

FLEETING MOMENTS MADE SOLID

The silversmith Jonathan Boyd is always up for a challenge, and the painstaking detail in his work often harks back to his home town of Glasgow. *Imogen Greenhalgh* caught up with him to talk about new projects, his Commonwealth medals and a film about nothing. Portrait by *Shannon Tofts*





Early for my meeting with the jeweller Jonathan Boyd, I spend half an hour ambling through Barras Market in Glasgow's East End, where he rents a studio. A Monday morning, the weekend market is deserted and its quietness, coupled with a dull November sky, make the rusting security shutters and peeling, moss-covered shop signs prominent. We're overlooked, they seem to imply, so far under the radar of the galleries, cafés and ambitious landlords that herald the steady march of gentrification. The perfect place, then, for a maker such as Boyd, whose practice devotes itself to aspects of everyday life that might otherwise slip by unnoticed.

'I get over-involved,' he tells me, with a hint of sheepishness, once we are inside his studio. 'I start something, and then it just spirals out of control. It happens with every project I take on, and the more the project seems to be about small things, the more I read into them, and take out of them.' As he talks, the studio's walls and shelves, littered with sketches, samples and jotted notes, attest to their owner's expansive approach. 'The more you look at nothing, or small things, the more you uncover.'

Boyd credits his employer, Glasgow School of Art, where he teaches, for nurturing this rather wayward tendency when it comes to developing ideas, affording him both the time and creative freedom to pursue a strongly research-oriented approach, investigating the outer limits of silver's possibilities. As those familiar with Boyd's work might know, his process is anything but straightforward, with every piece challenging what is feasible in his medium: 'I get really bored, so I never try to make something that feels like the piece I made before,' he tells me. 'I always want to try something different for new projects, so it feels alive, which usually means enormous headaches as I work out what to do.'

Continually experimenting – an inclination that began in school with the discovery of an enamel kiln, and flourished under the tutelage of Michael Rowe and Hans Stofer at the RCA, 'the greatest experience of my life' – can lead to a fractured output. As a maker hops from one method to another, there's a danger they'll leave an

Opposite: *M8 Intersection* neckpiece, 2016, oxidised silver and paint;
Above: *An Endless and Extended Rant on Craft* bangle, 2013, and *An Endless Rant on Craft* bangle, 2012, oxidised silver; Right: *Possible Narratives from an Empty Space #3*



invigorating but incoherent body of work in their wake. With Boyd, however, there are noticeable lines of progression – his use of oxidised silver and complex lost-wax casting techniques for a start, but also his fascination with the to and fro of conversation, the throwaway things we say which, if unrecorded, vanish, like soap bubbles in the air.

Informal exchanges shared by friends – Boyd has made works based on anecdotes told to him at parties and snippets overheard on the street – might seem an oddly workaday place for an art jeweller to uncover inspiration but, then again, there is something satisfyingly unlikely about all of Boyd's jewellery. It is strikingly heavy and often dark and graphic, toying with notions of wearability. Though intricate, it turns its back on conventions of preciousness and femininity. People tend to see in his aesthetic the industrial vistas for which Glasgow became notorious, but this was never something Boyd overtly set out to achieve: 'I've always used oxidised silver, even when I was a student... I just think it looks better,' he shrugs, admitting he's given up second-guessing which aspects of his work appeal to whom. Whatever it is, he concludes, most people seem to be drawn in by the stories the pieces tell, a series of intimate moments captured in metal.

What about the intrigue of their making, the captivating levels of detail and complexity each work reveals? You only have to puzzle over one of Boyd's works to appreciate the long hours that have been spent bringing it into fruition. He nods in agreement, though suspects this exertion isn't immediately apparent to many. 'Silversmiths have asked about my prices before because, you know, pieces might only have seven or eight hundred pounds-worth of silver,' he acknowledges. 'But when they listen to the process, they get it.'

This painstaking approach has, at times, bordered on painful, particularly when Boyd embarks on an exceptionally elaborate or large work requiring considerable labour. A giant bangle, *An Endless and Extended Rant on Craft*, commissioned by a collector in 2013, took him close to a year to realise, stretching his abilities to their limits. The end result is both magnificent and resolved in equal measure, but is he never tempted to throw up his hands and admit defeat? 'Once I've had an idea about what I want to make, I just have to find a way of making it. That tends to be the difficult part, but I don't like to compromise,' he admits. 'It drives my wife up the wall, but it's part of the process.'

This dogged approach to design reached an apotheosis of kinds in 2014, when Boyd spearheaded a group of Glasgow-based designer-makers in producing the medals for the Commonwealth Games – all 1,514 of them. For Boyd, it was vital the medals were 'Clyde built', reflecting not only the city they came from, but the exceptional craft skills native to it, too, and it was with this promise that the group's proposal to the Games saw off competition from one of the world's oldest and most prestigious mints.

Working alongside the likes of Helen Marriott, Anna Gordon, Andrew Lamb and a handful of other makers associated with the art school, he, by his own admission, 'got a bit carried away and kept adding processes' to the designs. Each gold medal alone ended up taking three days to complete. 'It took over our lives, especially mine and Helen Marriott's,' he recalls. 'We were working from seven in the morning until 11 or 12 at night every day for six months just to finish on



time.' Friends and family were hauled in – 'my mum, a senior manager in the NHS and an amateur seamstress, stitched every single one of those medal ribbons' – and Boyd looks back on the whole venture with a wince of discomfort. 'I've got three medals in my living room and I glance at them and feel quite proud, but it was a great thing to do, but that's only because I don't think about it in detail. As soon as I start talking about it, I can almost feel the tears welling up, it's like a minor trauma.'

Traumas aside, the group achieved what they set out to do – to design and hand-make an iconic object in Glasgow – and the medals featured heavily in BBC coverage of the Games. If there were lessons learned, however, reigning in ambitions was not one, and his most recent undertaking – a project titled *To Sorn* – seems similarly Herculean in its ambitions.

The project's backbone is a 34-mile trek that Boyd and his friend Sorley Kleboe, an underfloor heating specialist he has known since his college years, completed from Maryhill in Glasgow to Sorn in Ayrshire, where Kleboe, Boyd's improbable 'muse', as he puts it, was born: 'We take the mickey out of each other, as a muse is meant to be this wistful, beautiful creature and I've got a short, bearded man from Ayrshire.'

With the help of head and shoulder cameras, Boyd recorded the entire walk, 30 minutes of which he has cut into a film, with composer Charlie Knox providing a soundtrack to the pair's charmingly meandering exchanges. 'The film is strange as it's about nothing,' he reflects. 'It's aimless, just walking and talking drivel, but I'm interested in that, in the impermanent... trying to take it and make it into something physical, real. That's where the jewellery comes in.'

The project provides a marker in Boyd's progress as a maker, not least because of his foray into other mediums. Alongside the film, in which Kleboe is the hilarious star, he plans to make a range of jewellery relating to moments of the walk, and a large-scale ceramic mural tracing the scenery encountered. The idea, he explains, is to present this tribute to his adopted hometown in an exhibition in the city, in what would be, surprisingly, his first solo show in Scotland.

After a number of years working almost exclusively in oxidised silver, you sense Boyd is starting to feel freer and looser, experimenting with dashes of colour – smudges of thick, orange paint in reference to the sodium glow of Glasgow's streetlights, but also hints of blue and yellow – and new idioms, translating sketches, as well as sentences, into metal. For now, at least,

silver remains, safe: 'Something always just draws me back to it, I don't know what it is.'

So far, the process of making the pieces for his *Sorn* project has posed the jeweller exactly the type of challenges he relishes. 'When I started doing these,' he says of the line drawings that are transposed into cage-like links, 'I didn't know if it would be possible. There were some failures when we [he and Nigel Munro, the technician he works with] were casting, so we had to reconfigure things – that took us a couple of weeks.'

The project has already reaped rewards, and Boyd has shown the completed parts of the collection at Goldsmiths' Fair and SOFA in Chicago, selling several pieces he has made thus far. He lights up at the thought of this single narrative acting as a thread between these far-flung buyers, joining disparate people and places together with Glasgow firmly at the centre of the web.

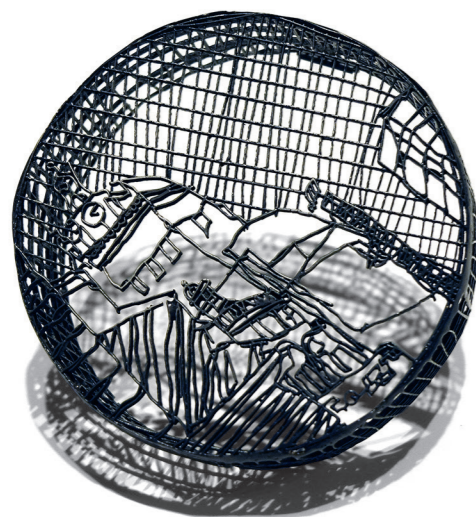
While Boyd is still very much in the project's midst, with fresh challenges still to complete, you get the feeling it's a place he is more than happy to be. 'I guess all of my work is about taking something fleeting,' he smiles, 'and then spending months and months of work turning it into something solid.' An eye for small things, but tended with limitless care and ambition.

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Above: Gold, silver and bronze medals for the Commonwealth Games Glasgow 2014; Right: *Central Station Sketch* brooch, from *To Sorn* collection, 2016



Above: *Six Miles in with a Pen* neckpiece, from *To Sorn* collection, 2016; Left: *Early Morning* brooch, from *To Sorn* collection, 2016

