



SPECIAL REPORT: CONTEMPORARY ART

Taking Gold and Silver Into the Light

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FRANKFURT — Frankfurt is a city better known for money than for culture. But an exhibition by the sculptor and jeweler Rita Grosse-Ruyken, “Rays of Light,” at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, or applied arts museum, has brought a new take on gold and silver to the heart of the German banking system and home of the European central bank.



Museum für Angewandte Kunst
A work by Rita Grosse-Ruyken.

In a video at the entrance to the show, the artist gently beats a bowl into shape from a golden disc. The process, using hammers that gradually decrease in weight from 4 kilograms, or 9 pounds, to 75 grams, is guided by the slowly modulating music of the blows, like a glockenspiel, on the ever-finer metal skin. A large bowl takes up to three years to complete, in which time Ms. Grosse-Ruyken works 10-hour days in the converted Bavarian watermill that is her studio, standing for up to 45 minutes on one leg while using the other to support the wafer-thin material.

The end result is a vessel with walls less than a millimeter, or 0.04 inch, thick, of such delicate refinement and suppleness that, when she lifts it, it quivers and breathes with a life of its own. Balanced on a pure white marble pedestal quarried from the Greek island of Thassos, it undulates with every sound and movement of the air.

Born in 1948 and raised on an estate overlooking the Danube, with a gentleman blacksmith grandfather, Ms. Grosse-Ruyken studied philology and visual arts in Munich in the 1970s, where she became a pupil and friend of the Catholic philosopher Aloys Goergen. Her work is rooted in a conjoining of the metalworker’s craft and her mentor’s search for the unification of material and spiritual worlds.

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“Rita is not only an exceptional artist; she is a phenomenon as well,” said Sabine Runde, vice director and curator of the Frankfurt museum. “Her personality, her appearance and her work are one. Part of her uniqueness is her inimitable capability — technically, spiritually, mentally, uncompromisingly focused on a clear vision. To realize her vision, no mountain is too high, no way too long for her. She and her work are extraordinary from the beginning: a deep intention and continuity inspires all she does.”

To make her pieces, Ms. Grosse-Ruyken goes to extraordinary lengths of personal commitment and technological innovation. For her 1986 work, “The Silver Cord,” she cast, forged and hand-pulled refined silver into a diaphanous thread that she then wove into a quasi-transparent spatial structure, a 21-meter, or 69-foot cord that took eight months to complete. For “Rays of Light” — “Durchflutung,” in German — she developed a technique of embedding two wafer-thin concentric platinum rings invisibly into the initial gold disc, to provide a necessary reinforcement for the ever more fragile walls of the bowl.

The processes and results “have no parallel in history and presence,” said Ms. Runde. “For me as a curator, she is writing history with her work.”

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“The artist works with the material until it reaches its physical limits, while simultaneously exploring her own physical limitations,” said Ulrich Schneider, the museum’s director, in a foreword to the catalog of the show. “She creates an esthetic abstraction with her works that is intended to lead into numinous realms.”

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One of a cluster of museums along the Main river known as “the string of pearls,” the applied arts museum is housed in the Villa Metzler, once home to Germany’s oldest private banking family. The American architect Richard Meier in 1985 added a luminously minimalist extension that provides a resonant setting for the show.

“The proportions, the white and the light” of Mr. Meier’s design “correspond naturally” with the installation, said Ms. Runde.

In a space saturated with light, white on white walls melt into floors. Gold and silver bowls and hanging gold and silver mobiles shimmer and reverberate.

The mobiles, Calder-like, twist and turn, reflecting the ever-changing light. A wraith-like twirl in silver reaches heavenward. Titled “The birth of the number — one,” it materializes, says a text by the artist, “forward-thrusted Fibonacci spiral space.”

The exhibition includes gold and silver jewelry. Inspired by Etruscan, Greek or African ornaments, the pieces marry foil and filigree, the spirit of antiquity and contemporary virtuosity.

On an upper floor, at the zenith, literally, of the exhibition, a large golden bowl sits on a white pillar at the center of a maze of white screens in a white cubic room, entered by a doorway screened with a rose-red curtain. Viewed through different openings, it radiates endlessly changing plays of light from its almost translucent surface, a sun-spirit at the center of a Copernican universe.

Speakers transmit the sound of the bowl’s movements, captured and magnified by a system of sensors installed by musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra — a latter-day rediscovery of the music of the spheres.

Like the Renaissance cosmologists and alchemists, Ms. Grosse-Ruyken is concerned with universality and transformation; the mathematics of the physical universe and the metaphysics of timeless space. In her hands the weight of pure gold becomes light, diaphanous, dissolving into an insubstantial eternity.

“The heaviness of the material is brought to the lightness of light,” Ms. Grosse-Ruyken said in an interview.

“The heaviness is no longer felt. The light dissolves the material. I have inner imaginations and this is the concretization of the visions. It’s a long process — a strong dialogue between the material and me.”

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