

The Story of the 'Elephant' Necklace

When Ralph Turner left Electrum Gallery in 1974 I gave him a necklace of very heavy fused silver beads, thanks for the extensive mentoring he had given me during the two years that I had showed there with him.

Soon after this Ralph was planning the jewellery exhibition "Jewellery in Europe" and invited me to participate. He was particularly keen that each of the twenty-five contributors should show something besides their jewellery, for example drawings. In my case he emphasised that it should be big, "*BIG*", with accompanying hand gestures.

I don't show my drawings and, at that time, did not do 'big'. As a separate issue I had the problem that I made deliberately tactile jewellery; how to show it so that people could touch it without being able to remove it?

My answer was to decide to make a piece of jewellery so big that only a large Poston could lift it. To tease Ralph I made a giant 160kg copy of the necklace I had given him, with Portland limestone pebble beads (each carried 300ft up a cliff path), some steel loose rings and some of my actual textile bracelets as additional loose rings, all threaded on thick hemp rope.

When he visited my workshop in Portland Ralph surprised me by his enthusiasm. The issue of how to photograph it was discussed but my wife and I were not in favour of his initial idea that images of it should be superimposed on pictures of the body of an attractive woman, so he promised to give it further thought.

A week later Ralph called me to ask, mysteriously, whether I had any strong feelings about elephants; I re-assured him. Another week on and I received a very formal letter on Crafts Advisory Committee headed paper informing me that I had an appointment with a lady called Womba at the East Midlands safari park, the winter quarters of Mary Chipperfield's circus.

At the park on the appointed day we met the photographer David Cripps who, inspired by the prospect, had decided to use his full-frame wooden camera, complete with tripod and black velvet cloth over his head. Womba, the female model in question, had had a preparatory wash and spruce up, hosepipes and rasping steel wire brushes. Unfortunately the floor of the yard was uneven solid rock and Womba, considerably agitated by the unaccustomed heavy necklace round her shoulders, kept shuffling around while Mary C. repeatedly

exhorted her to lift her “Trunk up!”. Gradually, with politely suppressed giggles, the entire circus staff came out to watch this large tubby fellow with a cloth over his head tripping over himself as he tried to get Womba in focus and frame. In the end David had to retreat to his Nikon 35mm.

On the way out of the park, on a glorious autumn evening, David insisted that I also modelled the necklace; I could only just stand in it and had bruised shoulders for weeks. A little while later this photo appeared in Vogue...

To my considerable surprise Ralph decided to use one of David's photographs of Womba for the poster for “Jewellery in Europe” so it duly appeared for the first venue, in Edinburgh. For the private view I wore an appropriate pavé-set diamanté and silver brooch that I had made for the occasion, “Elephants are Forever”.

After Edinburgh the next venue was to be the V&A in London. Shortly before the show was to move there I got a call from a very seriously agitated Ralph Turner. Though the V&A had no editorial rights, the then Director Dr Roy Strong had refused the use of the poster on the grounds that, as reported to me verbatim by Ralph, “An elephant is not commensurate with the dignity of the Victoria and Albert Museum”. (No ivory in there, then.) I played down the disappointment since I was in the show, had had the poster, it existed, and I had heard sufficient elephant jokes.

A new poster was created using the work of a Czech jeweller, Svatopluk Casaly. The neckpiece consisting of a large piece of cut glass on a long metal curve was modelled by a very attractive young woman, naked to the waist. So an elephant is not commensurate with the dignity of the V&A, but a nice pair of tits, no problem.

The good news was that as a consequence of getting the poster Svatia was subsequently admitted into the Czech Artists' Union and became able to work full time as an artist.

The show went on elsewhere but I don't think that Womba reappeared at any of the other venues, at least I don't recall her doing so. While the show was at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol (then well known for showing jewellery) the necklace was purchased by a private collector who subsequently installed it on a wall in his architect-built house in the Forest of Dean, deliberately placed so that the children could touch and feel it as they went past.



David Poston

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