

UNDOER S THE SURFACE

YOUNG AUSTRALIAN JEWELLER BIC TIEU MIXES INNOVATIVE DESIGN WITH THE CENTURIES-OLD ART OF JAPANESE LACQUER.





Jeweller Bic Tieu has something special she wants to show me.

We're in Mother Chu's Vegetarian Kitchen, a haven for a decent feed in the scruffy end of Sydney's Pitt Street. After unpacking tissue paper from a small box, she leans forward with purposeful eye contact and holds in her fingertips a ring.

It is exquisite: bold and geometric in form yet organic and graceful in detail. A filigree basket of foliage in white gold is mounted on a simple band, supporting a bulbous disc bearing the stylised image of a flower in black and pink. It's an assertive presence on the hand, something to be worn with eyes twinkling to match its circle of black diamonds. It's also the culmination of two years of intensive learning in the traditional Japanese lacquer studio of Unryuan Kitamura Tatsuo, and the first taste of Tieu's vision to take this rarefied art form into uncharted territory.

Tieu is herself an ornament within the cheerfully dog-eared restaurant setting: smooth black hair, warm smile and unselfconscious elegance. She explains that she was only permitted to make the ring after proving her commitment and ability to the revered studio master Kitamura Tatsuo.

"After I had made a couple of panel paintings I moved on to a tea caddy, and then from the tea caddy to a box, and for the last project I was allowed to work on this ring."

What was her time in Japan like? "Challenging..." Tieu replies, complete with verbal ellipsis. Her modest list of projects hints at how demanding Japanese lacquer, or *makie*, is of its artists. While she is hardly the first to face the Byzantine complexities of moving to Japan – complete with

80-page visa application and overwhelming language and cultural barriers – few outsiders gain entry to the highly protected sphere of Japanese arts and she remains the only Western artist to undertake *makie* training.

"It feels like a dream, it really does. I can't believe I went through it. It was one of the most difficult things I've done," she reflects. "I didn't know how complex it would be. And it's sucked me into this long journey!"

It's a journey that began during Tieu's undergraduate studies at the University of New South Wales' College of Fine Arts when she encountered photographs of lacquer works made for the nobility of the Edo period (1600–1868), *makie*'s golden age. They are objects with an immediate seductiveness, while coyly concealing their true nature to non-initiates.

At first glance, *makie* can appear to be intricately wrought gold. If given the opportunity to touch an object, however, the hands contradict the eyes to reveal its astonishing lightness and tactile



1 Bic Tieu applies lacquer using a traditional brush.

2 A selection of Tieu's handiwork.

3 Tieu at work in her Sydney studio.

4 The lacquer is sprinkled with gold dust.

5 Tieu's diamond and *makie* ring.

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warmth. Derived from a tree sap, *makie*'s craftsmanship and lustre belie its organic origins.

"The magic of it certainly deepens and increases when people start to understand what a time-consuming and complex process it is," says Lesley Kehoe, influential dealer, scholar and supporter of Japanese art in Australia.

"When you use the word lacquer in English it immediately gives the impression of a thin surface treatment to a piece of wood. In Japanese lacquer the wood substrate is the least important part. In most instances it is paper thin or can even be silk, or hessian, or leather. When you hold smaller pieces up to the light they are often translucent."

Bewitched by the mystique of this material, Tieu began simulating its lustre in her jewellery and small objects, using ebony, acrylic inlay and polished metal. A master's degree gave her the opportunity to travel to Vietnam to learn lacquer techniques for the first time, followed by a Federal Government grant which took her to Japan, including some time at Kitamura's studio in the lacquer centre of Wajima.

This encounter with the traditional studio system came as quite a shock to Tieu: "I met Kitamura-san and got really freaked out because he was so traditional and strict. The questions he asked me," she adopts the serious tone of the master, "Why are you at my studio? What do you want to become? Do you want to become a serious *makie* artist? Do you want to use lacquer superficially?" Big questions that I found very difficult to answer. It was quite frightening."

The experience was enough, however, for Tieu to prove that she was indeed serious about her work and it laid the foundation for a second, more extensive placement with Kitamura, this time for two years.

Tieu soon found that there would be no grace period for the new girl.

"Kitamura said that my lines were really ugly and so the first four months he made me just draw lines, tracing flowers, birds, trees. I had to do that for eight hours a day, six days a week. I almost went crazy by the end of it!" she says, laughing.

"He would say, 'Bic, you need to go out into the real world and look at these flowers, how they fall from the branches. You need to capture their sensibility.'"

Though such measures may seem excessive, Tieu believes Kitamura's insistence on high standards was crucial to the development of her work.

"I've kept all those drawings and I can see how much finer, how much more beautiful my lines became."

Having gained confidence in her brushwork, Tieu was permitted to begin her training in *makie*. The strictness and traditionalism of Kitamura's studio underpins his ambition to produce *makie* of comparable quality to the Edo period.

Essential to this is the revival of the studio system, involving specialist artisans working together as a team. Thus the process of Japanese lacquer requires three sets of ▶



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hands. First, an artisan creates the substrate, then another waterproofs and strengthens it through applying base coats. *Makie* is technically the third stage, and translates as ‘sprinkled picture’ or ‘sprinkling of gold’.

The *makie* artist plans the design in detail before using a brush to painstakingly sculpt each element with lacquer and dust the paintwork with gold. It is *makie*'s requirement of precision that makes it one of the most time-consuming art forms. “My tea caddy took seven months. In an eight-hour day I might have been fortunate to finish four or five tiny flowers,” recalls Tieu.

It was Kehoe, Kitamura’s international agent, who effectively brokered the residency. “It was a huge and rare opportunity for Bic,” Kehoe enthuses, though there was a higher objective at play as well.

“I encouraged Kitamura to take her because there aren’t many Japanese artists doing really interesting contemporary, cutting-edge work in lacquer. There are negatives associated with hundreds of years of tradition. Someone with Western objectivity who can see the potential of that material and who can apply completely different creative concepts to it, I think that’s a very interesting opportunity for the future of lacquer.”

Further support came in the form of financial donations, including from philanthropist Pauline Gandel whose major collection of Japanese lacquer is curated by Kehoe.

“It was a privilege to be able to assist a young Australian artist to take advantage of this unique opportunity,” she says, commenting that she feels a sense of continuity with the system of patronage that allowed lacquer to flourish in

centuries gone by. “The historical works that I have collected for over 25 years now are in my hands because they were sponsored and cherished by generations past. Part of my responsibility in the 21st century is to make sure those objects survive for future generations and to support the creation of their contemporary counterparts.”

Notably, Gandel is also the patron of the new Pauline Gandel Gallery of Japanese Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, which ensures permanent public display of a broad spectrum of Japanese artworks including highlights from her own collection.

That Tieu represents the future of lacquer is not an exaggeration, as many Japanese arts face unprecedented challenges that threaten their survival.

“One of the reasons Bic had such an opportunity is that Kitamura believes that the art of lacquer will not survive unless it moves out of Japan,” explains Kehoe.

For all his traditionalism Kitamura is revealed as something of a reformist within Japanese arts. “Kitamura has been the object of serious criticism from other lacquer artists in Japan for teaching things that should be secret. The tradition in Japan is the lacquer master keeps secrets unique to that studio, and if there isn’t a brilliant student or a direct descendent then the secrets die with that lacquer master.”

Tieu, however, does not see herself as the next Kitamura Tatsuo. Her interest in lacquer is in its application to her jewellery, though she does share with her teacher a desire to make this ancient art viable in the 21st century.

6 Practice makes perfect - Tieu’s early sketches.

7 *Makie* has very fine sculptural properties.

8 Inspiration comes in many forms.

9 Tieu’s finished *makie* rings.

10 Traditional Japanese lacquer work tools.

11 A contemporary application of an ancient art.

“My work doesn’t represent traditional lacquer but it comes from traditional lacquer,” she says, “and I’m making a tiny contribution to how it evolves in contemporary society and outside of Japan.”

Her distinctive approach is more than merely a material hybrid, however. Combining Japanese lacquer with a Western concept of contemporary jewellery also represents a fusion of cultures. This is significant for Tieu given, as an Australian of Chinese/Vietnamese descent, she is herself a cultural fusion.

“It’s a metaphor of who I am,” she affirms. The beginning of Tieu’s career coincides with the beginning of the Asian century and a growing acknowledgement of Australia’s need to engage with Asia more deeply.

Thus an artist’s personal journey becomes an element of another greater journey that is already under way for us all. ■