

PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Pebble Dish', 2002, white willow and silver plated pins, constructed, 56 x 56 x 5cm

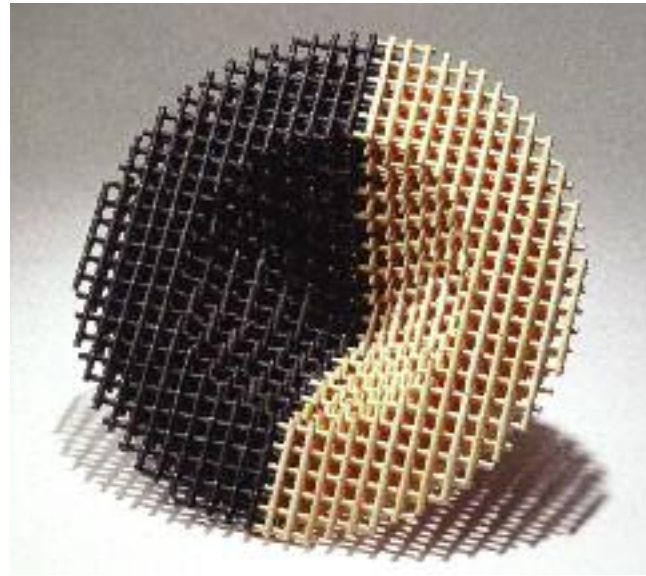


PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Black and White Bowl', 2004, black willow, white willow, silver plated pins, constructed, 65 x 65 x 27.5 cm

CARTOGRAPHY OF FORM

Discovering basketry was Dail Behennah's introduction into the world of making, but over time her complex constructions have become progressively notional and increasingly less functional. Profile by Ian Wilson.

HOW many penguin pools enjoy the distinction, as does that designed for London Zoo in 1934, of Grade 1 listing as a protected building? – a status which acknowledges the significance of this edifice as an icon of modern design. The architect was Berthold Lubetkin, a Russian émigré, from whom the grandparents of Dail Behennah, the subject of this essay, bought their London house, and she is convinced that the time spent there as a child, allied with 'being surrounded by the clean lines of well-designed, Swedish furniture' in her parents' home, contributed to her formation as a thorough-going modernist. Growing up in the 1960s Behennah loved the paintings of Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley and yearned to wear the clothing of Courrèges and Mary Quant, and these

youthful passions have clearly fed into the artist's interest in optical illusion.

Behennah is a maker who works in a range of materials, but the motivation – whether the medium is wood, stone, metal or enamel – invariably arises from her involvement with geography, which she studied at the University of Birmingham. Both the practical and conceptual aspects of the art of mapping are important for her and there is a marked affinity to cartography in the working drawings which are meticulously plotted on graph paper. She has also spoken of how the grid of a map 'onto which all the other information is drawn' remains a powerful concept for her. The references to maps might not always be immediately apparent, but the principles of taxonomy, collecting



PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Complex Grid Circle', 2012, white willow and silver plated pins, constructed, 90 x 90 x 4.5 cm

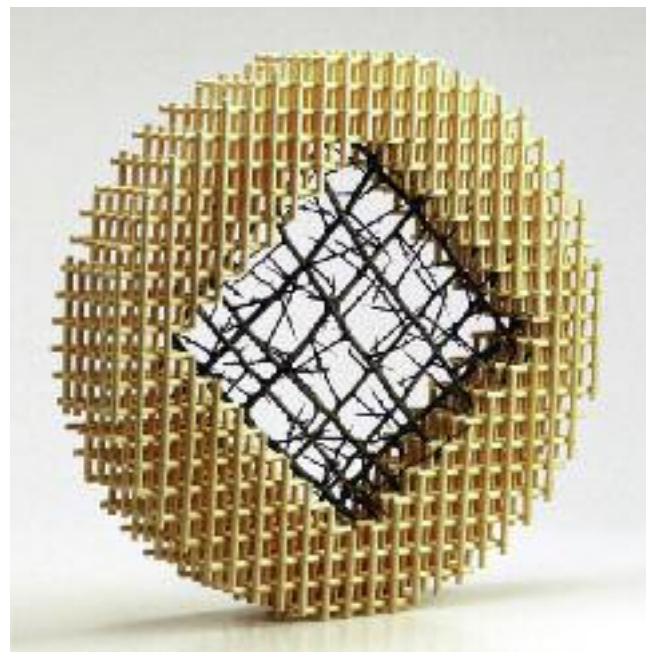


PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Blackthorn Dish', 2006, white willow, blackthorn, bamboo dowels, drilled and dowelled, 56 x 56 x 11 cm

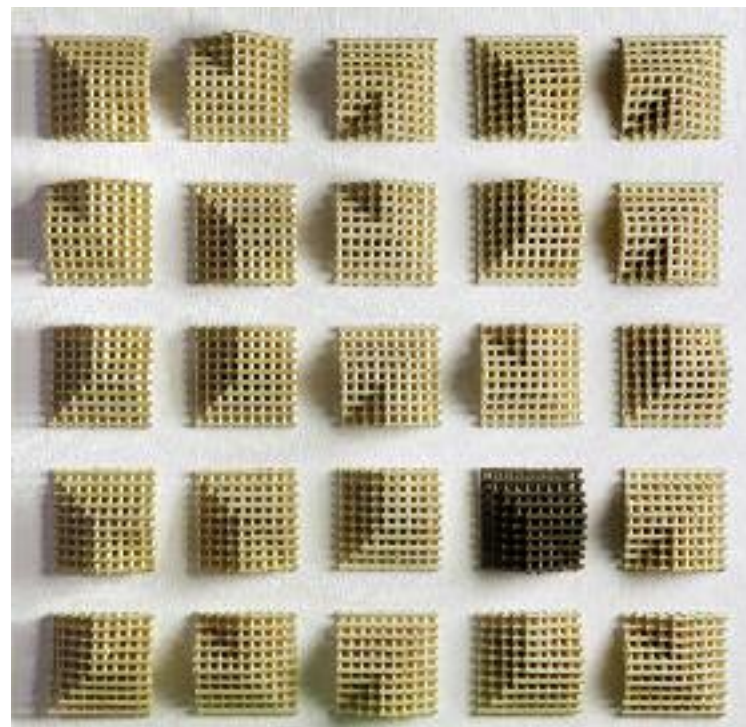


PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Twenty-Five Squares', 2007, white willow and silver plated pins, constructed, 92.5 x 92.5 x 6.5 cm



PHOTO: RICHARD LEONARD

'Nine by Five', 2011, plaited stainless steel cable, 196 x 84 cm

and organization link Behennah's public art installation, *Labelled*, (Plymouth City Museum) to the precepts of map-making. She photographed labels from the Natural History Collection in the Museum – alert to which species were vulnerable or extinct – and then reproduced 500 of these classification tags in vitreous enamel on copper and assembled them into a hemisphere with a diameter of 225 cm. Discovering basketry was Behennah's adult entry point into the world of craft, but she seldom weaves traditional baskets and there is a clearly discernible trend in her work towards constructions which has become progressively notional and increasingly less functional. When Hisako Sekijima – the Japanese maker who was a fellow-participant in the "East Weaves West: Basketry from Japan & Britain" exhibition – compared their craft to miniature architecture, she was expressing an aesthetic with which Behennah concurs profoundly.

In *Leaf-shaped Dish* tinned copper wire was employed to coil the lengths of poelut cane and although these fasteners form delicate vein-like patterns, the innovative techniques manifest a preoccupation with structure rather than with surface and decoration.¹ It took an hour to stitch and coil each of the dozens of recycled strings in *Guitar String Dish* and, thus linked, they form a vessel with a strong sense of circular movement, so that the bead-like ball-ends on the strings – emerging proud of the fabric – seem not only to be swept around in a swirling rhythm, but also, like punctuation marks, encourage the viewer to pause and give thought to the nature of this structure.

The grid pieces – often fashioned from a variety of white willow which is too hard to be used for woven baskets, unless it is very "green" – constitute an important strand in Behennah's practice. These dimensional meshes have a geometrical strength of presence, as well as casting complex patterns of shadows, which is always an important consideration for Behennah. In addition, if one moves the eye-lines when looking at these multi-layered grids, something further comes into view, as if peering more deeply and from different angles reveals the unexpected beauty of the mathematics of the interior architecture.

It was while running a workshop in Sweden that Behennah noticed how the Scandinavian participants would go into the surrounding countryside and gather all kinds of natural objects to use in their projects. She told herself that she was a geographer who was not using the landscape, an omission which *Pebble Dish* and *Blackthorn Dish*, among other works, rectified. These are part of a series concerned with Pembrokeshire, for it was in this Welsh county that the centrally located components – which feature in the titles – were collected. The irregularities and individualities of both the twigs and little stones are seen all the better for the consciously thoughtful and orderly manner of their arrangement, which also reveals the differences between the spaces which they occupy and those within the frame.

Pebble Sphere and *Traeth Mawr* ("Big Beach") also belong to the Pembrokeshire series. The former demonstrates Behennah's aim of achieving a sense of calm in her artefacts while quite definitely not wanting them to appear static. Notwithstanding its protected habitat within an acrylic case and thus untouched by breezes or human breath, this airy, fragmented sphere not only emanates a sense of movement in stasis, but also recalls a type of energy similar to that seen in Dali's *Exploding Raphaelesque Head*.

The imagery of *Traeth Mawr* is concerned with the notion of "X marks the spot", such a thrilling signifier on the treasure maps drawn in childhood, and also with the shorthand notation of affection at the end of a letter. Each part of this trio is a reliquary sheltering samples of natural material from the area celebrated in the title – driftwood found on the tideline, marram grass growing on the dunes

and slate from the nearby hills – so that the austere, tripartite symmetry houses a heartfelt expression of devotion for this loved landscape.

Only three bundles of white willow remain in Behennah's storeroom, for the grower who has supplied her with this vital and valued ingredient has now retired. He was an obsessive weeder and never let bindweed grow around the willow because it left marks on the bark – but Behennah admits that such blemishes sometimes possess great beauty. She sees her source of white willow drying up as an opportunity to change direction and to dedicate these final rods to making a series of memorably special pieces.

Working collaboratively with an architect on the Pavilion which is located on the Bristol Harbourside was an exciting experience for Behennah because of her passion for architecture. Offered the choice between designing embellishment for the façade or fittings integral to the building, she chose the latter, true to her belief that the details contribute enormously to making a building pleasant to be in. The balustrades, for example, not only cast attractive shadows, but also provide a further visual pleasure in that, as a result of the diffraction of the light, they appear to flicker like moiré fabric as you walk beside them.

While the Pavilion's stair railings and window manifestations had to be functional, the threatening, punitive *Spoons for Ceremonies* are unequivocally non-utilitarian tableware. This project required Behennah to acquire forging skills

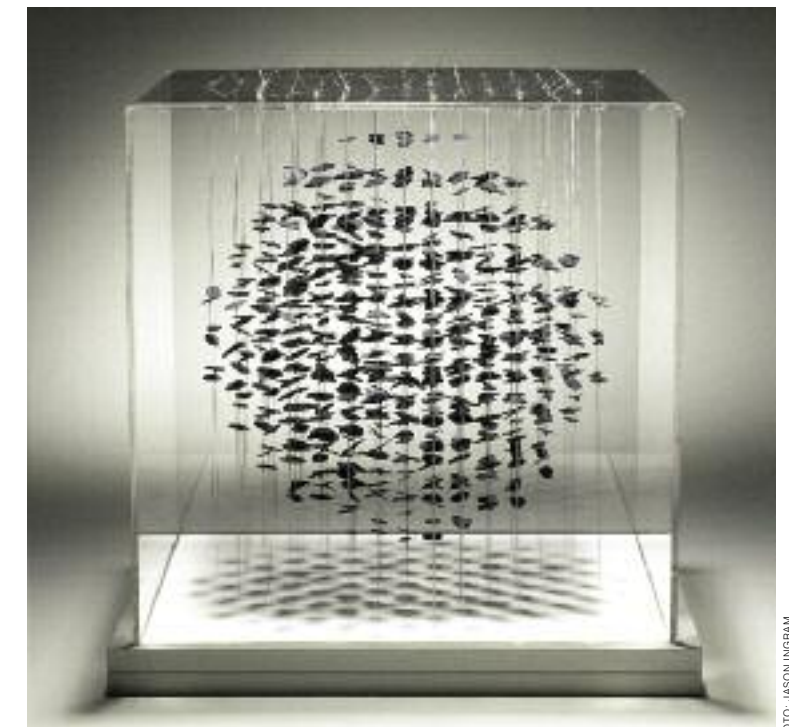


PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Pebble Sphere', 2006, acrylic cube, nylon covered steel wire, pebbles, crimps, 33 x 33 x 32 cm

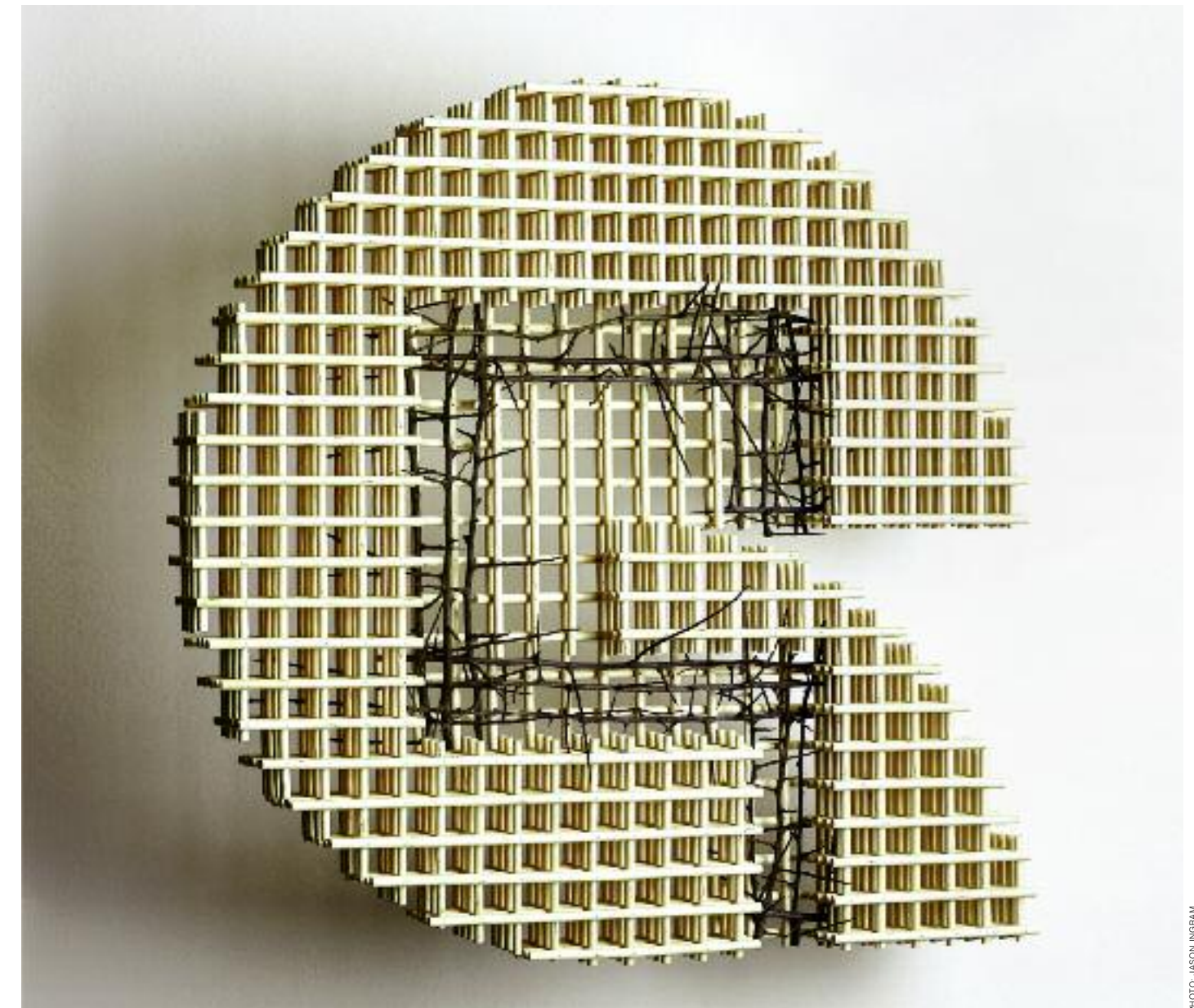


PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Innocence', 2013, white willow, blackthorn, silver plated pins, constructed, 58 x 58 x 6 cm



PHOTO: DAIL BEHENNAH

'Spoons for Ceremonies', 2008, copper, brass, wood, vitreous enamel, paint and wax, forged, enamelled and riveted, overall measurement 61 x 46 x 5 cm

in order to create bowls of patinated copper, enamelled copper, and brass. She had in mind functions fulfilled by spoons, such as skimming, sifting and anointing.

The enlivening variety within a repetitive theme is a characterising attribute of Behennah's corpus and is exemplified in the numerically named *Twenty Five Squares* and *Nine by Five*. While working on a recent project, Behennah realised that she was employing basketry techniques, such as plaiting, weaving and twining which she had not used for 20 years and refinding these methods has given her the incentive to utilise them once again, reinterpreting them in new configurations. It is an exercise such as this which helps one to understand why she sees her body of work as progressive and logical – the sum of her experiences.

The total focus which is required when working, is how the processes of making help this artist to escape restlessness during the long, labour-intensive periods in her studio. But away from the workplace ideas for further projects continue



PHOTO: DAIL BEHENNAH

'Labelled' (detail), 2009, an installation of 500 vitreous enamelled classification labels for Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery, UK



PHOTO: DAIL BEHENNAH

'Guitar String Dish', 2012, recycled brass wound guitar strings and gold plated copper wire, coiled, 26 x 26 x 2 cm

to present themselves because 'an idea and the making of it stimulate and change each other'.² This reflexive, fertilising exchange can be likened to the viewer's engagement with these artefacts. Our looking and our consideration reveal – through both cerebral reflection and instinctual insights – surprising and enlightening meanings within Dail Behennah's richly minimal oeuvre.

Ian Wilson

Footnotes

1. Behennah's approach is reflected in the American sculptor Donald Judd's statement: 'I pay a lot of attention to how things are done and the whole activity of building something is interesting.' www.brainyquote.com (Site accessed 15/2/13)

2. This statement can be read alongside Number 10 of Sol Lewitt's Sentences on Conceptual Art: 'Ideas can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.'

Sentences on Conceptual Art, first published in 0-9 (New York) 1969 and Art-Language (England) May 1969.

www.cognitivegeometrics.wordpress.com (Site accessed 18/2/13).



PHOTO: JASON INGRAM

'Traeth Mawr', 2004, white willow, silver plated pins, slate, marram grass, driftwood, waxed linen thread, drilled and threaded, each cross 52 x 52 x 6 cm