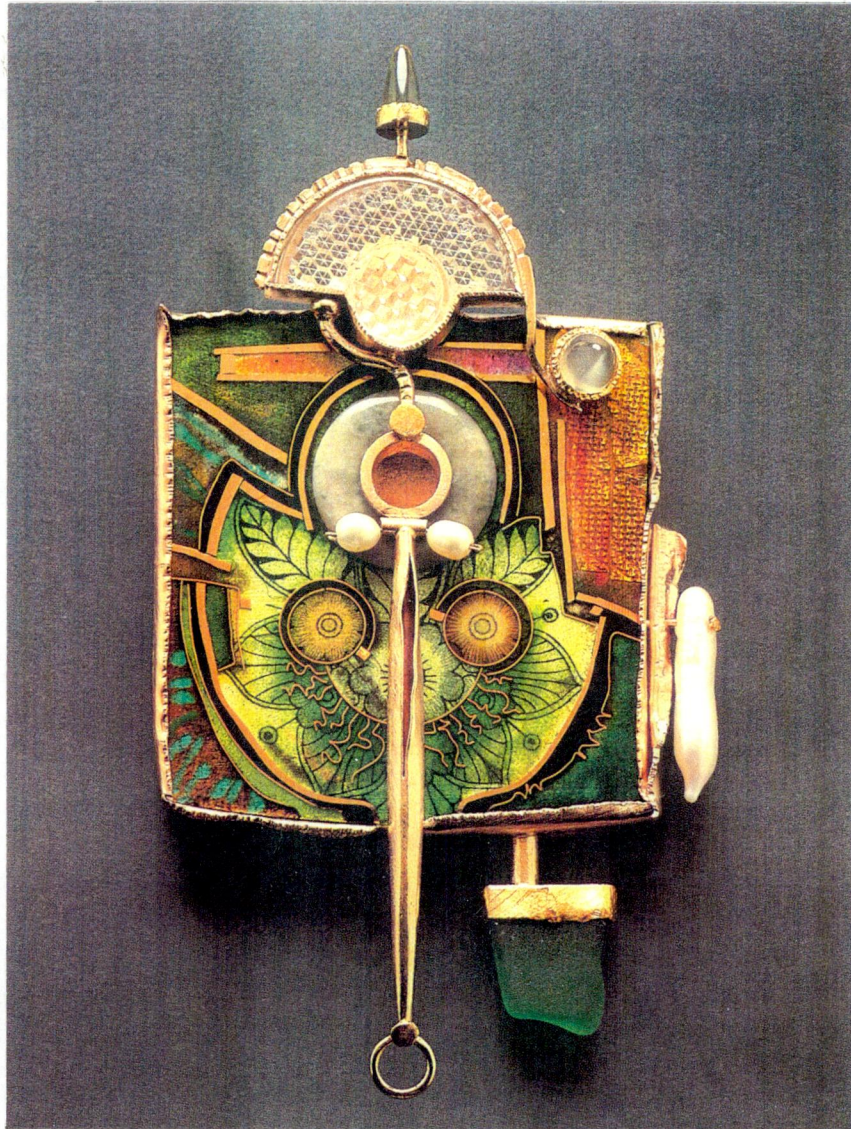
William Harper's work is instantly recognizable. His rich glowing cloisonné enamel and his use of precious stones juxtaposed with found objects and low cost materials and his almost brutal use of gold sums up his personal style. He is a master of enamel, a medium that has not been a major vehicle of artistic expression since the turn of the century when it was used in fantastic Art Nouveau creations such as those of Rene Lalique. Through the use of transparent and opaque colour, Harper achieves visual depth which seems almost to exceed physical limitation and the inclusion of gold or silver cloisons give his work a powerful graphic quality.

Harper began to use enamel at a time when there was a general reaction by artist jewellers against the use of precious metals and the connotations associated with it such as exclusiveness and wealth. However, his gestural gold had nothing in common with the fashionable use of the material where the metal was overworked, highly polished and lost much of its intrinsic beauty.

Harper, who started out as a painter insists he still thinks like one and certainly, many of his enamels recall abstract painting. Rather than fussing over drawings, Harper draws directly with the cloison wire and he allows the colours and forms of secondary materials (i.e. beads, stones, found objects) to suggest the direction of the enamelled section. The tropical environment of his Florida home has provided him with many of the objects of his inspiration - scarab beetles, exotic seashells, shark's teeth. While including such beautiful gems as opals and rubies in his pieces, he argues:

"Plastic and glass have the same clarity and depth of colour as semiprecious stones".¹

Harper's search for a means of expression by working directly with his materials makes him a leading figure of the contemporary American studio jewellery movement which emerged after World War II and has its roots in various modern art



2. **Pentimenti; # 11: The Courtesan, 1987**

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, citrine, moonstone, pearls, jade, glass, plastic.

14.0 x 7.2 x 1.7cm

movements. One of the most important trends in American jewellery has been the adoption of assemblage, interest in which was sharpened in 1961 by the exhibition 'The Art of Assemblage' held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Harper's debt to assemblage art is obvious and this aesthetic is best exemplified by his Pentimenti series from 1987. (See Ill. No.2). Harper is also very much of his time as regards preoccupations in the art world during the late Sixties and early Seventies."

In the jewellery arena, the Sixties and in particular the Seventies were years of frantic experimentation. Many jewellers of the time, in their bid to be taken seriously as "artists", seemed to forget the very special qualities inherent in jewellery. In contrast, Harper's early pieces were inspired by African art and were realized as fetish objects and jewels. Rattles, amulets, talismans and charms revealed his fascination with magic, mystery and the undefined. Harper's work still retains the powerful qualities of his earlier pieces but over the years has become more complex and multi-layered.

Harper is a self-proclaimed "Eclectic Man" ² and museum junky. Artists now have all-but-instant access to all the world's cultures and Harper has taken full advantage of the information explosion. He draws his subject matter, themes and symbols from mythological and religious sources. His interests are wide-ranging and he admits:

" I am an assimilator. I borrow and change and learn from past civilisations." ³

The concept of extremes and dichotomies are the structural principles of his art and lie at the core of his consistency of vision. In an interview from 1991, he easily reeled off some of the dichotomies he has explored:

"Beauty versus ugliness, crude versus refined, precious versus nonprecious, male versus female, light versus dark" ⁴.



3. **Self-Portrait of the Artist with a Migraine III, 1989**
24k gold, 14k gold, sterling silver, aluminium, topaz, pearl, tooth, plastic.
27.2 x 6.3 x 3.0cm

Harper's fascination with duality embraces a cross-cultural element. His interest in androgyny has resulted in works inspired by Hindu deities, African power figures, St. Sebastian and the ideas of alchemy.

Harper prefers to lecture on aesthetics in general rather than his process. He is more interested in "the so-called fine arts" ⁵ than he is in the decorative arts. Although some critics have described his work as "miniature sculpture" ⁶, he does not view his work as such. He is scornful of those who make works that are unwearable, meant more as costume or merely to be photographed. Some of his pieces are quite large, such as the Self-Portrait of the Artist with a Migraine III (1989), (which is over ten inches long) but all are carefully designed to be easy to wear. However, Harper acknowledges that he tries:

"to have the pieces intellectually interesting enough that one can appreciate them in a showcase or on a table in addition to being worn" ⁷.

How do people react to Harper's idiosyncratic vision? I put this question to him in a recent questionnaire and he gave the reply that at exhibitions of his work:

"Most people express their wonderment that I can do what I do - they see the magic - and that thrills me".

He went on to say:

"I have noticed when a woman wears my work, that some people seem to be intimidated by her because of it - any woman who does wear my jewellery exudes self-confidence ... a certain attitude is implicit in the kind of personality who would wear the work - a woman who is very sure of herself and who might want to test society's idea of what jewellery might be" ⁸.

Harper's Baroque Grotesqueries (1986/1987) include his Fake Maharajahs (1986), (See Ill. No.4), and the White Hermaphrodite (1987). When this series was exhibited at the Yaw Gallery, Michigan in 1988, the brooches ranged in price



4. **The Last Fake Maharajah, 1987**

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, moonstone, citrine, pearl, mirror, plastic, 10.7 x 8.5 x 1.2cm

from \$3,200 to \$14,000. However, not all of Harper's clients are wealthy and he says of these:

"they have seen it and needed to own it and have sacrificed something else to be able to afford it" ⁹.

Many of his clients send him payments for many months before acquiring the work.

Judging by the reaction of Harper's audience and clients, his powerful work strikes a particularly deep chord. Since archaic times, people have made use of small objects that can be worn, carried or placed near or on the body. Jewellery remains an essential and meaningful part of almost everyone's existence. Handcrafted jewellery can give people special feelings about themselves and help them to realize themselves. In this respect, Harper's pieces serve the time honoured function of jewellery - to identify and enhance the life, power and status of the wearer.

CHAPTER 1

Background/Early Years

The late Fifties and early Sixties were years of major change in the world of American art. Educational structures were revolutionised due to the influx of American servicemen returning from the second world war. European artists, craftsmen and teachers who had escaped political upheaval by emigrating to the U.S. now occupied important positions on various university faculties. With them came traditions evolved over centuries in their native cultures.

Many of the larger art institutions offered courses in clay, fibre, wood and vitreous enamels as well as the classically acceptable arts of painting and sculpture. The curricula of these institutions required students to pursue studies in history, philosophy and other humanistic disciplines along with their course work in art. This created an environment significantly different from that of the traditional apprentice system of education in the crafts. Students interested in craft media were immersed in the traditions of technique and they gained an intimate understanding of materials and function. However, they were also constantly in touch with writers, poets, painters and sculptors who were often more interested in idea than in technique or function. Serious students of craft were challenged by peers in the visual arts who believed that no serious statement could possibly be made in media they viewed as decidedly inferior to oil paint, stone or metal. What was actually taking place was the creation of a very dynamic environment where new ideas and approaches were constantly appearing, being carefully questioned, accepted or discarded, or transformed into whole new systems of understanding.¹

William Harper, from his earliest studies, showed a very strong interest in colour and for four years he explored it through painting. However, he became dissatisfied with the medium and when he began his studies in 1962 at Western



5. **A Personal Geography, 1971**
Movable Modular Object
Silver cloisonné on copper; plexiglass,
3.8 x 40.6 x 40.6

Reserve University and the Cleveland Institute of Art he became interested in the techniques of vitreous enamelling. Kenneth Bates, one of the most influential contemporary American enamellists was teaching at the Cleveland Institute of Art at the time. He quickly realised that Harper was a gifted colourist and became a mentor for him.

Of his early works, Harper says:

"My enamel was more like Abstract Expressionism. To create wall pieces as large as 20 by 26 inches I would throw enamel through my fingers or splash it on with water. These experiments convinced me that you could take a painterly approach to the medium."²

Harper submitted these early works for exhibition and they were rejected. But he was not to be deterred for he had become fascinated by a medium which he felt had its own integrity and unique qualities.

In 1967, Harper began a series of small sketches in cloisonné. These were used in a variety of ways from inlays for wooden containers to small individual objects. Harper resolved many aesthetic and technical problems during this time including the use of transparent and opaque colours, the cloisonné as a graphic element, the use of gold and silver foils and the possibilities of inlaid decalcomania. Harper began to realise that his chosen medium was an extremely intimate one and he felt that an object should be so appealing that people would want to handle it, pick it up, look at it closely and enjoy the colours. This wish to involve the viewer was particularly evident with his series of Freudian Toys ('69-'71) which were a series of gaming pieces and with provocative titles like Dirty Dominoes (1971) and Fondler's Game he displayed a sense of humour which he would not lose even in his more mature works. The main impetus for Harper's work around this time was the sexual revolution which was taking place. Each object/game contained a number of single units representing interpretations of the more intimate parts of the human body. These individual units consisted of cloisonné drawings mounted

on plexiglass. Within the structure of the gaming set they could be rearranged to produce different combinations and often amusing associations. With these objects there was an emphasis on technique as Harper gained increased control of his medium. He was extremely dedicated to his work and as one critic said of these pieces: "Through countless hours of patient and meticulous stoning, his enamels have a velvety surface which is a sensuous delight".³

Harper's next pieces recall ritual objects as he began to integrate the notion of primitivism into his work. The idea of the Primitive has been evident in the work of many artists since the beginning of the century. Artists like Picasso, Miro and Max Ernst along with other leading figures of their generation were directly influenced by concrete examples of tribal art. Abstract Expressionism favoured a broader, synthetic idea of the Primitive and their view centred on the spirit of myth and magic more than on specific forms. This tendency to see the Primitive in conceptual rather than concrete terms became even more evident in the later 1960s. The Sixties was a decade which produced a new kind of art student, sophisticated and self-conscious in art history awareness. College trained artists began producing earthworks, performance art and various other works which were modelled on the organisational patterns of tribal and prehistoric societies, on ideas about the structures of Primitive thought and belief or on collective expressions such as architecture and dance.

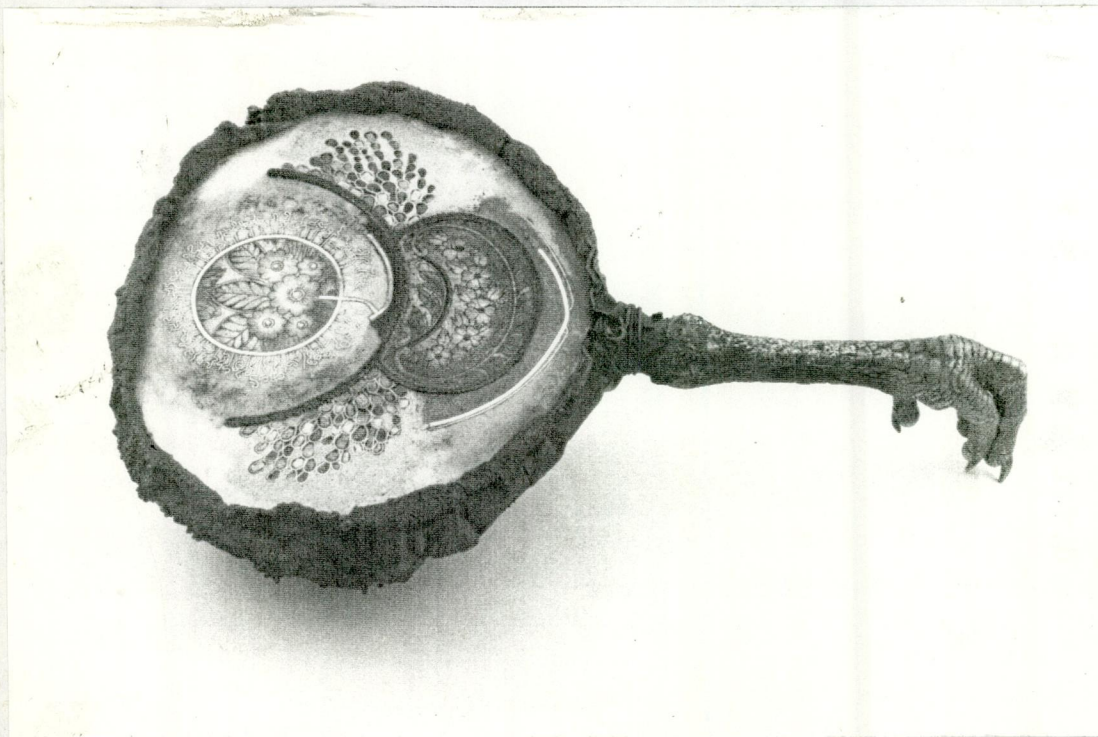
Besides the more learned manifestation of the Primitive in the fine arts during the late Sixties and Seventies, there was a generally heightened awareness of other cultures around the time Harper's ideas would have been developing. During the 'Flower Power Era' there was a renewed interest in Asia and the Far East. Counterculture groups dressed in ethnic garb were not only conveying their rejection of American military policies in Vietnam, but showed yearnings for what were perceived to be the gentler more humane life-styles of other societies. The 'Flower Children' were advocating universal love and the communal family. Leather thong jewellery hung

with dyed feathers and beads typified the ethnic style of the period. In addition, the 'Black is Beautiful' movement focused attending on African decorative art.

While acknowledging that Harper is very much of his time, there was nothing superficial about the incorporation of primitivism in his work. His notion of the Primitive is founded on first-hand study of major examples. During his years at Western Reserve, the Cleveland Museum of Art added the noted collection of Katherine Croyton White to its holdings of tribal art. In the course of many hours spent studying that collection, Harper absorbed the primitive component of his personal style.

In 1970, Harper accepted a position at Kent State University as visiting artist. At the same time he also acted as adjunct instructor of enamelling and design at Case Western Reserve University and spent his summers teaching at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. It was an extremely active and creative time for the artist. New ideas and concepts were constantly being formulated from experience and from careful study of various cultures and their artifacts.

In 1967, Harper had made his first purchase of African sculpture. Basic to the animism that pervades life in sub-Saharan African is the belief that inanimate objects (whether created by nature or man) have spiritual force. This is why African artifacts have such strong aesthetic presence even if they are not necessarily technically sophisticated. One of the aspects of African art that fascinated Harper was its social function. Objects were not merely decorative but they were imbued with power; they were functioning devices integral to a particular society's beliefs. Harper began to study works of art from cultures as divergent as tribal Africa, Catholic Europe and American Appalachia and his central concern was the "power" object. Reliquaries, fetishes, masks, amulets and other ritual objects would soon influence the nature of the objects he was to produce.



6. **Rattle for a White Witch, 1972**
Hand Mirror-Rattle
Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on copper; electroformed silver, mirror, pebbles, cast bronze.
30.5 x 12.7 x 5.0

In December 1971, Harper attended a two-week workshop at the Penland School of Crafts. He lived and worked with artists from different backgrounds in an intimate environment and there was an exchange of ideas and techniques. Bob Ebendorf, who is well-known as an inspiring teacher, was a particularly influential peer. According to Harper:

" - he influenced me through his natural charisma and energy more than in any other way. I did not like most jewellery until I met him and he showed me that jewellery could have the personality of its maker and not just be anonymous craftsmanship and design. Most metalsmiths at the time thought my work too strange, too subjective - Bob was reassuring about this and gave me confidence to explore this part of myself much more".⁴

After having returned from his workshop, Harper's work also became more complex in its visual structure.

Harper held his summer job at the Penland School of Crafts for seven years between 1969 and 1976. In 1972 he visited a small folk museum in the area which had in its collection a series of birds' feet cast in precious metal. The superstition surrounding these objects was that if a bird of prey came near the scene of a death the bird would swoop down and snatch up the spirit of the departed. If you could catch the bird and sever its feet, the spirit would be released from bondage. The bird's feet, cast in metal became amulets for warding off evil. This story became the impetus for five works which were realised as hand-mirrors. Harper's game sets had involved the viewer and these mirrors made his work more intimate still. This series saw the first inclusion of found objects in Harper's work. He used deer antlers for the handles in two pieces (the handles of the other three pieces were cast bird's feet) and played the irregularity of these objects against the discipline of the enamel composition. He also placed small pebbles inside to create sound when the pieces were manipulated. Penelope Hunter - Stiebel describes his Rain Rattle (1972): "Although its antler handle and rattling pebbles suggest use in an Indian rain dance, the piece belongs equally to the European tradition of dressing table accoutrements".⁵ This series aptly illustrates Harper's



into his work being more interested in an objects textural and visual qualities. The inclusion of found objects also serves as a shock tactic, catching the attention of the viewer and inviting him to examine the piece more closely.

The notion of preciousness, primitivism, the question of beauty, the aspect of the power object, the use of shock tactics, the concept of opposites and a fascination with the senses are elements visible early on in Harper's work. These ideas combined with a use of suggestive titles to enhance the meaning of the work laid the foundations for his jewellery which he would begin to make in 1976.



8. **Talismanic Beads # 1, 1975**

Silver and gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; sterling silver, 14k gold, 18k gold, 24k gold, ebony, ivory, bone, amber, shell; Chain, 40.0cm

CHAPTER TWO

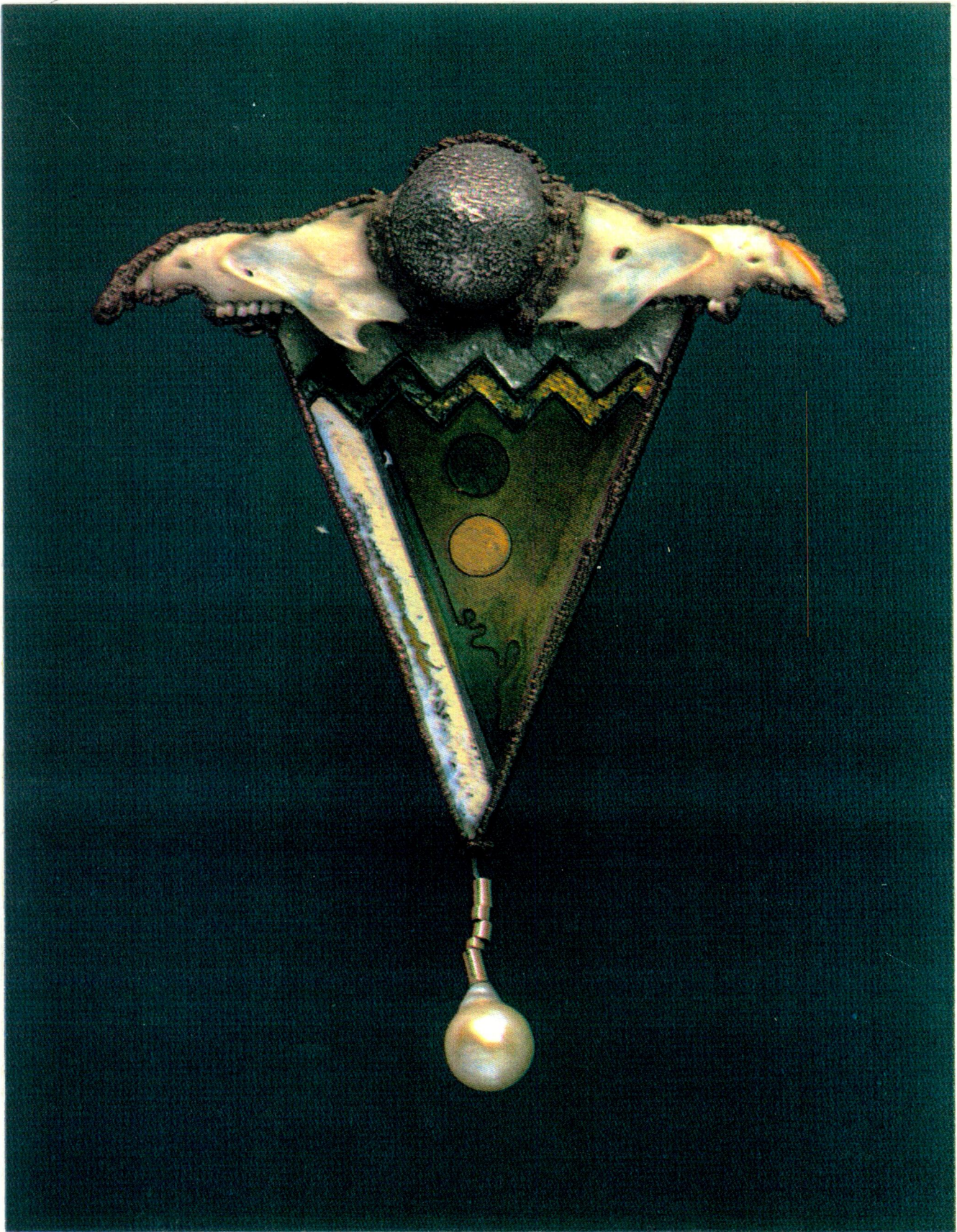
Harper felt that enamel as a material was;

"so often badly abused, forced to represent another design cliché without wit or elegance".¹

His gaming sets and rattles, made between 1970 and 1974, were partly a reaction against the work of most other enamellists of the time. Enamel was generally used as surrogate painting medium or as a decorative element applied to conventional objects such as bowls or boxes. In contrast, Harper's early work had to be approached without preconceptions. After exploring unusual forms with his fetish objects, Harper was able to progress confidently to making his fetish jewellery; pieces which were certainly wearable, but definitely not conventional.

Harper's two main influences at this point were African assemblage art and Islamic design and he applied these to his first explorations with jewellery. The fact that his first pieces took the form of beads is noteworthy and revealing. Beads first appeared with the advent of modern man, Homo Sapiens, at least forty thousand years ago. The intimate relationship with their owners is reflected in the fact that they are the most common items unearthed from ancient graves. The manufacture and use of beads is deeply embedded in human society and they have always been used to state basic relationships to life and the supernatural.² In our rapidly changing age, we continue to use and feel comfortable with forms that go back to pre-history - in particular, the bead.

With Talismanic Beads #1 (1975), (Ill. No. 8) Harper uses a variety of materials, influenced by the fact that African beads are generally part of an assemblage, put together in a seemingly haphazard way so that the object appears not to have been designed. His use of bone and ivory is evocative, recalling that the first beads were made from by-products of the hunt. By wearing parts of the animal's body, the wearer and creator of the beads gained a measure of control over its



9. **Fetish Pin # 1, 1976**

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on sterling silver; reticulated sterling silver, electroformed copper, 14k gold, pearl, chipmunk jaws
11.1 x 9.8 x 1.5cm

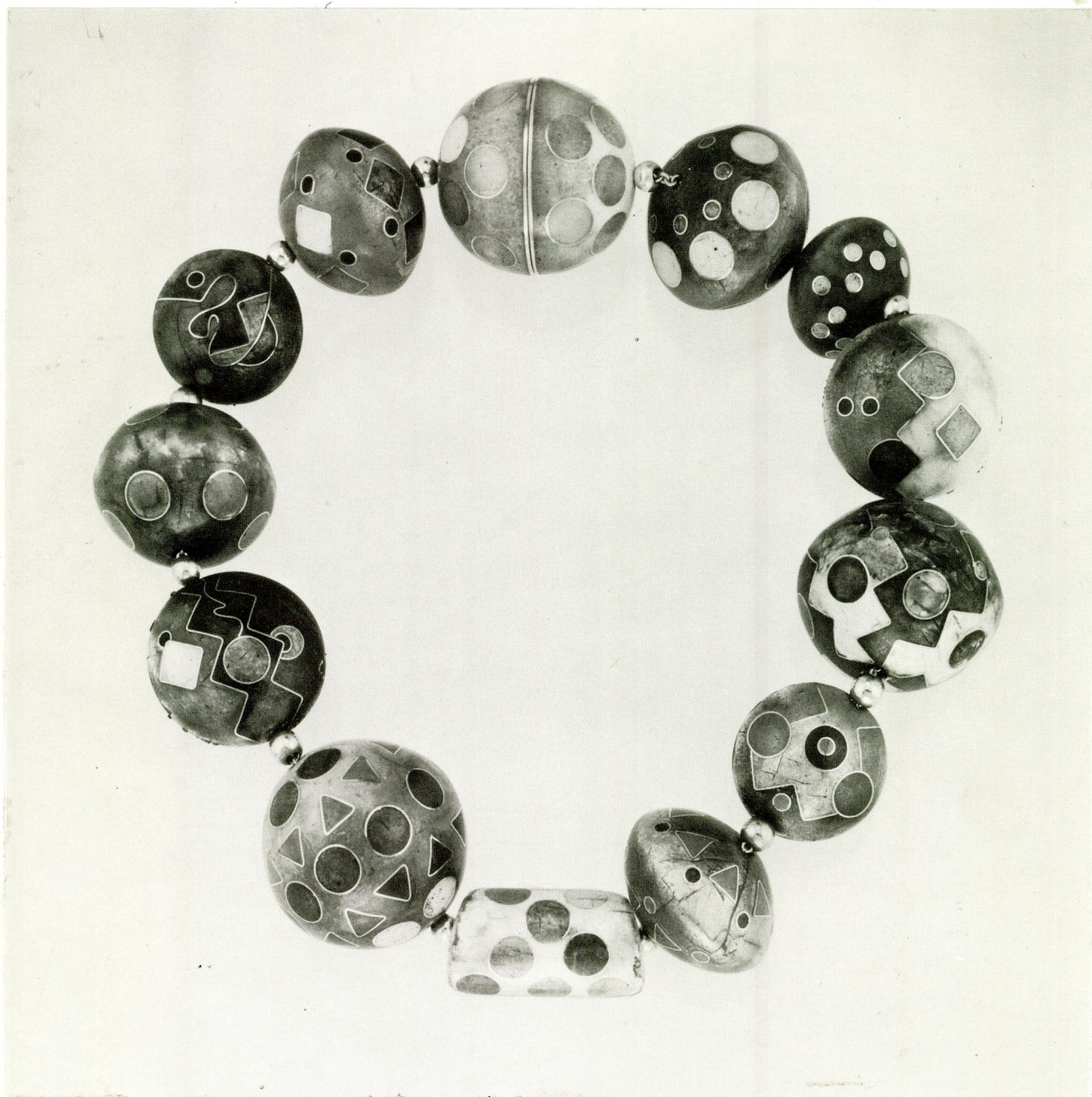
spirit. Harper's piece also includes shell, amber and ebony. Ebony was very popular in preparation of amulets against the evil eye and amber (a fossilised resin that ranks as a semi-precious stone) is one of the most magical of all natural amulets. It brings good luck and protects against evil spirits. Talismanic Beads convey the age-old reasons for wearing jewellery - power and protection.

The first manufactured beads were disk-shaped, barrel-shaped and tubular reflecting the limitations of technology. Harper had already used disk-shaped beads (Fetish Sistrum, 1974), barrel-shaped (Talismanic Beads, 1975) and his Fetish Pin # 1 from 1976 (See Ill. No. 9) includes tubular beads. The use of these basic forms illustrates Harper's respect for primitive techniques and soon he would make the decision that for his needs, his metalwork technique could remain uncomplicated.

Talismanic Beads (1975) had included - as well as natural materials - spherical and egg-shaped beads covered with gold and silver cloisonné enamel. With Amuletic Beads # 1 (1975), (See Ill. No. 10) Harper constructed the entire piece using enamelled beads. This piece reflects Harper's appreciation of Islamic design. Muslims consider mathematics an integral part of art and design and believe that geometric patterns underlie all natural phenomena. Islamic design is rich and intricate but details are rarely ends in themselves. The artist's highest priorities, whether in carpets, tiles, furniture or beads are the beauty of the overall design and harmony of colour. As Harper says:-

"The rug weavers of Islam know well how to catch and hold the eye of the viewer: the more one has to look at, the more one wants to see; the more one sees, the more one is forced to look - a beautiful complexity. It is this complexity that has been the chief impetus in the search for an interaction of surface and form in my enamel work - to catch and hold the viewer while his eyes explore the many secrets to be found".³

Harper's beads, each a single element in themselves, "a composition, a total idea"⁴, function simultaneously as part of



10. **Amuletic Beads # 1, 1975**

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on copper and fine silver, electroformed copper, and bronze.
Length 35.5cm

another totality, the necklace - thus creating a greater complexity.

Harper's beads can be compared with Tibetan yantras - a form of the universally used mandala - which are used in ritual to aid meditation and concentration. Yantras are composed of simple geometrical figures (lines, triangles, rectangles, circles, etc) and are intimately related to mantras. A mantra is a nucleus of sound by means of which cosmic and bodily forces are concentrated into ritual. So there is a link between sound, colour and form. This interconnection between the forces and energies expressed in both mantras and yantras is known as tantra.

Tantric art only came to light in the Western world in 1963. It captured the imagination of artists, students and younger people in general who felt that the qualities of the art offered them something positive and special. The discovery of the art of tantra was mainly down to one man, Akitcoomar Mookerjee, who had been aware for many years of the common undercurrent of archetypal significance between primitive and modern arts.

Harper has said recently, "I don't think I knew what a tantra was until 1973, but do not recall really seeing any until much later".⁵ However, the interconnection between sound, colour and form inherent in Tantric art seems to have influenced Harper. He says of his beads;

"I like to think that they are rather musical in form; there is a common theme, but each bead is a separate variation. The theme may be one of colour or motif, but explored in its various aspects of each unit, the bead".⁶

The late nineteenth century European Symbolists should be mentioned in regard to the aforementioned ideas. They were interested in synesthesia, a notion shared by Kandinsky, meaning the direct transfer of reactions from one sense to another, so that one might "hear" colours and conversely "see" sounds.⁷



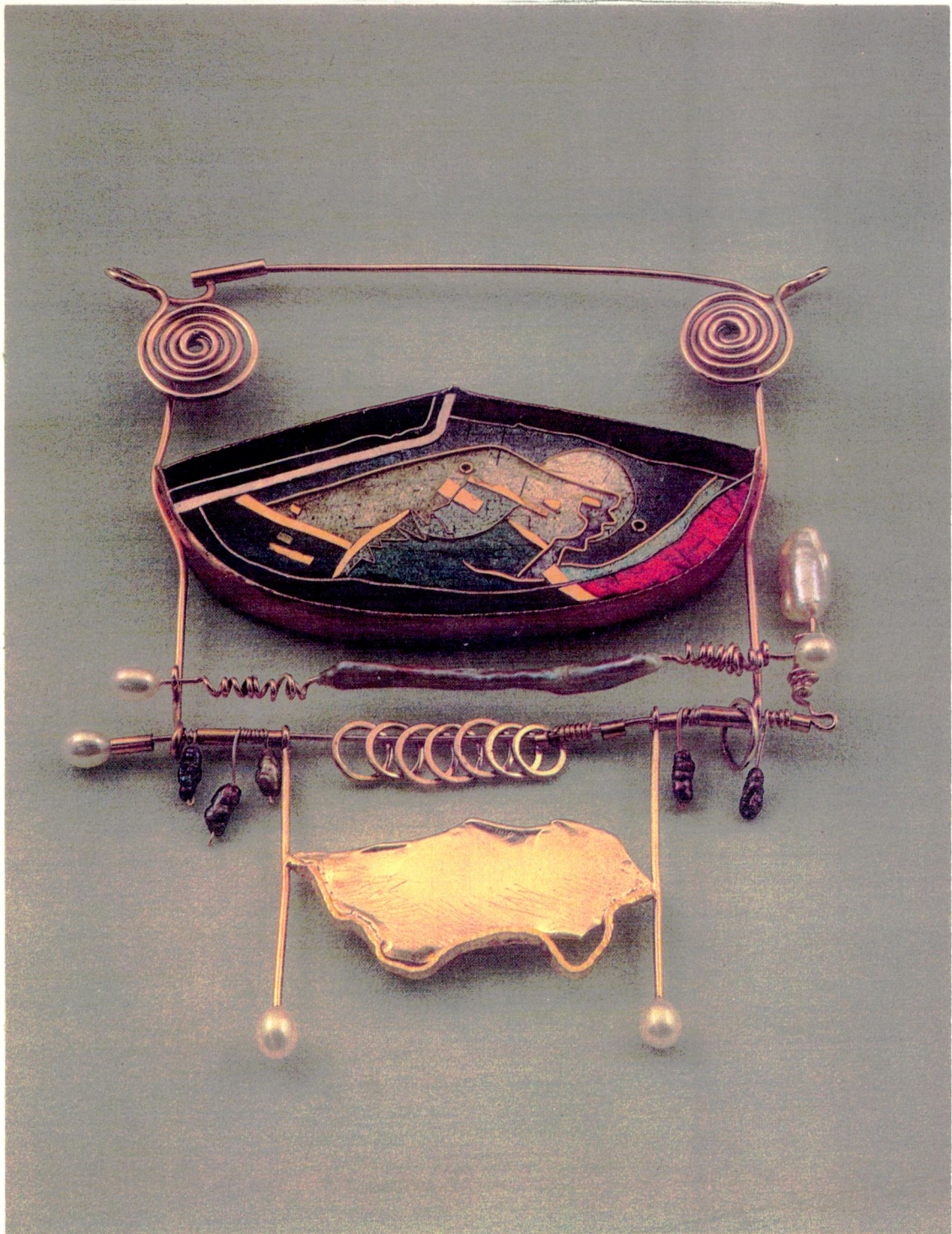
11. **Bib of Charms 1, 1980**

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on fine silver, fine gold and copper; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, 60.6 x 14.0 x 4.8cm; Chain 27.4cm.

In regard to Harper's Bib of Charms 1 (1980) (Ill. No. 11), a charm is generally understood to be an amulet or anything which by common use has come to be regarded as lucky or it can be a personal fetish. In the past an amulet that was inscribed with characters of magical significance was known as a charm. In addition, the word 'charm' is from the Latin **carmen** which means 'song', suggesting that the words used in charms were originally intended to be chanted or sung. Harper's beads, as well as having a visual appeal and a "musical" significance also have a basic tactile appeal (especially his spherical and egg-shaped beads) - all of these elements illustrating his fascination with the senses.

In 1976, Harper was invited along with a group of other prominent jewellers to the Taylor School of Art, Temple University in Pennsylvania to use technological equipment available there. He came away after the two week session having made the decision that technology was not necessary to his approach. This incident, along with his study of pre-Columbian jewellery at the Museum of Primitive Art in New York City, assured him that he only needed to use simple techniques to achieve the results he wanted. By handling pre-Columbian gold, Harper learned that "gold had a quality that was so noble, you could treat it disrespectfully and still have it emerge as a wonderful material".⁸ You could crumple it and bend it like paper without diminishing its splendour. Pre-Columbian metalworkers used gold in an almost casual way, dealing directly with the richness of its dazzling colour, its ability to be drawn into delicately thin structures and its almost molten texture. Harper up to this point had used copper as the main structural element, but he would begin to explore the use of gold in his own, personal way.

Harper Pagan Baby series (1977/78) displays his treatment of gold (See Ill. Nos. 12 & 13). He uses gold bezels to set the cloisonné enamelled inset but instead of the expected smoothly crafted edge, the metal is almost brutally manipulated into place, revealing gold's unique malleable texture. Harper chose to keep his technique uncomplicated because he did not want the viewer to be concerned with how his jewellery was



14. **Ghost Oracle, 1978**

Brooch

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel, gold, sterling silver and baroque pearls, 5" x 4".

fabricated. He has said, "I don't just work in gold using time honoured techniques. I have no desire to sit tapping away with a little hammer for months".⁹ He treasures his freedom of approach and, by de-emphasizing technique, makes the viewer concentrate on the idea behind the piece above all else.

Harper has used gold wire both as a functional device, pin and a compositional element. Ghost Oracle from 1978 (Ill. No. 14) is an excellent example of this and also displays certain ideas integral to Harper's developing style. He considers the back or the reverse side of his pieces as being important, "They are not ordinarily seen when the pieces are worn but remain a secret between the wearer, the maker and the object".¹⁰ With Ghost Oracle, Harper engraved an abstract pattern on the back of the enamelled plaque and added repoussé dots. He has incorporated free-moving objects in many of his pieces to produce delicate rustling sounds and in this particular piece the gold rings on the lower parallel bar provide movement and sound. Baroque pearls shading from black to purple originally suggested the mauve palette for the enamels.

Harper's desire to incorporate movement in his work is best conveyed with a series of stickpins from 1980, called Kubuki Boogie I-V (See Ill No. 15). The colour schemes of the spherical enamelled faces were inspired by costumes of the Japanese Kabuki theatre and the hair sprouting in tufts from two of the pieces was derived from Congolese masks of the Dan tribe. Penelope Hunter - Stiebel has described them as follows:-

"If you allow these engaging parasites to serve their stickpin function, they invariably perform; the shimmy and shake of their loose-limbed boogie accompanies the wearer's every move."¹¹

A main theme present throughout Harper's career has been the religious imagery of all cultures. His interest centres on the underlying similarities and differences between religious myths as they appear in different societal groups. Among his



15. **Kabuki Boogie I-V, 1980**

Stickpins

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver, 14k gold, sterling silver and pig's teeth with IV and V also employing feathers.



16. **Congolese Nail Figure, 1875-1900**
Wood with screws, nails, blades, cowrie shells and other materials.

favourite objects of inspiration are Congolese male fetish sculptures (See Ill. No. 16). These particular power figures would have belonged to a whole village and were used to achieve both positive and negative ends. They functioned to protect the whole village from the outside world and to kill malefactors who tried to harm those under the spirits' protection. Nails and blades were driven into these figures, the object of the mutilations being to transfer evil to the figure and so eliminate it from one's daily life. These fetish figures were the main inspiration for Harper's concept of extremes and dichotomies because it struck him that the intrinsic linkage of good and evil in a single icon had a lot to do with the icon's aura of power.

Harper compares these fetish figures to that of St. Sebastian. The image of St. Sebastian - a beautiful youth bound to a tree and pierced by arrows is a standard one in gay literary and artistic tradition. The curious aspect of the St. Sebastian figure is that it conveys a passive eroticism rather than pain or suffering. Harper broadly applied the imagery from both of these cultural symbols to his Saints, Martyrs, Savages series (1981/82) and also to his Archangels (1982). The impetus for his Savages (See. Ill. No. 18) came from a series of photographs Harper had seen of the New Guinea mudmen. These tribesmen adorn their bodies with paint, flowers and feathers in order to take part in religious festivals. As Harper pointed out in the text accompanying the Saints, Martyrs, Savages show at the Kennedy Galleries (1982).

"We might view this as barbarian, as savage. How might they view St. Sebastian?"

He went on to say that this series resulted from

"..... a certain cynicism about all of us, what we have learned, or not learned, from all the various cultural - political - religious empires which have existed before us".

And he asks us; "What makes a saint, who is a savage?"

Harper is very much a sceptic concerning institutionalised religious doctrine and dogma and this is revealed in his Saints (See Ill. No. 17) series through the device of removable masks. His saints are possessors of multiple



17. **Saint Sebastian, 1981**

Chain with Pendant

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on copper, fine silver and find gold, 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, tourmaline, plastic, 15.2 x 5.6 x 2.0cm; chain, 56.0cm



18. **Savage IV, 1982**

Brooch

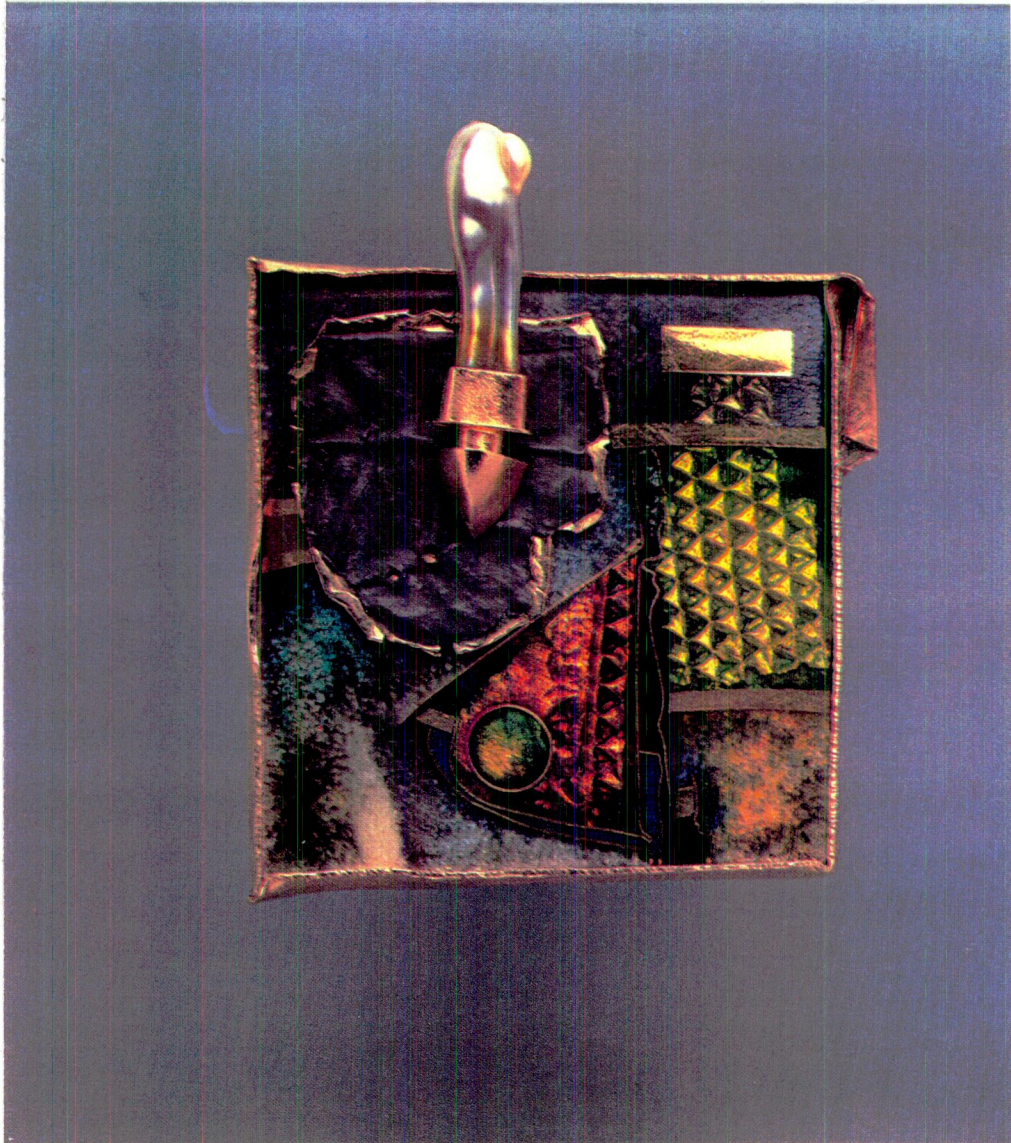
Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 14k gold, sterling silver, copper, pearl, 14.0 x 5.9 x 1.6cm



19. **The Archangel Shiva Sebastian, 1982**

Neckpiece. Chain with pectoral.

Gold cloisonné enamel on copper and fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, copper, pearl, shell, moonstone, tourmaline, 21.0 x 10.2 x 2.5cm; Chain, 51.0cm



20. The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa II... and the darkness of the mystery was felt within her ..., 1985

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver and fine gold; 14k gold, sterling silver, lead, pearl, 6.1 x 5.3 x 1.4cm



countenances but which one is real and which one is sham? Each visage is always present and the viewer is asked to choose which one he wishes to confront.

Another series which illustrates Harper's cynicism is The Ecstasy of St. Teresa (1985). Saint Teresa was a Carmelite nun of the mid-1500s who was displeased with the excesses of her day. After reading the confessions of Saint Augustine, suffering the death of her father and experiencing "certain supernatural visitations", she acquired an enlightened spirituality. Harper takes the view, popular amongst Teresa's enemies that her "supernatural visitations" were perpetuated by sexual forces.¹² Although Harper interprets the ecstatic event abstractly, his titles are quite explicit. Each work is titled generally The Ecstasy of St. Teresa and the series is numbered I through to IV. In the subtitles we hear the story according to Harper:

"... and she knew confusion ..."

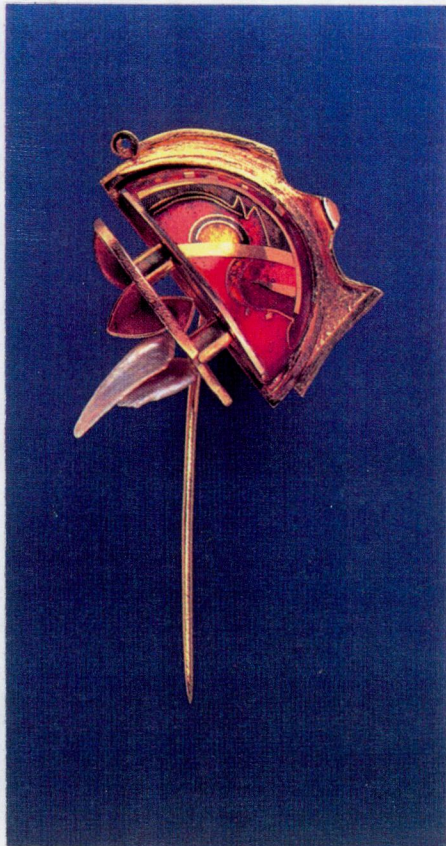
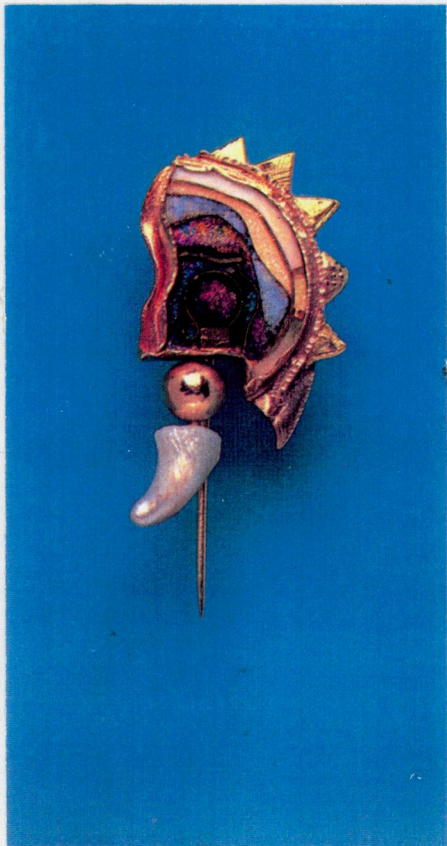
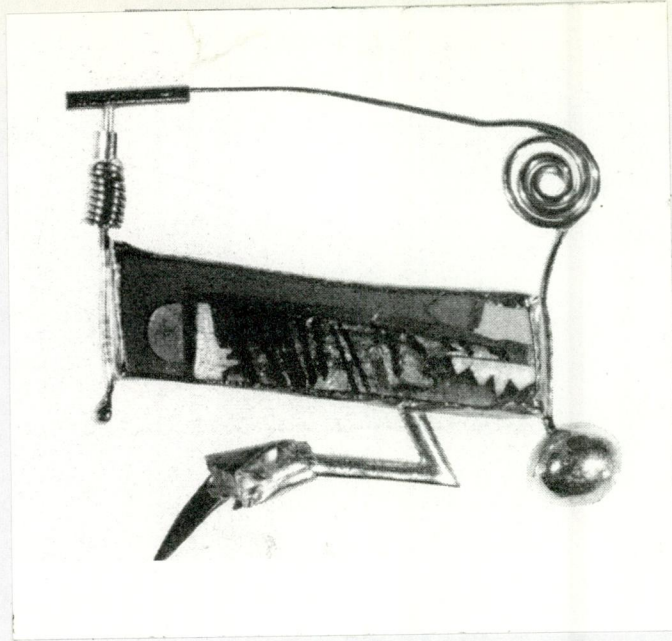
"... and the darkness of the mystery was felt within her ..."

"... and she was filled with the radiance of his light"

"... and she knew the heat of the passion ..."

With this series, the titles are invaluable to an interpretation of the abstract pieces. In La (sic) Fleur du Mal series from 1980, the title enhances the work to an unlimited extent.

Harper's La (sic) Fleur du Mal series directly indicates his interest in the work of the French Symbolists and Decadents at the end of the last century. The title refers to Baudelaire's volume of poetry Les Fleurs du Mal, published in 1884 and the subject of a famous obscenity trial. The title renders perfectly the antithesis of beauty and evil. Harper explored this idea not only with the aforementioned series but also with a brooch entitled Nightshade Long (1980) and with his Poison Flower series (1983). The theme of the vegetable was one which obsessed Symbolist writers and painters as well as Art Nouveau protagonists. Odilon Redon's (1840 - 1916) typically Symbolist anthropomorphism can be traced to one of his early mentors, the scientist Armand Clauvaud, whose



21. (Above), **Nightshade Long 1980**, Brooch; gold cloisonné enamel on copper, 14k and 24k gold, sterling silver and shark's tooth, 2" x 1½"

22-24. (Below, left to right), **La Fleur Du Mal I, II, VIII, 1985**

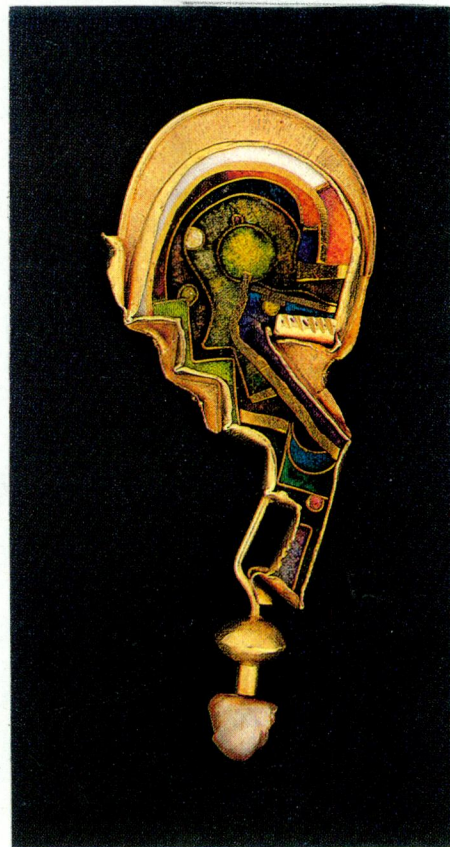
Brooches; gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver and fine gold; 14k gold, 18k gold, 24k gold, pearls, moonstone (VIII).

contributions to botany were on the forefront of research.¹³ His work on the animal characteristics of certain plants undoubtedly affected Redon. Penelope Hunter - Stiebel has described Harper's abstract piece Nightshade Long (Ill. No. 21) as having "the menace of a tarantula. Its narrow enamel field of greys is broken by jagged lines. A gold ball weighs down the tail while a single flexed gold leg pointing a black shark's tooth talon, is held poised to strike".¹⁴

J.K. Huysmans included a section on monstrous flowers in his unique novel A Rebours (Against Nature) 1884, which took decadence to a point that could hardly be surpassed. The central theme of the book is the hero's (Des Esseintes) cult of the artificial which stems from his pessimistic rejection of the natural world. Des Essenites in his search for "natural flowers that would look like fakes", has cartloads of monstrous flowers delivered to his home. He describes "the Echinopsis, thrusting its ghastly pink blossoms out of cotton-wool compresses like the stumps of amputated limbs; the Nidalarium opening its sword-shaped petals to reveal gaping flesh-wounds"¹⁵. Throughout the last years of the Nineteenth century, there was a combined celebration of the artificial and the object represented was denaturalized. Elaine Showalter describes Aubrey Beardsley's John and Salome (1894):

"the rosebud seems like a living thing extending its tendrils behind Salomè's body to entwine John. It is full of blossoms, while all of its thorns have become giant protuberances wound in Salomé's hair like vagina dentata".¹⁶

This description indicates how the uncanny representation of flowers is closely associated with the image of woman; an image which dominated the fin-de-siècle. The Decadents put forward the view of woman as deadly, impure, damned, "dragging man down to vice or decadence".¹⁷ Gustave Moreau's (1826 - 1908) favourite theme was that of Evil and Death incarnate in feminine beauty. With Khnopff (1858 - 1921), the leopard - woman was born, the seductress who dominates the entire man whilst abandoning herself to sensual pleasure.



25. (Left) La Fleur du Mal IX, 1985

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, pearl, 7.7 x 4.0 x 0.9cm.

26. (Right) La Fleur du Mal XI, 1985

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, pearl, tourmaline, 8.56 x 3.81 x 0.64cm

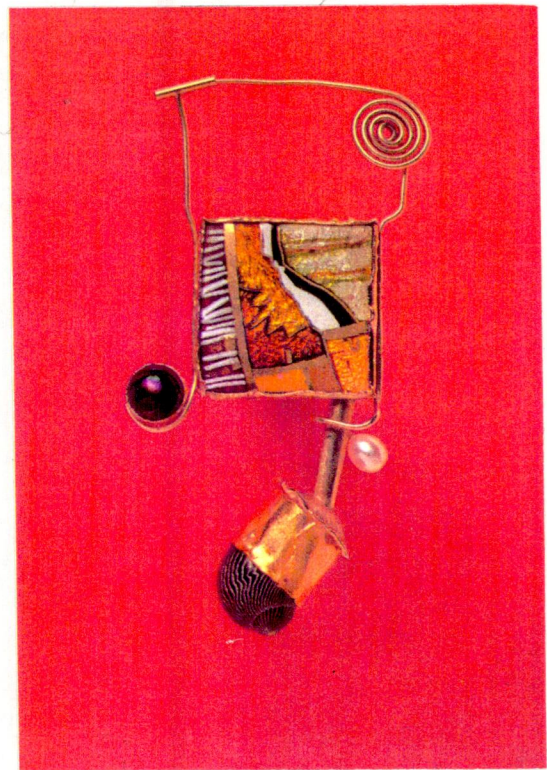
Des Esseintes, after gathering his monstrous flowers around him, dreams of "an ashen faced woman":

"... with an irresistible movement she clutched him and held him, and pale with horror, he saw the savage Nidalarium blossoming between her uplifted thighs, with its swordblades gaping open to expose the bloody depths".¹⁸

William Harper condenses this idea of a corrupt and threatening, yet alluring female sexuality in his La (sic) Fleur du Mal series. A seductive femininity is conveyed with these brooches and this is best illustrated with La Fleur du Mal XI, where the enamel is set into the surrounding gold in such a way to suggest the layering of petals. This is followed through in the enamelled composition itself with the scheme of colison wires. In contrast, the pearl is like a phallic extension jutting into the surrounding space, giving an effect of aggression and penetration.

Phallic imagery has always been an intrinsic part of Harper's iconography. Many of his works from the seventies, most notably the Pagan Baby series (1978) include these powerful appendages. With his Nine Sketches (See Ill Nos. 27-29) from 1980, the left corner of each piece is ornamented with a found object, a pearl or a semi-precious stone, suggesting the feminine while on the right is a phallic symbol. The use of male and female imagery is just part of Harper's investigation into what makes a small object potent.

Many of the sources of Decadence/Symbolism are learned and in this respect Harper, with his interest in mythological and religious themes, has a close affinity with the artists and writers of the fin-de-siècle. The communion of ideas between painters and men of letters has never been more evident than during this period. The desire for unity in the arts was characteristic of much late nineteenth century thinking about the nature of artistic creativity and response. Wagnerism advocated a new subjectivism in which the suggestive and the descriptive, the visual and the literary and the musical, or



27. (Left) Nine Sketches III - Sapphire, 1980

Brooch

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on copper; 14k gold, 24k gold, bronze, shell, pearl, moonstone, 6.9 x 4.1 x 11cm.

28. (Right) Nine Sketches V - Saffron

Brooch

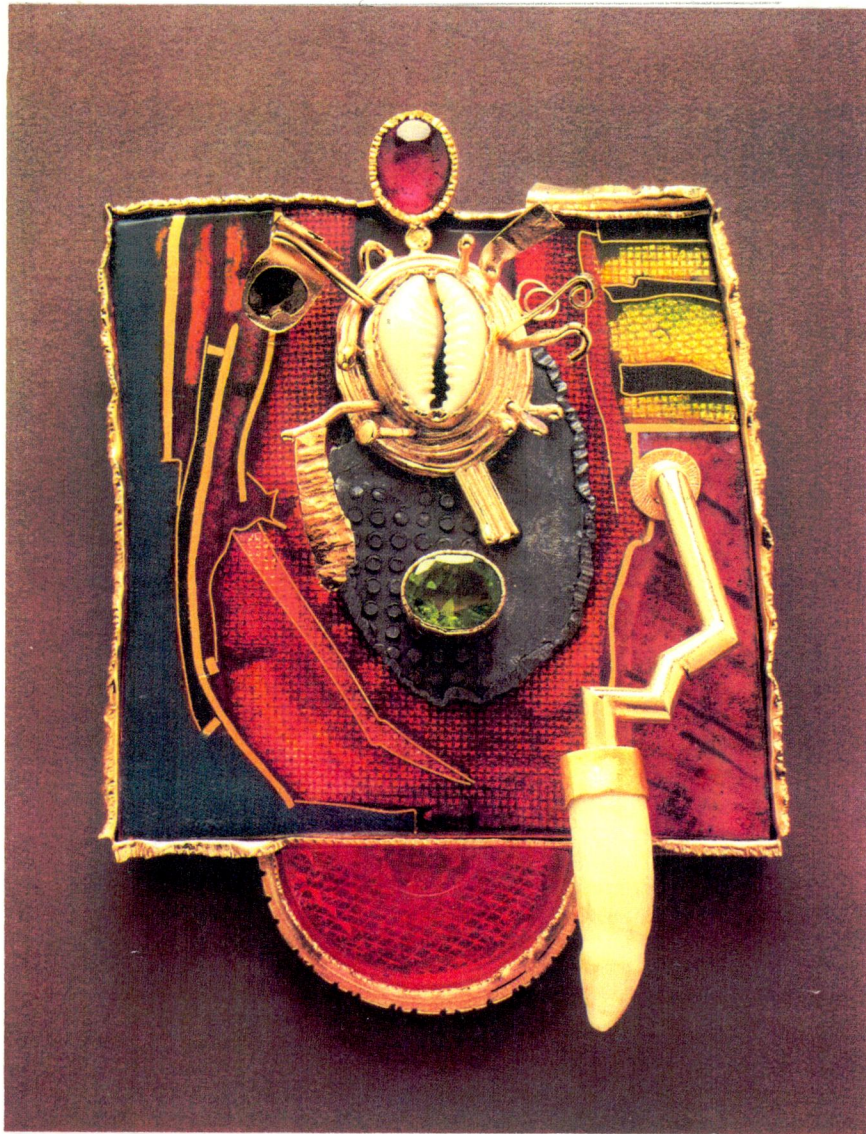
Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on copper; 14k gold, 24k gold, bronze, glass, pearl, shell, 8.1 x 4.3 x 1.3cm.



29. **Nine Sketches VIII - Tongue, 1980**

Brooch

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on copper; 14k gold, 7.9 x 5.4 x 1.6cm



30. **Pentimenti # 10: Stigmata, 1987**

Brooch

Gold Cloisonné enamel on fine silver, fine gold, and copper; 14k gold, sterling silver, lead, peridot, tourmaline, shell, tooth, plastic, 10.5 x 7.2 x 2.1cm

the legendary and the personal would come together to bring about a new kind of unity in the creative process.¹⁹

Harper's Pentimenti series (1978) illustrates just how close his aims are to those of the Symbolists. A symbol is often a comparison but it never actually resembles the thing it symbolises or conjures up. To the Symbolist, the mystery of reality could only be evoked and they used mythological and religious sources to this end, like the Surrealists and the Abstract Expressionists after them. Jean Cassau in his Concise Encyclopedia of Symbolism points out; "The myth, properly so called is only Symbolist of it is the bearer of several possible meanings and the setting for mystery. It draws towards an unknown which it never permits to reach".²⁰ A close examination of the Pentimenti series will illustrate these ideas. Pentimenti (the Italian for repentance) refers to a phenomenon that occurs in old oil paintings after the artist 'repents' of his first choice and paints a second image over that which he had earlier chosen. As the paint ages and becomes more translucent, the first image is slowly revealed, actually underlying the first. Harper's brooches have a meticulously layered construction which is realised in the enamelled surface where transparent colours are used and also in the juxtaposition of other elements overlaying the enamel. Pentimenti is also an obvious reference to the 'layers' of meaning in Harper's work, which in this series became even more complex. The Pentimenti series includes all his main ideas up to that point while also bringing them a stage further; in fact Harper has described his work as a "summation series".²¹

This series best illustrates his notion of preciousness which has been evident from his earliest works. The term "precious" has both positive and negative connotations. It is used derogatively in some instances and at other times represents power or the intimate. The aspect of preciousness that Harper focuses on is that of the intimate:

"It is the intimacy which allows the concept of PRECIOUSNESS its most complete flowering. One artist, a single maker, creates an object,



31. Schwitters: Merz 25: A Painting with Stars, 1920.
Oil and Collage.

overwhelming in its delicate relationships of scale and proportion. Introspective objects - contemplative microcosms. Manuscript painting, carved ivories, overembroidered brocade, a Vermeer painting, the art of the goldsmith. These do not easily fit into the modern museum so that endless crowds can look at them. Rather, they are in the realm of the individual who will be rewarded for his looking by seeing things which his own mind could never have imagined".²²

Harper had previously used found objects as a shock-tactic to draw the viewer into contemplation of his pieces. In the Pentimenti series, he juxtaposes enamels, semi-precious stones and pearls with mirror shards, fragments of bicycle reflectors, aluminium pop-tops, sand-frosted beach glass, pebbles and teeth. With the complex layering system of this series, the found objects are not as obvious and seem to take on a new meaning as part of the whole. As mentioned in the introduction, Harper uses secondary items such as found objects or precious stones as starting points for his creations.

"My interest is in the relationship that takes place if I move materials around in an assemblage manner. In 90 per cent of the cases the secondary objects come first. I put them together in a relationship that suggests the quality to be developed in the enamel".²³

An obvious example of this can be seen in Pentimenti # 4: Gemini (See Ill. No. 35). The glass rod at the bottom left-hand corner of the piece originally provided the blue palette of the enamel. The orange colour of the bicycle reflector plastic is also carried through in the enamelled section.

Harper's collage aesthetic is primarily inspired by African assemblage art. However, he has also mentioned Joseph Cornell and Kurt Schwitters (Ill. No. 31) as being influential and an examination of assemblage art in the twentieth century provides a better understanding of his work.

The term assemblage denotes a specific technical procedure used in the literacy and musical as well as the plastic arts. It was the poets working with less physical and more



32. Pentimenti #5: The Veil, 1987

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver; 14k gold, sterling silver, pearl, plastic, mirror, 10.0 x 8.4 x 1.7cm

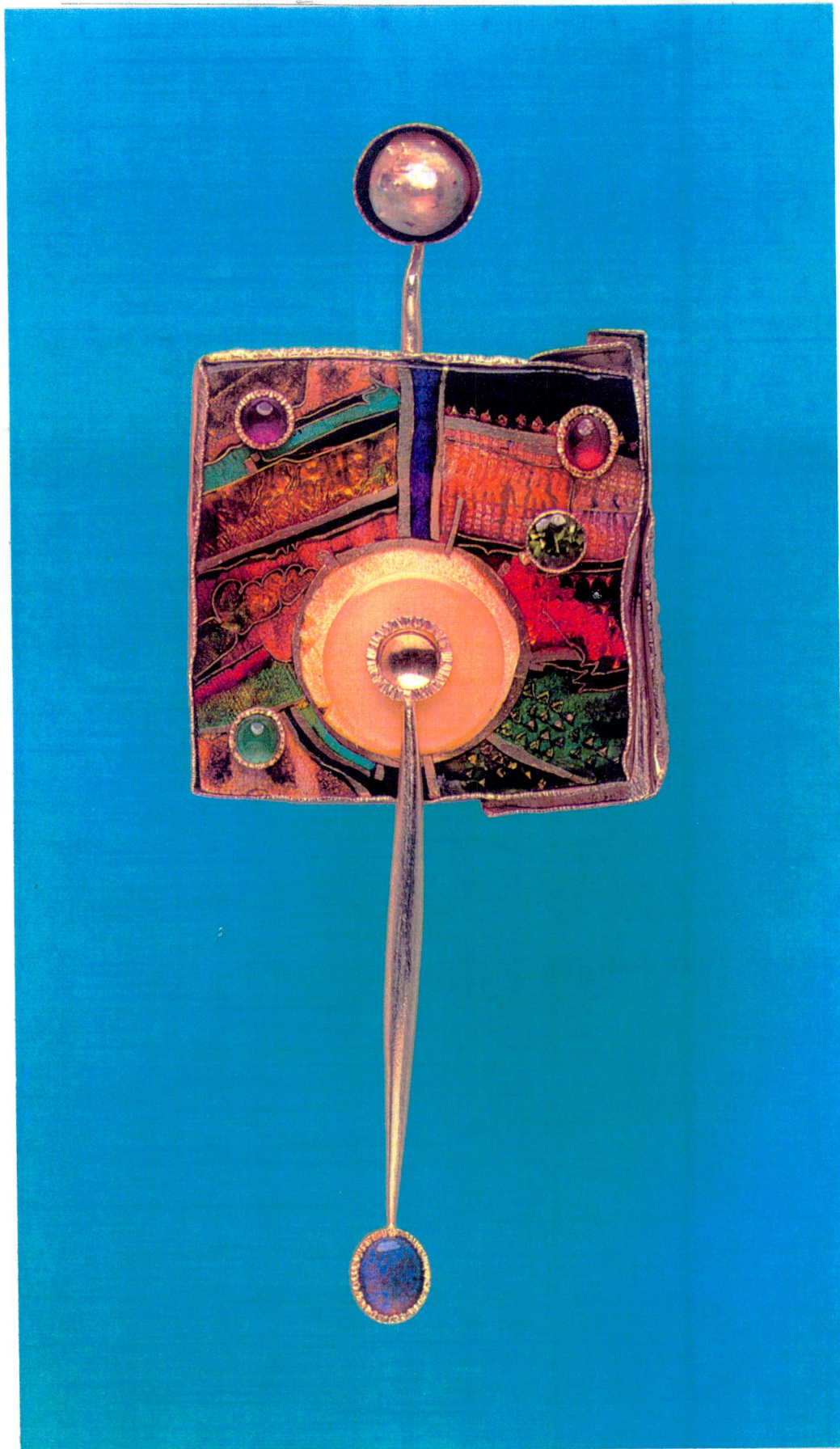
responsive materials than painters who were the forerunners of the method. The poetry of Mallarme suggested the confrontation of fragments as a literary method and juxtaposition in modern literature, began where he left off. Guillaume Apollinaire, around 1912, decided to use as poetic material any words or word associations, however mundane, jarring or disassociated they might appear.

Dada began as a literary and political rather than a plastic movement and the Surrealists' method of juxtaposition was routed in Lautrémont's now famous image of the "chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table".²⁴ The method of collage is close to poetry because in the arrangement of words, each carries with it "an image or an idea surrounded by a vague aura of associations".²⁵ Likewise in collage each physical component carries with it overtones and associations and these are also placed in juxtaposition which result in a group of meanings existing independently of the colours, forms, and textures which are its carriers. As William Chapin Seitz, has said:

"In thought provoking ways assemblage is poetic rather than realistic, for each constituent element can be transformed. Physical materials and their auras are transmitted into a new amalgam that both transcends and includes its parts".²⁶

The almost magical transformation of mundane objects in assemblage can be compared with the alchemical transformation of lead into gold which Harper refers to in Pentimenti # 10: Stigmata (See Ill. No. 30), the significance of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In several of the brooches from the Pentimenti series, Harper engages the viewer through the flashing reflections of a broken mirror. Mirrors are said to permit a diviner to see into their depths as into water and this thus to see the other world. At first glance the mirror is used most appropriately in Pentimenti # 5: The Veil (see Ill. No. 32). The poet Swinburne called the appearance of the familiar world "that painted veil"²⁷ and said that behind its coloured fabric was a



33. **Pentimenti # 3: The Harem, 1987**

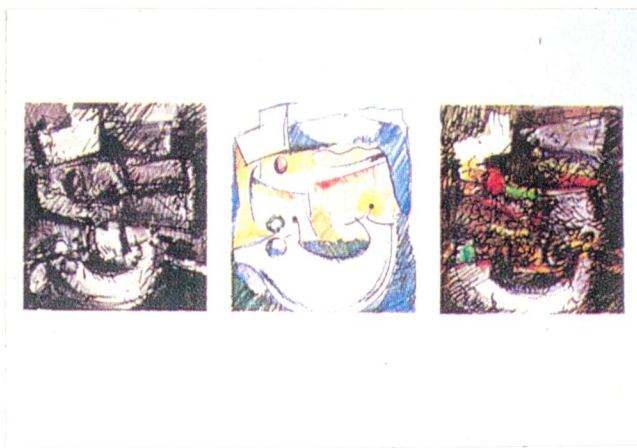
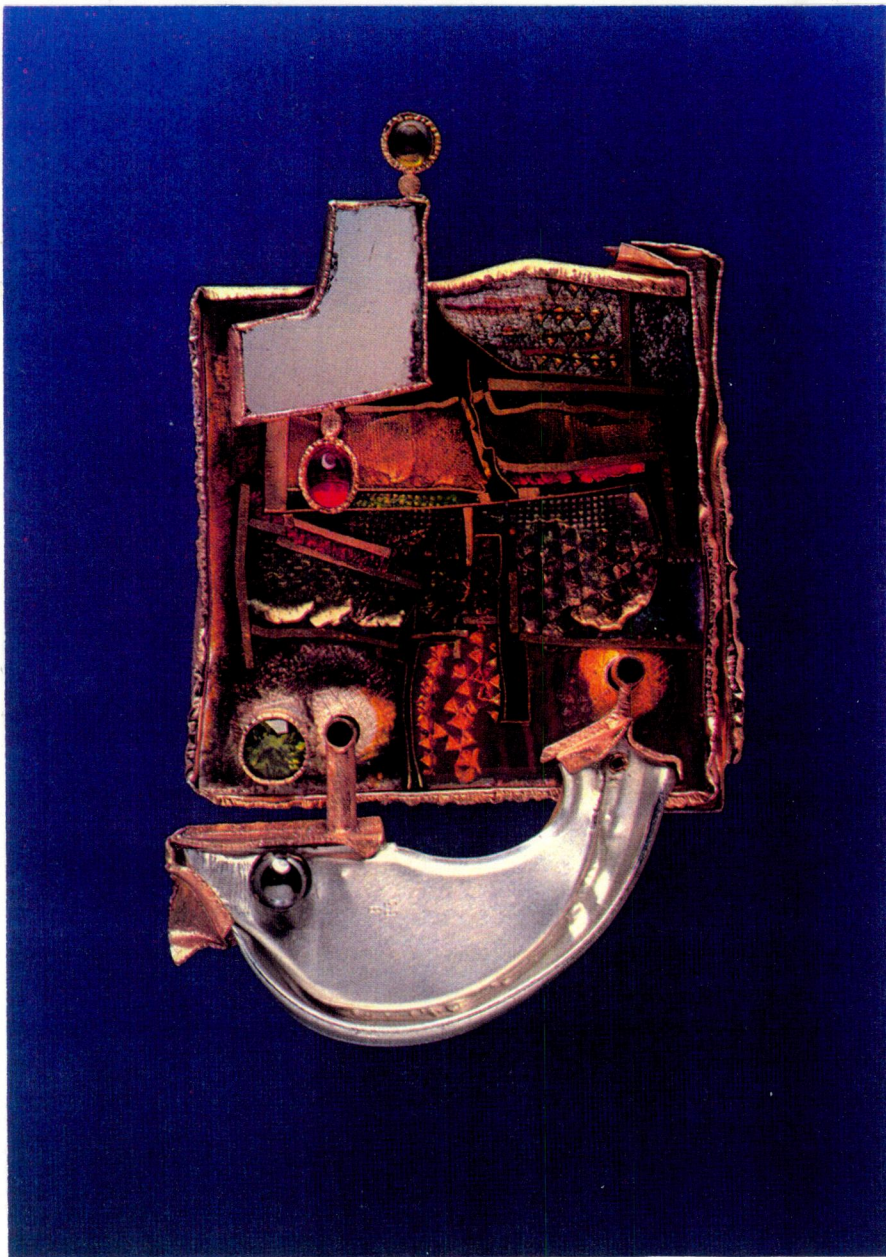
Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, opal, tourmaline, garnet, peridot, amethyst, jade, pearl,
17.4 x 6.9 x 1.3cm

rich spiritual world. The secret symbolism of the occult arts and sciences is used on this side of the veil to point to meanings behind it in the spiritual realm. The veil is also linked with femininity. Elaine Showalter in her book Sexual Anarchy says: "... veiling was associated with female sexuality and with the veil of the hymen ... in rituals of the nunnery, marriage or mourning, it concealed sexuality". The veiled woman was also associated "with the mysteries of the Orient, the harem or seraglio".²⁸

In Pentimenti # 3: The Harem (See Ill No. 33) and Pentimenti # 7: The Chamber of the Bride (See Ill. No. 40), the abstract enamelled sections resemble a view-from-above of these dwellings. The same applies to Pentimenti # 2: Grey Gardens (See Ill. No. 36) which refers to the huge sprawling mansion inhabited by Jackie Kennedy's aunt and her mother. In all cultures, a labyrinth of strange passages and chambers symbolises "... the world of matriarchal consciousness; it can be traversed only by those who are ready for a special initiation into the mysterious world of the collective unconscious".²⁹ The Empress belongs to the Major Arcana of the Tarot pack. Each card encompasses a vast array of symbols which act as keys to the human unconscious. The Empress is number twelve of the Pentimenti series. Pentimenti # 4 is entitled Gemini. This astrological sign "has an intimate connection with human thought processes and ideation".³⁰ In representations of Gemini, the twins are often depicted facing each other, as though mirroring each other. One represents the spiritual inflowing of ideas and the other the earthly reception of these ideas (though of course, being twins, they cannot easily be separated). Twins, as hero figures represent the opposites of ego and alter-ego.

Harper, as well as with his Pentimenti series, had previously used mirror fragments in his Wands series (1986) conceived as a metaphor for their function as objects which mediate between this world and the divine. In dream symbolism, a mirror can symbolise the power of the unconscious to mirror the individual objectively, giving him a view of himself that he



36. (Above) Pentimenti # 2: Grey Gardens, 1987

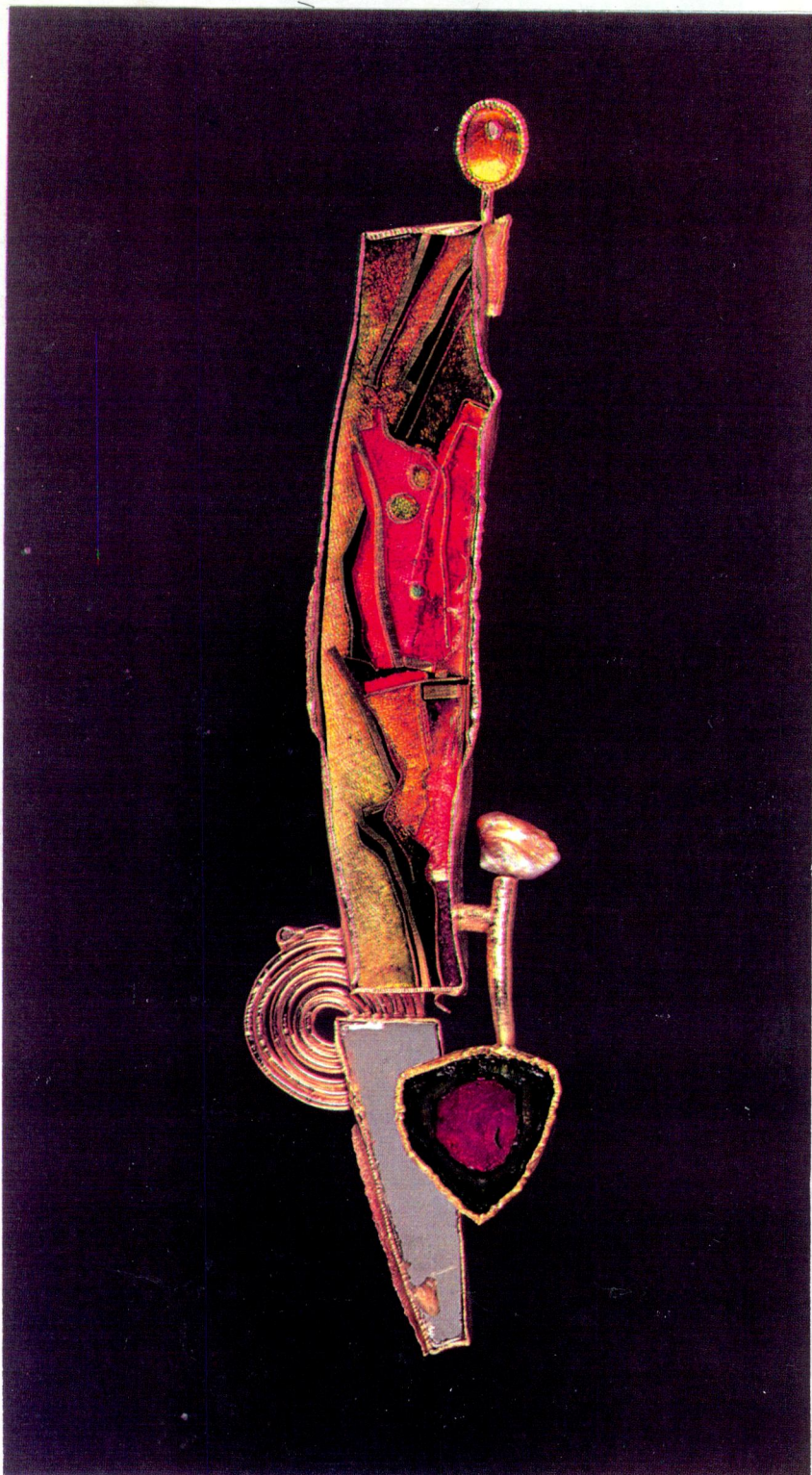
Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, aluminium, peridot, garnet, tourmaline, hematite, mirror, 11.6 x 7.5 x 1.5cm.

37. (Below) Three aspects of Pentimenti # 2: Grey Gardens, 1987

3

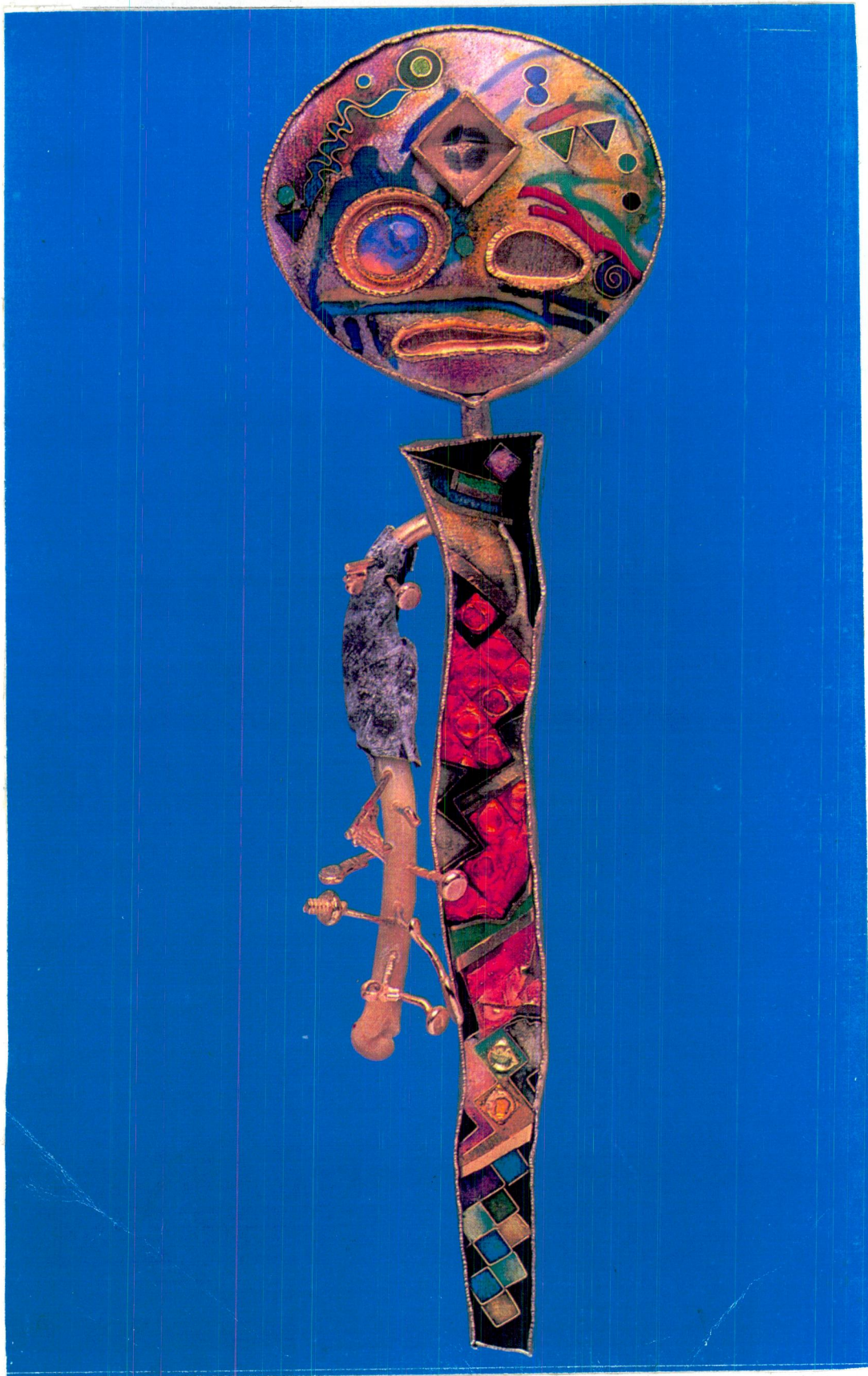
Faint, illegible text at the bottom of the page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side.



43. Wand I, 1986

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver and fine gold; 14k gold, 24k gold, citrine, tourmaline, pearl, mirror, 15.0 x 3.9 x 1.2cm.



44. **Self-Portrait of the Artist as St. Sebastian, 1987**

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, lead, quartz, bone,
20.1 x 6.3 x 2.5cm.



45. (Left) Phur-bu, Tibet, 18th Century

46. (Right) Self-Portrait of the Artist with a Migraine # 2, 1989.

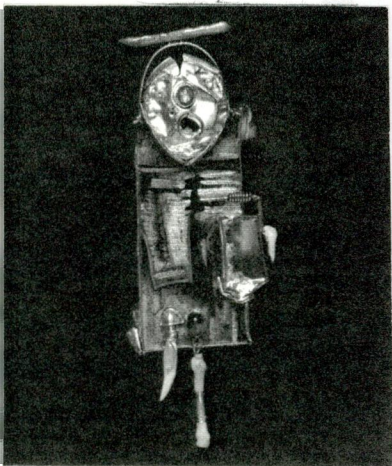
Brooch
14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, aluminium, quartz, synthetic ruby, pearls, 24.8 x 5.4 x 3.0cm.

CHAPTER THREE

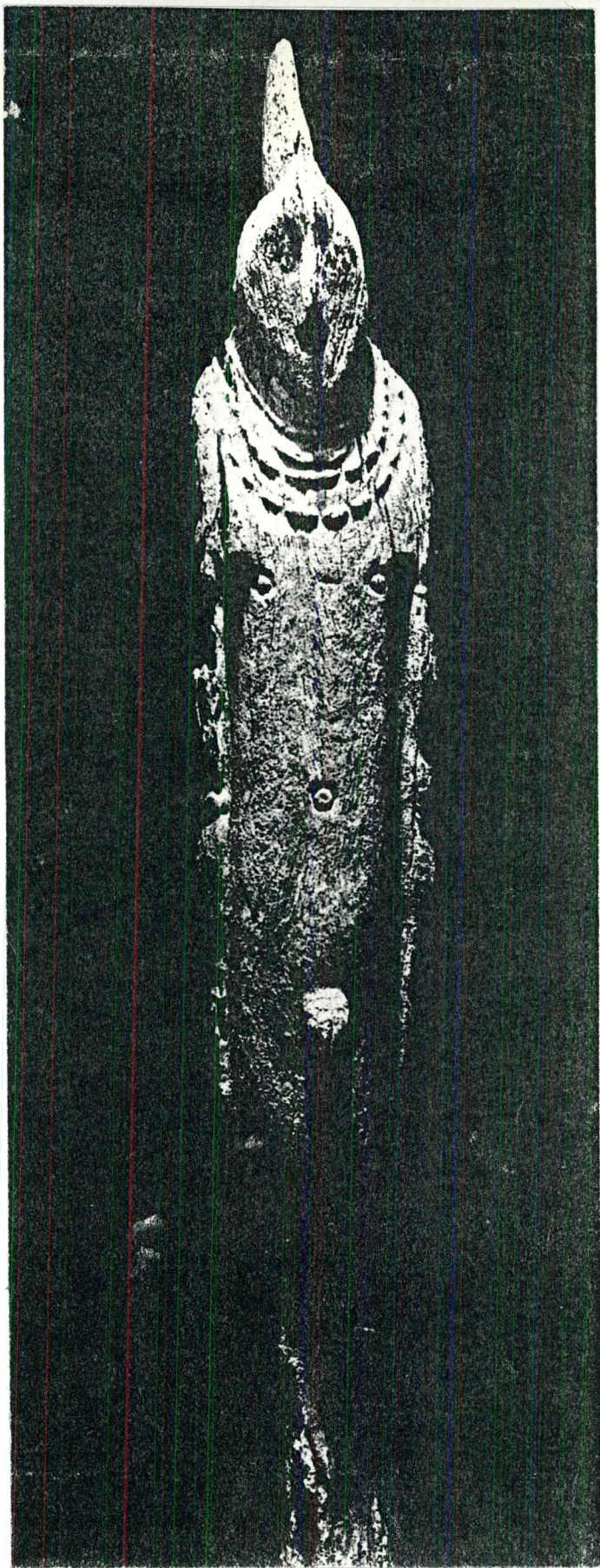
In 1987, Harper made the first of his self-portraits in the guise of St. Sebastian and St. Anthony. His long, thin, vertical Wands (See Ill. No. 43) from 1986 are fore-runners of his self-portraits, both in structure and theme. These pieces, which address the concept of the magician's conjuring device, point to how Harper views his role as an artist. As he has said: "The artist takes these things and he performs some kind of trick with, them. It's an illusion, whatever it is he presents".¹

Self-portraiture has no precedent in jewellery; it is in Harper's words, "unexplored territory".² Yet, Harper's work has always been highly subjective and this really was a natural step for him to take: "I do self-portraits because I have been trying in the last few years to make the work very, very personal. Maybe it's become autobiographical the last few years because of the age I am, [but] it just seemed logical to use my psyche, my impulses, as suitable subject matter."³

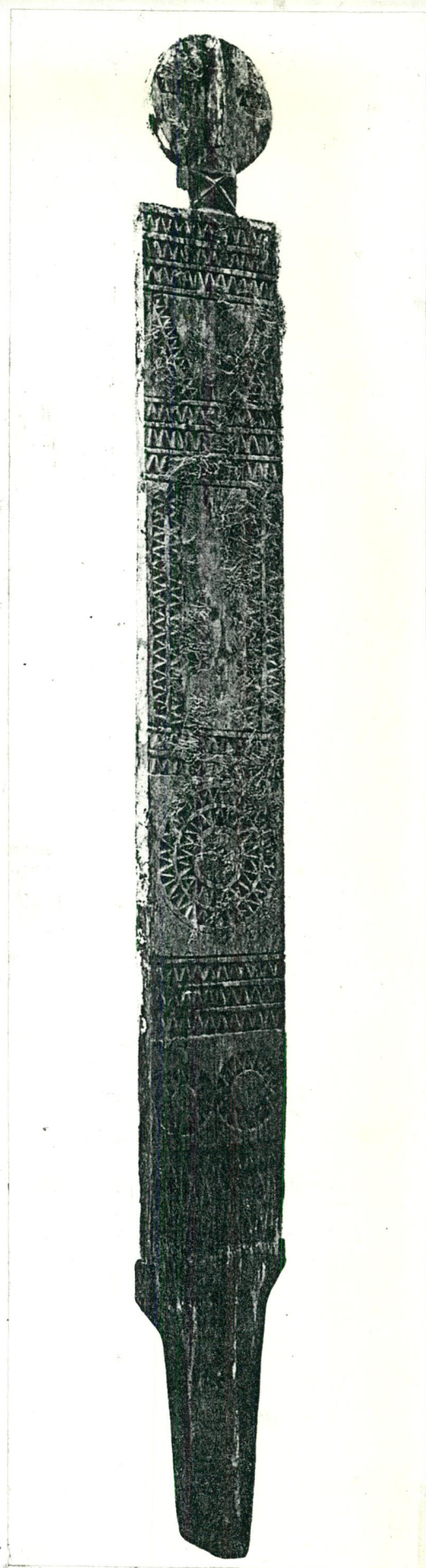
Some of Harper's self-portraits can be compared to the mystical dagger Phur-bu, which is used in Tibetan ritual to coerce, drive away or destroy evil forces. The hilts of the Phur-bu are often in the shape of terrible faces added to incorporate into the object their own spiritual power. This analogy is particularly relevant when considering Self-Portrait of The Artist as St. Anthony (1987) (See Ill. No. 48). In 1986, Harper created a very personal piece, The Temptation of St Anthony, (See Ill. No. 47) which he still has in his possession. Harper was inspired by an engraving by Martin Schongauer (1430 - 1491) and the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch (born 1516), where the saint is depicted in his solitude, tormented by terrible demons. Harper sees the ascetic hermit as the image of the artists spiritual growth. He identifies with the saint's plight and presents us with the dichotomy between aesthetic impulses and worldly attractions. Harper has said of this piece:



47. (Left) **The Temptation of St. Anthony, 1986**
 Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver with 14k and 24k gold, sterling silver, aluminium, opal, tourmaline, mirror, freshwater pearl, ivory and bone. 16.6 x 6.4 x 1.9cm.
48. (Right) **Self Portrait of the Artist as St. Anthony**
 Brooch
 Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, aluminium, opal, quartz, pearl, tooth, shell, bone, 19.3 x 5.7 x 2.1cm



49. (Left) Funeral Pole, Konso, Ethiopia
Wood, 213cm high.



50. (Right) Grave Figure, Kenya
Wood, 220cm high.



51. **Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Oracle, 1989**
Brooch
Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 24k gold, 14k gold, ruby, quartz, rose quartz.
9.8 x 10.30 x 3.3cm.

"The Temptation of St. Anthony is loaded with symbolism, but the most personal are the teeth. In Freudian dream symbolism, the loss of a tooth indicates fear of the loss of sexual potency. For the artist the greatest fear is the loss of creative potency, of the ability to continue creating the new and the unprecedented - will the next object be as remarkable as the last?"⁴

Self - Portrait of the Artist as St. Anthony displays a directness, a sense of power and mystery that recalls African masks and figures. The enamelled body is mummiform in shape and the end of a fluorescent tube serves as a face. The cowrie shell incorporated into the piece can be traced to Congolese figures. Most power figures have openings in the stomach which are filled with supernatural medicine and then sealed with mirrors or big cowrie shells. Cowrie shells have an ancient history in Africa and symbolise female fertility.

With Harper's Self-Portrait of the artist with a Migraine # 2 (1989) (See Ill No. 46), the body is de-emphasised and resembles "an emaciated golden lattice",⁵ so the power of the piece is concentrated on the head. The piece is referring to the migraine headaches which are a painful and recurring part of his existence. During these migraine episodes Harper's mind races and his most creative ideas are produced. The simplification of the body of this piece anticipates future self-portraits which are realised as faces/masks.

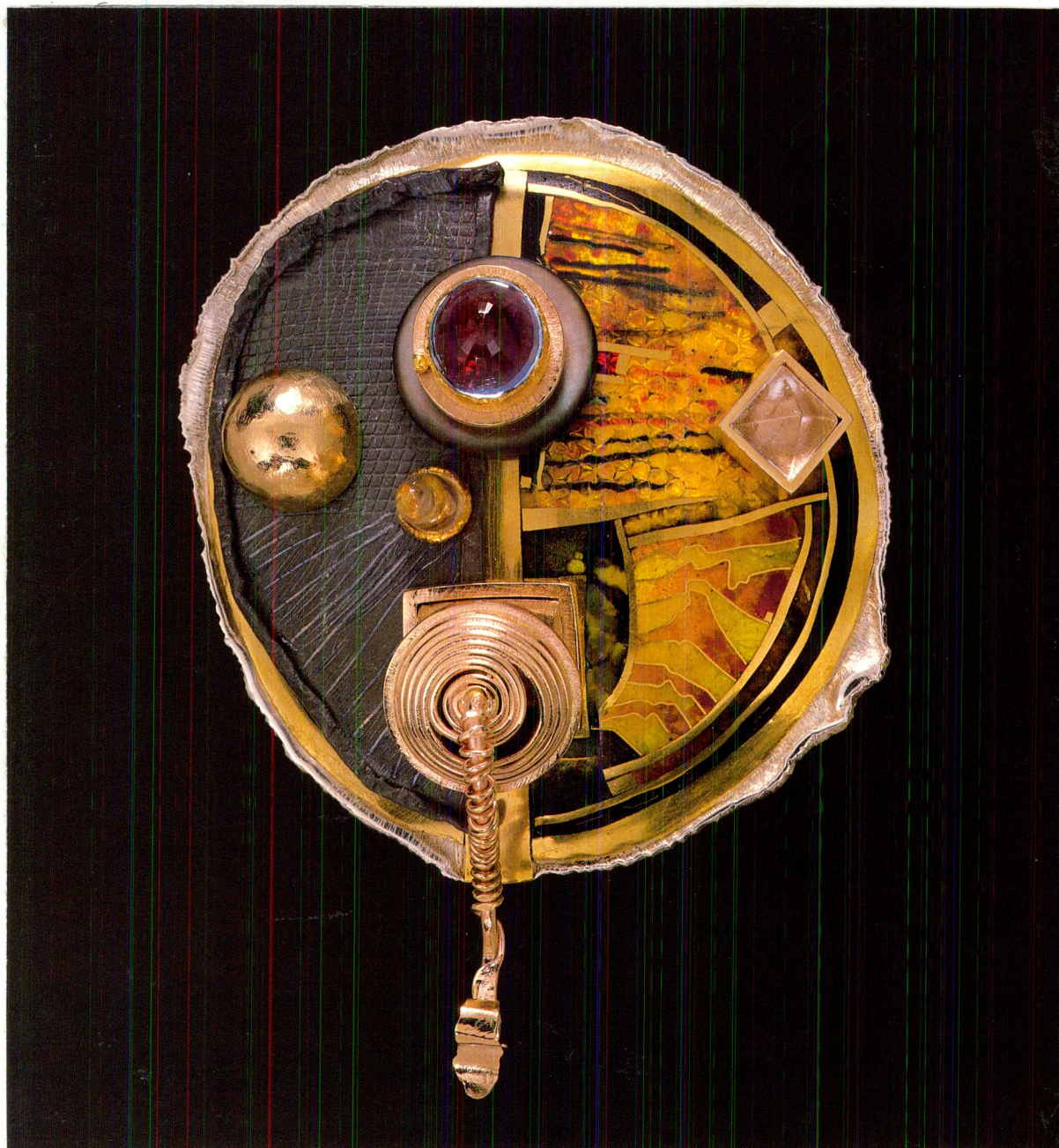
In 1990, Harper exhibited a series of twelve self-portraits at the Franklin Parrasch Gallery in New York. Included were pieces with such evocative titles as Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Oracle (1989), as an 'Enfant Terrible' (1990), as the Goddess Kali (1990) and as a Haruspex (1990). Regarding the two versions of Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Alchemist (1990), Harper had used the lead/gold symbolism before in his Pentimenti series but with these pieces he gives it singular prominence. The popular image of an alchemist is that of an old man working at a hot furnace in a laboratory filled with curiously shaped bottles. This man was intent on trying to make gold or silver from ordinary metal such as lead or iron. However, the gold the alchemist



52. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an 'Enfant Terrible', 1990

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver, 24k gold, 14k gold, aluminium, opal, moonstone, pearl.
8.1 x 9.7 x 5.0cm



53. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Alchemist,
1990

Brooch

Gold cloisonné on fine gold and fine silver, 24k gold, 14k gold, lead, blue topaz, quartz,
rutilated quartz, plastic. 12.7 x 9.1 x 3.6cm.



54. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as Alchemist II,
1990
Brooch
Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver; 24k gold, 14k gold, lead, garnet, onyx, turquoise, tooth,
14.1 x 9.5 x 5.8cm

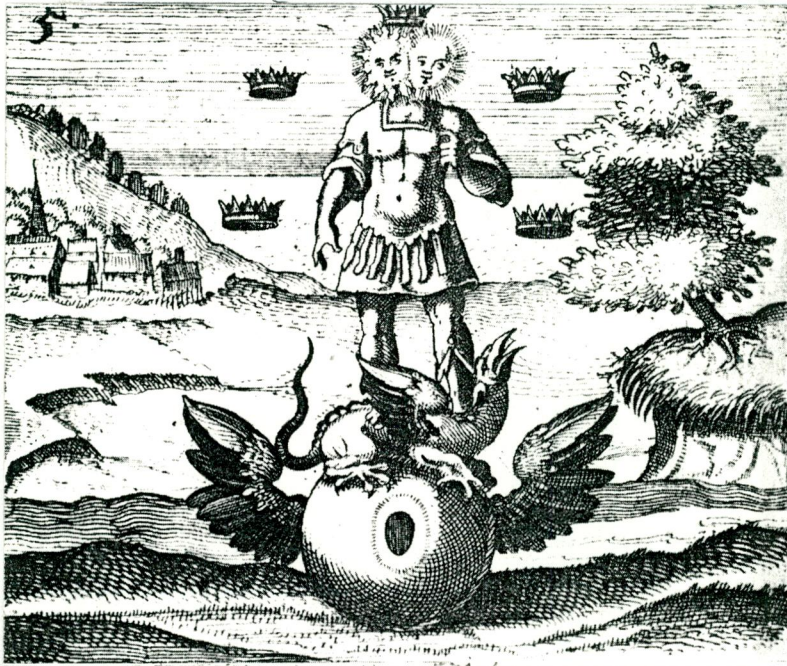
sought was not metal at all, the transmutation of metals was secondary to the main aim, which was the spiritual transformation of the adept.

The alchemists took account of what is ignored by most Christians - the question of evil. The Church left the opposition between light and good on the one hand and dark and evil on the other in open conflict, since Christ simply represents good and his counterpart, the devil, evil.

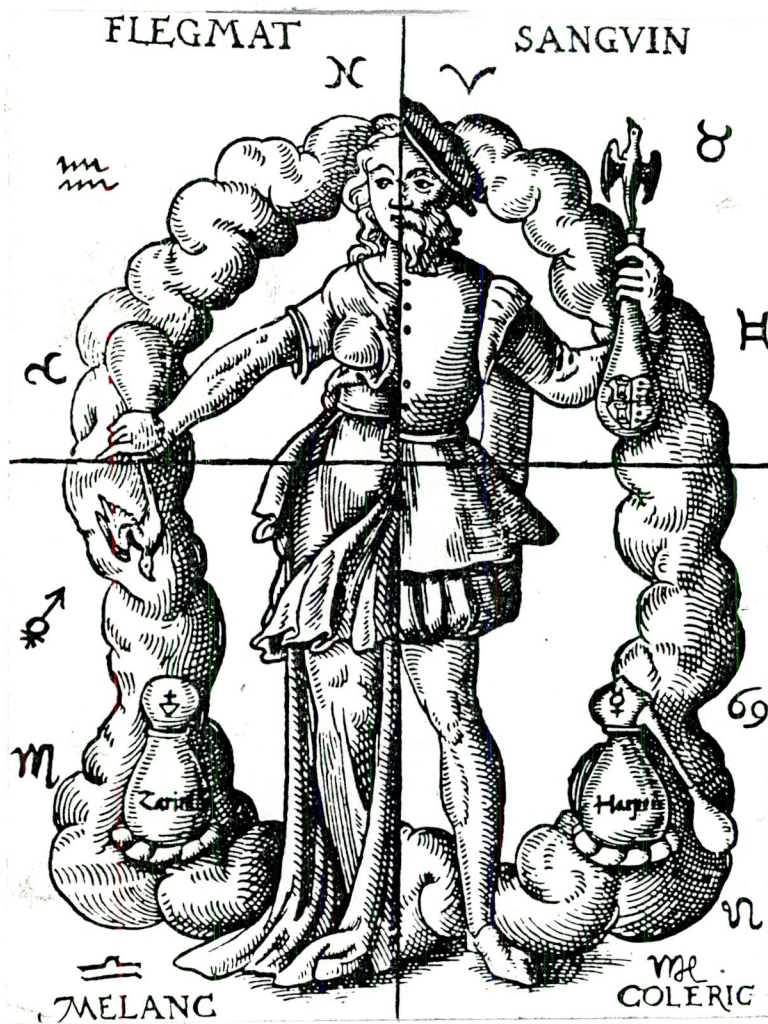
Alchemy, a movement that arose around A.D 1000, endeavoured to fill the gaps left open by the Christian tension of opposites. What they sought was the wholeness of man, encompassing mind and body and they invented a thousand names and symbols for it. One of their central symbols was the quadratura circuli (the squaring of the circle) which is nothing other than a form of the universally used mandala. The mandala is a symbol of the self as psychic totality; it expresses the union of opposites - the union of the personal, temporal world of the ego with the non-personal timeless world of the non-ego. This union is the fulfillment and goal of all religions; it is the union of the soul with God. Jakob Böhme's mandala (which contains a bright and a dark hemisphere turning their back to one another) represents un-united opposites and it aptly expresses the insoluble conflict underlying the Christian view of the world.

Harper's Grotesque Self-Portrait of the artist as Alchemist II (1990) (Ill. No. 54) can be compared to a mandala with its division into dark and light. The inclusion of the spiral takes on a particular significance in this context, being an emblem for the process of individuation. This is a term that Jung applied to the slow process of psychic growth. According to Jung ⁶ one must surrender consciously to the power of the unconscious in the individuation process, which appears to go around in circles or more accurately moves spiral wise around a centre, gradually getting closer.

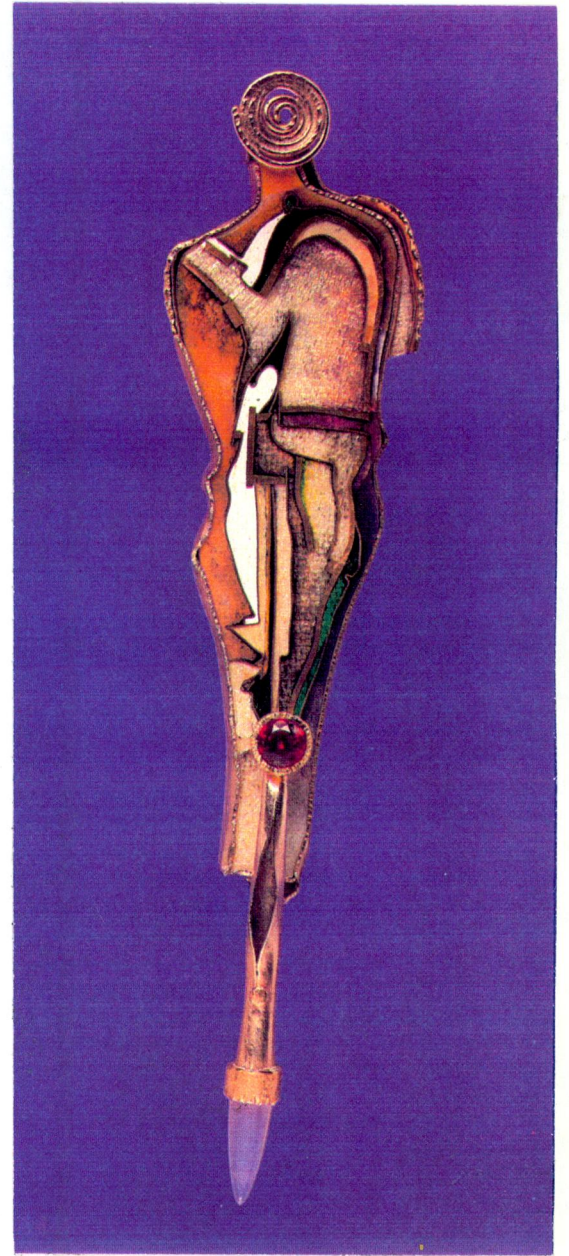
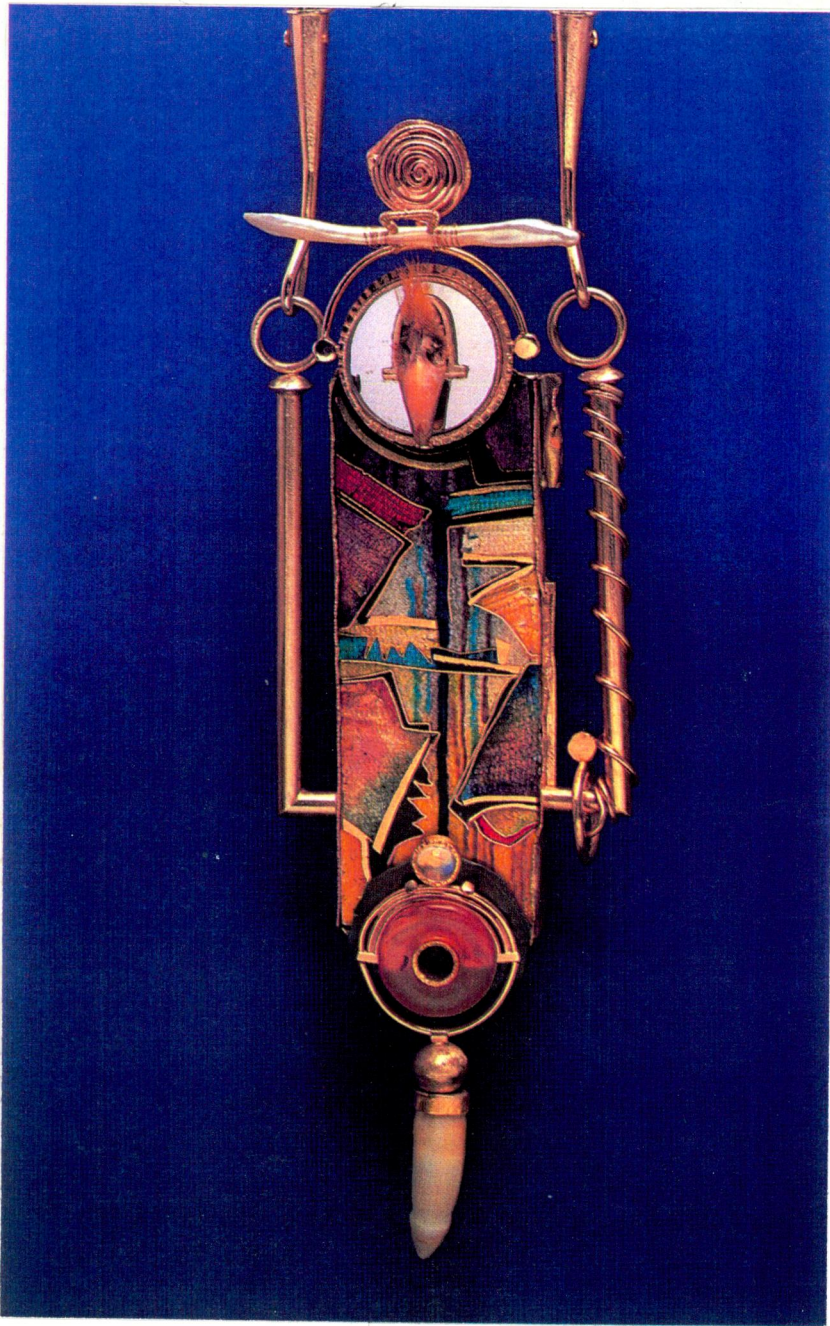
The work of the Alchemists remained a hermetic or hidden art, restricted to those few who were prepared to pass their lives in meditative discipline and quiet research. They called



55. Mercurius as the sun-moon hermaphrodite, Mylius, 1622



56. Alchemical woodcut of the sixteenth century showing the androgyne composite of man-woman



57. (Left) The Androgyne, 1986

Neckpiece, chain with pectoral
 Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver and fine gold; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, lead tooth, moonstone, pearls, pheasant beak, mirrored plastic, antique chinese ring, 20.0 x 7.1 x 3.0cm; chain, 48.0cm.

58. (Right) The White Hermaphrodite, 1987

Brooch
 Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver, 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, rose quartz, rhodochrosite, 17.4 x 4.1 x 1.5cm

their inner search the 'Great Work' and this was represented by a complex symbolism which describes a chemical process of transformation.

The transforming substance of alchemy is called the **prima materia** and was designated with the name Mercurius. The alchemists had the god Mercury in mind who, in ancient times, was responsible for communication with the gods. The Greek equivalent of Mercury is Hermes who is a messenger, god of the cross-roads and finally the leader of souls to and from the underworld. Hermes' phallus symbolises his role as mediator between two worlds. It penetrates from the known to the unknown, seeking a spiritual message of deliverance and healing⁷. In Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as Alchemist II (1990), the inclusion of a golden rod in the centre of the dark and light areas illustrates this idea.

Mercurius is a serpent or dragon in alchemy. The idea of transformation and renewal by means of a serpent is a well known archetype. The dragon is a **monstrum** a symbol combining the chthonic principle of the serpent and the aerial principle of the bird. This illustrates the fact the Mercurius is in himself an antithesis and so is represented as a hermaphrodite.

The idea of the hermaphrodite - that in every man is a spiritual woman and vice versa - was explored directly with The Androgyne (1986) (Ill. No. 57) and The White Hermaphrodite (1987) (Ill No. 58). Alchemy is thought to have originated in Egypt and The Androgyne refers to the ancient cult of Horus which believed a hermaphroditic figure could tell the future since it represented both male and female characteristics. Harper includes a pheasant beak to represent the bird-god and at the bottom of the piece uses an antique ring to represent the female while the alligator tooth represents the male. He says of the piece.

"I believe the Androgyne to be my most complex distillation of themes and philosophies for it is my first piece to go beyond the lead/gold symbolism of the Alchemist theme This creature



59. The Virgin and the Unicorn, 1988
16.5 x 7.6 x 2.2cm

represented perfection through a reconciliation of opposites. Just as the loose tooth symbolised the fear of the inability to create, so the Hermaphrodite can cast off sterility and predict its own ability to self-procreate. It points the way to transformation and ultimate perfection."⁸

The wealth of illustration of the Great Work was not just an elaborate system of symbolism hiding the alchemists true intentions. The alchemists actually did undertake chemical experiments. In fact, alchemy from its earliest days had a double face: on the one hand, the practical chemical work in the laboratory, on the other a psychological process.⁹ The devotion with which the old adepts carried out their work served to project values and meanings into the object of their passionate research. This helps to explain the old alchemical concept of "spirit imprisoned in matter"¹⁰, believed to be the spirit in and behind objects like metal or stone. What the alchemist saw in matter or thought he saw was chiefly the data of his own unconscious which he projected into it. Artists using the assemblage method, as has been discussed, perpetuate this tradition according to which the sought - for precious object is to be found in filth.¹¹

Harper incorporates such items as bicycle reflector plastic, teeth and beetle carapaces into his self-portraits. A steel-gear can be found at the centre of the sun-burst in Self-Portrait of the Artist as Icon (1990), (see Ill. No. 64). Harper, as in his Pentimenti series, integrates these objects with such skill and imagination that they attain an aspect which transcends their physical appearance.

As well as with The White Hermaphrodite (1987) and The Androgyne (1986), Harper again blatantly addresses the synthesis of opposites with his brooch from 1988 entitled The Virgin and the Unicorn (Ill. No. 59). The symbol of the unicorn is used worldwide and it is used in alchemy to signify Mercurius, as it harbours within itself an inner contradiction. This is best illustrated by the fact that the horn of the unicorn as an emblem of vigour and strength has a masculine character but at the same time it is a cup which as a receptacle is feminine.



60. (Above) Modern Representation of the Goddess Kali.

61. (Below) Various Depictions of the Gorgan

Harper portrays the Hindu Goddess Kali with bulging eyes, a protruding tongue and a mark on her forehead. In modern depictions Kali generally has gnashing teeth and snakes around her head as well as the aforementioned characteristics. Kali's facial characteristics are iconographically similar to those depicted on apotropaic or horrific masks. Apotropaic masks put their ugliness to some purpose; they are considerably exaggerated and their forms are stereotypical and controlled.

Kali's facial characteristics are strikingly similar to those of the Greek mythological Gorgon whose gaze turns men to stone and in fact the elements of surprise and arrest are central to monstrous faces. The bulging eyes of apotropaic faces can be related to the dilation of the pupils during emotional arousal and the freezing open of the eye when the overt pressure of the whites exaggerates the nuclei, in fear, surprise, anger and in general moments of arrest. Hence, arrestive images indicate just how visually similar are the representations of different emotional states.

In the case of heightened emotional expression as depicted on apotropaic masks, one is rarely sure of what is being communicated. A. David Napier explains:-

"As with Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, there is a deliberate attempt to seize the very expression that indicates the ambivalent, yet highly arresting stage between a laugh and a frown, or between fear and aggression - the point in other words of emotional transformation".¹²

The apotropaic face commands attention precisely because it thwarts one's understanding as to what it's meaning might be. There is very little indication that enables one to distinguish between a threatened and a threatening pose, though in both cases the ability to arrest is the same. Indeed, the arresting feature of the apotropaic face is intimately tied to an awareness that an unpredictable change is evident. As we have seen, Harper used masks in his Saints, Martyrs and Savages series (1981/1982) and also with his Archangels (1982). With his Savages and Archangels, it is



62. **The Dark Archangel, 1982**

Neckpiece; chain with pectoral.

Gold and silver cloisonné enamel on copper; fine silver and fine gold; 14k gold, 24k gold, sterling silver, bone, teeth, shell, pearls; 16.7 x 6.7 x 2.7cm; Chain, 51.0cm

hard to say if they are humorous or horrific, terrifying or ridiculous, and this ambivalence explains their strange fascination.

As has been indicated, apotropaic masks arrest attention because an unpredictable change seems evident but there is a reason of a more basic nature that explains their attraction:

"Human infants, in their first hour of life, will follow a moving object with their eyes, by three or four weeks, they respond to a pair of eyes or to masks including this design".¹⁵.

According to A. David Napier, experiments have revealed that subjects have the strongest emotional response to two spots or "eyes" set horizontally and, significantly, they have an even stronger reaction to a centrally circumscribed spot. This explains why Harper's self-portraits (each with a third eye set in the centre of the forehead), though greatly abstracted, hold the same fascination as the more realistically rendered faces/masks of the Savages and Archangels. They are in fact more arrestive because of their abstracted nature.

The ambivalence central to an understanding of apotropaic masks is fundamental to certain sorts of belief¹⁴ and a close examination of Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as the Goddess Kali illustrates this.

Harper's Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as the Goddess Kali is densely layered with Hindu mythology. Kali is a consort of the Supreme Lord, Shiva. She is one manifestation of Shakti, his female force. Kali represents the annihilating power of Time (Kala) and her emblem is the triangular **yoni**. The **yoni** at a simple level represent fertility and motherhood. At a deeper level, it represents the goddess as primal energy and the genetrix of all things. It is worshipped as the Ultimate Ground, the matrix from which arises the process of creation and into which all creation is in due time dissolved. Hence, Kali as a symbol of the cosmic power of time is destructive but she is also the energizing force that vitalizes the masculine principle which is dormant, even dead,



63. Grotesque Self-Portrait of the Artist as the Goddess
Kali, 1990

Brooch

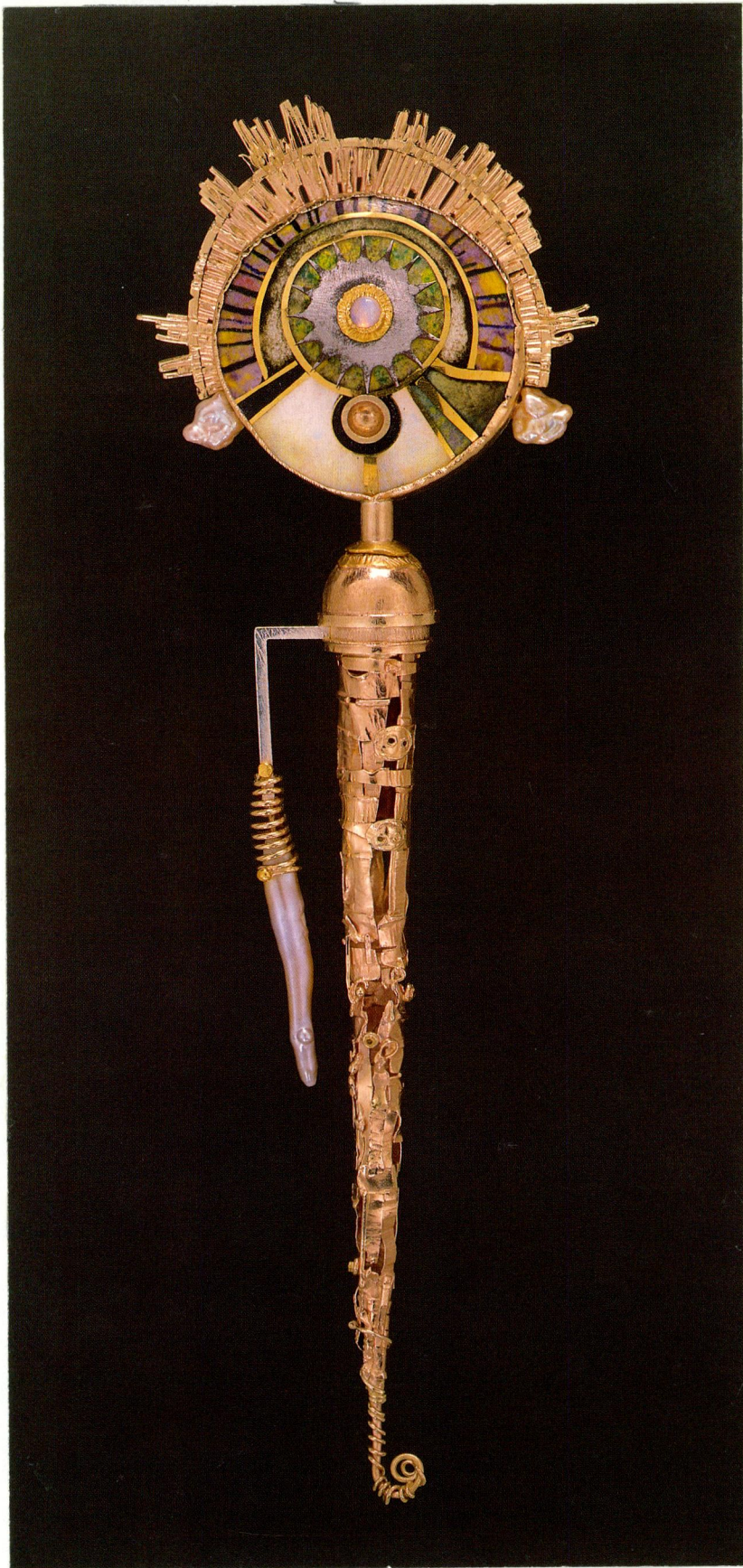
Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver and fine gold; 14k gold, moonstone, opal, pearl.
10.2 x 7.7 x 3.0cm

without her. According to Tantra, the ultimate truth is the union of Shiva and Shakti. Ceremonial mandalas (yantras) show Shiva in the eternal embrace of his feminine side and the aim of ritual contemplation is to accomplish within oneself the integration of these two polarities.

In tantric art, Kali is often portrayed as red, the colour of primordial energy. She dwells in the Island of Jewels signified in tantric paintings by a golden circle. In her destructive phase, Kali is black and her tongue hangs out to lick up the world. Harper manages to condense all the above ideas into his circular brooch/mask. Surrounded by a rim of gold. Kali's face is the incandescent red of bicycle reflector plastic, her black - rimmed eyes are moonstones and an opal serves as her third eye. A pearl-tipped **lingam** (Shiva's symbol) emerges from her mouth which is surrounded by green enamel and has the form of a **yoni**. This illustrates the "green womb"¹⁵ which in Kundalini yoga is a name for Shiva emerging from his latent condition.

The notion of the third eye is utilized in all of Harper's self-portraits. It represents the visionary powers of the mind and is the spiritual eye of the advanced seer. The third eye as well as being an inward eye of higher perception is also a powerful external force and this ambivalence is fundamental to an understanding of the third eye.

In India, the sun is glorified as the symbol of a single, all-seeing eye ¹⁶. The god Agni as a beneficent force is the rising sun and a source of enlightenment but he is also god of fire and holds the power of all physical destruction. The fire of Agni, the eye of Agni is the all-seeing eye of the sun. The third eye is a fire, like the sun, a fire that is latent and manifest, internal and external, dark and light. Like the twenty four hour path of the sun and the behaviour of all powerful Hindu deities, the third eye is enlightening on one hand and dark and destructive in the other. The third eye symbolises unity because it manifests either its inner or outer aspects. It represents the deliverance from irreconcilability, because opposites are resolved through it.



64. **Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Icon, 1990**

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine silver, 24k gold, sterling silver, steel, opal, pearl.

27.5 x 5.6 x 4.1cm

The face/mask becomes the intermediary between the two inner and outer opposites.

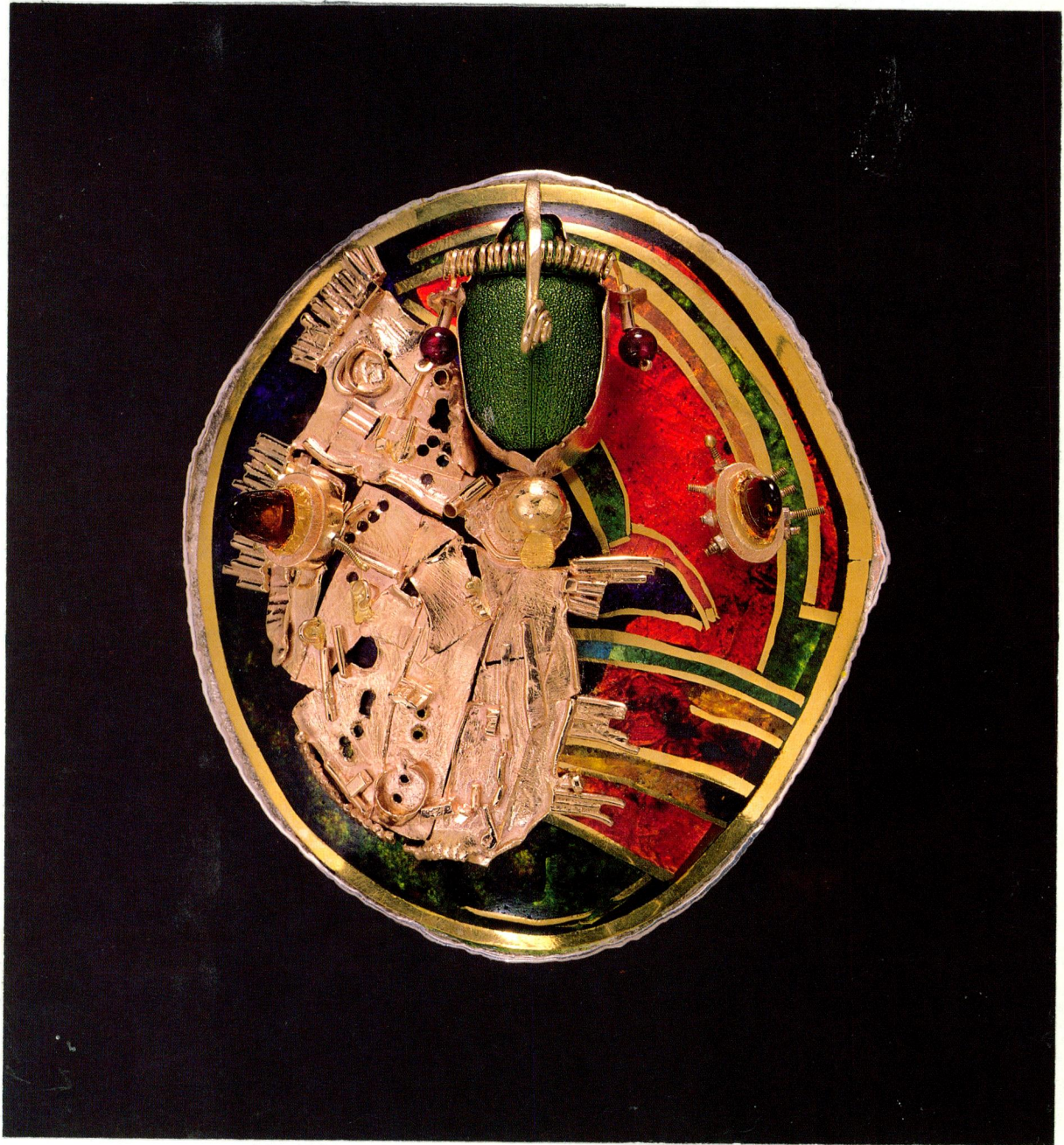
In Harper's Self-Portrait of the Artist as an Icon (Ill. No. 64), an opal again serves as the third eye and the whole face/mask is in the form of a sun-burst. Solar imagery, and its connection with the divine, is obviously important, apart from its relevance to Hindu mythology. The early Christians had difficulty in distinguishing the rising sun from Christ and the sun also is a classical symbol for unity and divinity of self ¹⁷.

In Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Pagan Baby (See Ill. No. 65) and Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Haruspex, (See Ill. No. 66) Harper uses a scarab to represent the third eye. The scarab beetle lays its egg in animal dung, rolls this into a ball with the egg inside and pushes the ball to some selected place where the heat of the sun will hatch out the egg. In ancient Egypt, there was a widespread use of the scarab, where it represented Phtah, creator of the universe and was linked to the sun cults. It was associated with the miracle of resurrection and was an important part of death-rites.

In Self-Portrait of the Artist as Haruspex, the use of the Scarab - which is also a symbol of the future - has particular relevance. The Romans practised haruspicy, a method of divination which consisted of the inspection of the entrails of slaughtered animals. With this brooch, Harper is suggesting that the artist creates by a process of self-evisceration. He presents us with the dichotomy between the pain of introspection and the ecstasy of revelation that lies at the heart of the creative process.

Harper's self-portraits were inspired by a wide range of subjects but, as has been indicated they are all intimately related to each other in various ways.

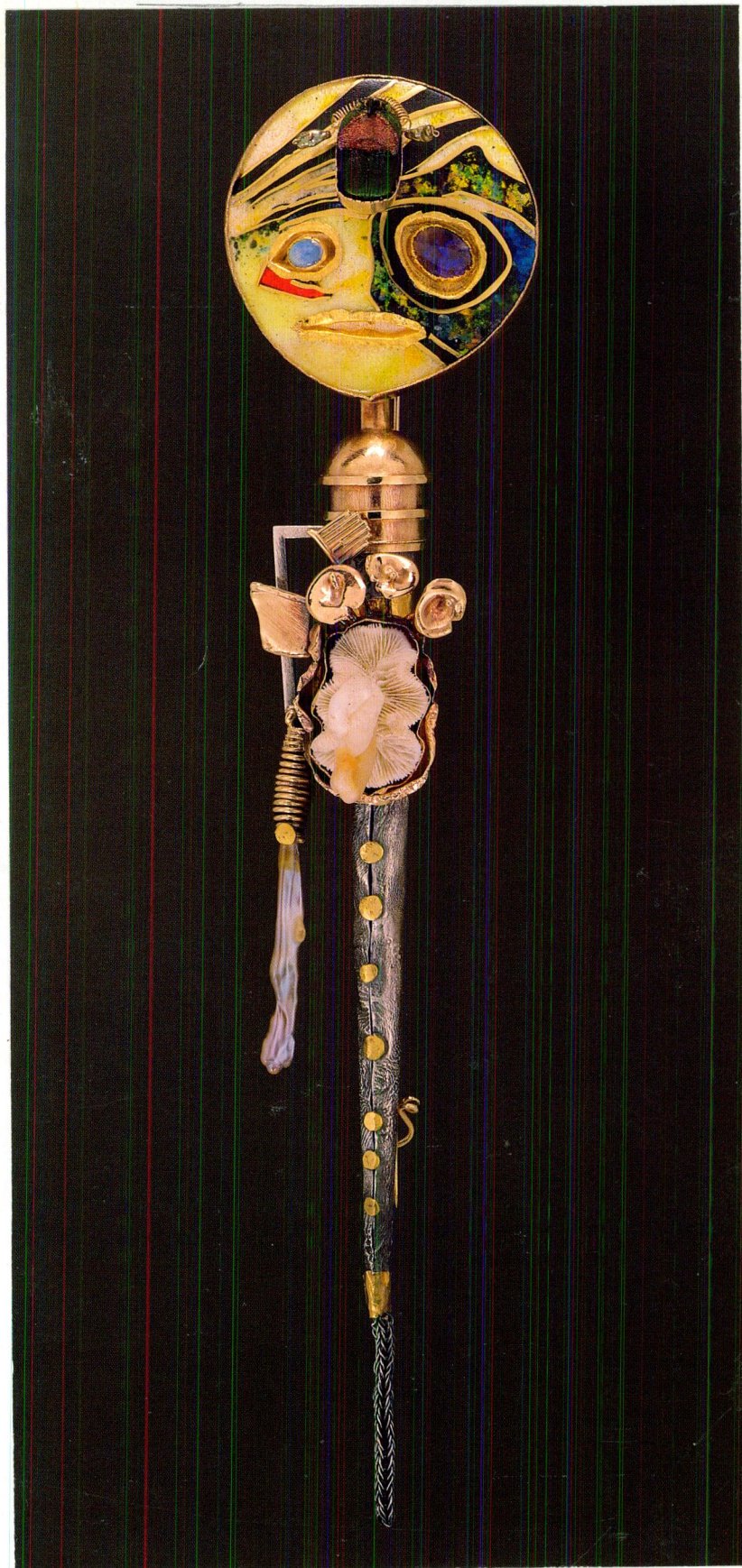
Harper has not shown much new work since 1990. In June 1990, he was left blind in his left eye after suffering a detached retina. Finding it difficult to work with one eye, he has



65. **Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Pagan Baby, 1990**

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver, 24k gold, 14k gold, sterling silver, opal, pearl, coral, shell, carapace, 29.4 x 6.5 x 4.8cm



66. **Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Haruspex, 1990**

Brooch

Gold cloisonné enamel on fine gold and fine silver; 24k gold, 14k gold, sterling silver, opal, pearl, coral, shell, carapace, 29.4 x 6.5 x 4.8cm

1948

1. The first of these is the fact that the...

2. The second is the fact that the...

3. The third is the fact that the...

4. The fourth is the fact that the...

5. The fifth is the fact that the...

6. The sixth is the fact that the...

7. The seventh is the fact that the...

8. The eighth is the fact that the...

9. The ninth is the fact that the...

10. The tenth is the fact that the...

11. The eleventh is the fact that the...

12. The twelfth is the fact that the...

13. The thirteenth is the fact that the...

14. The fourteenth is the fact that the...

15. The fifteenth is the fact that the...

16. The sixteenth is the fact that the...

17. The seventeenth is the fact that the...

18. The eighteenth is the fact that the...

19. The nineteenth is the fact that the...

20. The twentieth is the fact that the...

21. The twenty-first is the fact that the...

22. The twenty-second is the fact that the...

23. The twenty-third is the fact that the...

24. The twenty-fourth is the fact that the...

25. The twenty-fifth is the fact that the...

26. The twenty-sixth is the fact that the...

27. The twenty-seventh is the fact that the...

28. The twenty-eighth is the fact that the...

29. The twenty-ninth is the fact that the...

30. The thirtieth is the fact that the...

31. The thirty-first is the fact that the...

32. The thirty-second is the fact that the...

33. The thirty-third is the fact that the...

34. The thirty-fourth is the fact that the...

35. The thirty-fifth is the fact that the...

36. The thirty-sixth is the fact that the...

37. The thirty-seventh is the fact that the...

38. The thirty-eighth is the fact that the...

39. The thirty-ninth is the fact that the...

40. The fortieth is the fact that the...

41. The forty-first is the fact that the...

42. The forty-second is the fact that the...

43. The forty-third is the fact that the...

44. The forty-fourth is the fact that the...

45. The forty-fifth is the fact that the...

46. The forty-sixth is the fact that the...

47. The forty-seventh is the fact that the...

48. The forty-eighth is the fact that the...

49. The forty-ninth is the fact that the...

50. The fiftieth is the fact that the...

given up teaching permanently. At the moment, he is working on more self-portraits and also three other series of works twelve to fifteen pieces which are entitled Bridal Gardens, Pipe Blossoms and Faberge's Seed. The Pipe Blossoms series is a continuation of his La Fleur du Mal series. With Bridal Gardens, he is using a square enamel picture plane as in his Pentimenti series, with secondary materials off the sides and front surface and the imagery is very "male and female".¹⁸ With the Faberge's Seed series he is

"utilizing an egg shape with spiral or concentric circle enamel motifs, plus pearls attached to the surfaces in the manner of icons".¹⁹

The imagery is heavily sexual dealing with potency and reproduction. As well as working on his jewellery, Harper spends half his time painting and hopes to exhibit them soon.

CONCLUSION

William Harper's personal style defies categorization. As Karen S. Chambers has said:

"There is a certain perversity in Harper's personality. His aesthetic has involved some very conscious decisions to go against the mainstream".¹

This is not suprising considering his background as a painter and in fact Harper considers himself a "painter gone strange".² Over the past seventeen years, he has invented an almost entirely new vocabulary for his chosen medium of enamel and it is in the enamelled sections of his pieces that the viewer glimpses his skill and dedication to delicate and time consuming processes. His assemblages of opulent enamels, found objects, precious metals and jewels express the sensibilities of both painter and sculptor. However, with Harper, it is not a question of applying art to jewellery, but of discovering a new form of expression through penetrating analysis of the medium. He is comfortable with the category of decorative arts but argues against it's classification as a "minor art".

Harper always gets excellent reviews but a number of critics have refused to acknowledge that his work goes beyond the purely decorative. Edward Lebow, who reviewed the exhibition of his Pentimenti series (1988) at the Ruth Siegal gallery concluded a somewhat sarcastic article with the following statement:

"Every so often Harper's motifs are anthropomorphic, but most in this series take the form of jewelled abstractions, the best of which convince the eye that the simple appeal of preciously wrought colour and light are the real subject and achievement of this artist's designs. That may not be what William Harper had in mind when he declared these brooches to be a "summation series", encompassing such "great themes" as "mythology and religion", "sexuality", "the imagined landscape of the mind", and "the transmigration of the precious and the base", but perhaps it's just as well."¹³

Harper found the review "ludicrous" and considered Lebow's



attitude "shallow".⁴ Admittedly, Harper's work , on first viewing is difficult to approach; his creations require an extraordinary level of receptivity on the part of the potential buyer. The symbolist nature of the work, displayed both in the suggestive titles and the materials he uses ensures a certain unavoidable obscurity. His work embodies a rich juxtaposition of apparently non-related meanings whose associations are revealed only if the viewer is prepared to give the time to understand the work.

The fascinating thing about Harper's work is how persuasively the, by times seemingly disparate influences, insights and elements merge in his work; his pieces are extremely efficient in their synthesis of material, technique and symbolism. His jewellery communicates the feel of the ancient, of something dug up out of the past; yet it speaks simultaneously in a contemporary idiom.

Harper is perhaps telling us about the homogenised nature of the world we now live in, where we have access to the myths, histories and rituals of all cultural heritages, ours for the taking, though not always in the spirit they were created. The crossover enrichment between high and low culture and between art and craft, displayed in Harper's work, along with his use of sexuality as subject matter for art and his respect and understanding of other cultures, makes him "ahead of the times in three areas that are proving crucial for the 1990s"⁵.

His search for beauty and truth through dichotomy is best exemplified in work's such as the Androgyne (1986) and his more recent self-portraits where he explores the idea that the perfect human would be both male and female. To create life takes male and female and Harper believes to make art one also must be both. His pieces epitomise "a search for perfection and the realisation that perfection can never be found - it is really the search that matters".⁶

NOTES

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