

# Robert Smit: Craving the Essential

BY LIESBETH DEN BESTEN



*Towards the Liberation of Drawings,*  
1984  
drawing  
41 1/2 x 29 1/2"



*Neck Ornament,* 1984  
gold  
longest element 3 3/8"  
THE BOELEN COLLECTION,  
THE NETHERLANDS



Brooch, 1969  
gold, silver, paint  
3 x 2 1/8"  
THE BOELEN COLLECTION, THE  
NETHERLANDS

IN JANUARY 2013, Dutch artist Robert Smit combined drawings from the period 1975–85 with recent digital prints in the exhibition “The Present is the Result of the Past” (Galerie Locus Solus, Antwerp). Also shown were recent brooches from the “Letters to Madonna delle Dolomiti” series. The new work (prints and brooches) can be observed as a transformation in different techniques and materials of the earlier drawings. Taken together, the drawings and jewelry encapsulate the two major directions of Smit’s career. Although mainly known for his art jewelry, his work has been directed by drawing continuously.

Smit attended a technical school for instrument making in his hometown of Delft. By the age of nineteen, he was repairing jewelry for a jeweler’s shop. During this period he met artist Jan Schoonhoven, a member of the Zero art movement, whom he visited almost every day, fascinated by Schoonhoven’s personality, his art, and the jazz music he enjoyed. While friends gathered in Schoonhoven’s living room, drinking and discussing movies, literature, and art, the artist “stood at the table and glued with great calmness his reliefs” as Smit recalled.<sup>1</sup> It left an indelible impression on him. Schoonhoven’s reliefs were made from cardboard strips attached on a square wooden plate and painted white. The Zero movement (“Nul” in Dutch) popped up simultaneously in the late 1950s in different European countries; Zero artists worked from scratch aiming at a new beginning in art and society by denying personal expression to bring their art closer to the people.

Schoonhoven encouraged Smit to apply for a place in the Staatliche Kunst + Werkschule in Pforzheim (Germany). Although Smit could not meet the requirements, he was admitted nonetheless and became a student of master-goldsmith Klaus Ullrich. In 1966, Smit graduated cum laude and returned to the Netherlands. The same year he won a gold medal at the annual “Schmuck” (jewelry) exhibition, part of the International Trade Fair (IHM) in Munich.<sup>2</sup> In 1971, however, Smit stopped making jewelry. Photographed for an interview a few years later, he appears to be a promising if self-conscious young artist, dressed in stained jeans, a felt-tip pen in hand, and in the interview, he explained “it all happened on a beautiful warm day in May . . . a really great day with a super fabulous happening: the day I sold my goldsmith’s equipment for 2,000 guilders.”<sup>3</sup> His reasons for stopping were personal: My idea of what jewelry or an ornament should be was aligned with the visual arts. So the obvious thing for me to do, at that moment, was to start drawing and painting. I wanted to work for myself, to break with conventional standards. To achieve that, I had to stop designing jewelry.”<sup>4</sup>

Up to then, Smit had created jewelry that was anchored in contemporary art movements such as Informal Art and Zero, which were not readily accepted by Dutch colleagues or the art institutions that organized contemporary jewelry exhibitions in the country and abroad. Smit’s poetic and tactile work did not fit into the so-called Dutch school of jewelry inspired by formal and geometric constructive art, with most artists working in series—preferably in steel

**Drawing became a continuous source of making, remaking, copying, and reproducing.**

and aluminum. Instead, Smit’s jewelry, made either entirely of gold, or of combinations of acrylic, gold, or steel, concentrated on an investigation of surface, and

each piece was conceived as a one-off design. His early work, made around 1966, dealt with the erosion of the surface but eventually the material treatment became more structured. The punching of rows and fields of small holes, combined with lines of numbers and words or letters, reflected his interest in surface markings. From there, it was an easy step, not a big jump, to drawing.

Drawing, painting, and photography became his primary media. He studied the properties of drawing, the movement of the pencil, the touch of two different materials emanating from the movement of the hand. Using Polaroids—instant photography then being a new and exciting device—Smit made a series of studies of his hand while drawing and while playing with a pencil. Instant photography also provided his last contribution to a jewelry exhibition in this period: “Jewellery in Europe,” curated in 1975 by Ralph Turner. Smit submitted a series of 205 Polaroid photographs of a man

holding two packets of cigarettes behind his back, showing “synchronous movements of my favorite hand-adornment” as part of the descriptive title of the work reads. Smit’s work represented a sub-theme of the exhibition: “an exhibition of progressive work.” In Smit’s case, however, the progression was prompted not by jewelry but by fine art. It was not his intention to become a conceptual jeweler; at that time he had lost interest in jewelry.

In 1978, Smit had a series of ten exhibitions, “Towards the Liberation of Drawings,” at Galerie Orez Mobiel in The Hague. The exhibitions and works on display demonstrated the seriousness with which Smit approached his artistic research, taking into account different conditions and a priori givens. A wide range of techniques and methods was explored in a prodigious flow of productivity, in which the act of drawing remained central. Even a hiking tour in Wales turned into an exploration of drawing, an attempt to capture the essence of the village of Cwrt by approaching it from different directions while never actually reaching it. Drawing became a continuous source of making, remaking, copying, and reproducing. For fifteen years Smit continued to be fascinated by the phenomenon of drawing, with many of his results shown in a solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1984.



Brooch and Ring, 1970  
gold, acrylic  
brooch 3 1/8 x 3 1/8"  
THE BOELEN COLLECTION, THE  
NETHERLANDS



Brooch, 1985  
gold, paint  
7 x 4 3/4"  
COLLECTION OF STEDELIJK MUSEUM,  
AMSTERDAM



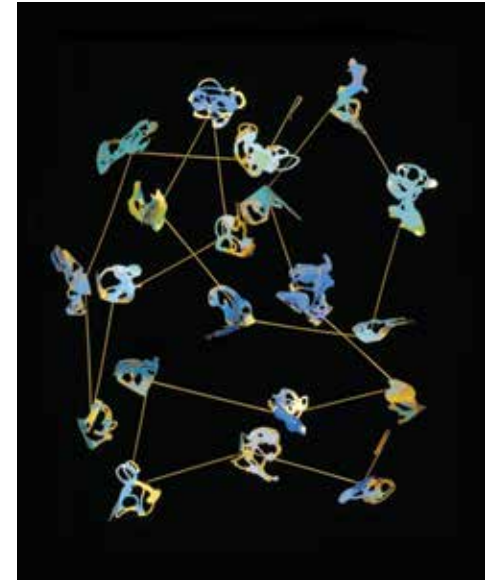
Bello as a Rocking-Horse (brooch),  
1992  
gold, pearls, paint  
4 5/8 x 4 3/4"  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, GERMANY

Madonna delle Dolomiti X (necklace), 2007  
gold, silver, Epson print on paint  
5 1/8 x 4 1/2"  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, GERMANY



Silo object

One year later, in 1985, Smit reentered the jewelry world with the "Ornamentum Humanum" exhibition at Galerie RA, Amsterdam. By then he thought "nothing could be added to drawing, the research was finished. Miraculously these ideas made it possible to start making jewelry again."<sup>5</sup> Much has been written about this exhibition not least for engendering a debate between Smit and designer Gijs Bakker, centered on the issue of gold and artistic integrity, instigated by a leading Dutch fine art magazine.<sup>6</sup> By the 1980s in the Netherlands, among radicalized Dutch jewelers, gold was largely spurned as a medium, although some young jewelers such as Annelies Planteijdt and Philip Sajet, had cautiously started using it. Dutch purists rejected Smit's idiosyncratic use of gold, curled up, creased, serrated, flowing, and oxidized, which he elaborated with drawings, scratches, and imprints. Smit's treatment of the 24k gold he favored revealed its immense sculptural and artistic potential; he discovered the material anew. But the general discourse in Dutch jewelry was concerned with the future and in the magazine Bakker accused Smit of re-establishing jewelry as a "status symbol and safe investment." This time Smit was not taken aback; he pleaded for the "physical beauty," "imagination," and "enchantment" of a new kind of jewelry, denouncing Bakker's



Chain, 1991  
gold, paint  
length 50"  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, ITALY

**Smit's treatment of the 24k gold he favored revealed its immense sculptural and artistic potential; he discovered the material anew.**



Succulent Tulip (brooch), 1998  
gold, silver, enamel  
3 3/8 x 6 1/4 x 1/4"  
COLLECTION OF RIJKSMUSEUM,  
AMSTERDAM

“anti-concepts” as “nothing more than comments on an existing situation.”<sup>7</sup>

From the first series of jewelry in gold, other new series developed, oxidized and painted with vibrant colors, cubes, swirling forms, and plaited compositions. In his “Bello” series, around 1992, narrative entered his work. It was based on a series of characters he developed. One, the dog Bello, acted as Smit’s alter ego. Other characters included Bello’s dog sister, a young girl Lili, her doll, a fat man, and a working woman, all fantasies inspired by a comic strip by Moebius. Together they formed a narrative, like a sequence of stills from an unmade movie—open to interpretation, to anyone’s imagination. In some of these pieces, Smit tried to negate the spell of gold by covering it in layers of paint. In 2004 he expressed his fascination for the material: “It cannot be compared to any other material, the strength of color and tone, the intensity. If I make an alloy—I always do this myself—it is incredibly exciting to see if it has the color I wished. The tonality of gold is so immense, so rich, I can work with that the rest of my life.”<sup>8</sup>

Drawing and painting were still important, although as adjuncts to the jewelry making. Around 2004, Smit

started reworking drawings he had made twenty-five years earlier—the “Cwrt” drawings, as well as notations of landscapes, roads, impressions, and places in Wales. The original drawings had been made in a period of high artistic activity, but in fact he had never actually finished the “Cwrt” series. In his reworkings, he made studies on paper and worked in collage. He began to see how these drawings might be realized as jewelry. He created a series of large gold pendants, with compositions consisting of small bits of painted gold, silver, and lead scattered over a square field of glowing and scratched gold. These pendants were, foremost, two-dimensional works of art. Indeed, adorning the body is not Smit’s first motive for making jewelry: “I’ve never had the feeling that my jewelry should connect with the body. Whether on a table, in a museum, or on the wall—it’s all the same to me. Beside that, jewelry should be examined in your hands, like drawings. The people who are wearing my jewelry make a connection with me. It can be rather confronting, it is never noncommittal, as an artist you lose your control.”<sup>9</sup> This must be rather disturbing for an artist who kept his other artwork, the drawings and prints, for later reworking, as if he was not finished and there is more to express.

The need to narrate is the motor of Smit’s work. Stories pop up continuously: about Bello the dog, or an encounter between Erasmus and Thomas Moore, or Madonna delle Dolomiti, a mysterious woman with an exquisite voice. On a drive through the Dolomites in Italy, Smit heard a woman singing an Italian folksong on the car radio and was enchanted by her voice. In his imagination he makes the drive again and again, and each time feels the same enchantment: “This is what’s it is all about. This is the way I want to create art. . . . I want to design jewelry that shares the same incomprehensible brilliance that partakes of the same ineffable clarity. This brilliance, this clarity, is the essence of all art to me.”<sup>10</sup>

In the same period Smit began investigating digital technology as an artistic tool by drawing on the computer and printing on paper or inappropriate materials such as wood and gold. He labored to develop a method to adapt ink to gold via a layer of paint. The first results were shown in the exhibition “Madonna delle Dolomiti” (Galerie Louise Smit, 2008), where jewelry was displayed alongside computer drawings. According to Smit, “the possibilities of digital drawing are immense. Drawing with a pencil on a computer tablet is lovely, it is another experience, much faster and manipulative. It is not about indolence, your effort is the same but you can react faster with the computer. I can spend days behind the computer until the image doesn’t change essentially anymore, it is a continuous dialogue with the image.”<sup>11</sup> Again Smit is reusing drawings in another context, alongside the letters he has been writing to the imaginary Madonna delle Dolomiti. Smit explains, “I think I have become too much encapsulated in jewelry. I want to have it in balance, drawing and jewelry—they are so close to each other.”<sup>12</sup> In Smit’s art, sometimes they merge and other times they go their own way, yet together they are the essence of his art.

Liesbeth den Besten is a Dutch art historian, working as a freelance writer, teacher, lecturer and curator in the field of contemporary jewelry and design.

1. Robert Smit, “Golden Years—From the Light of Delft to the Sparkle of the Dolomites,” typescript of a lecture presented at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, March 2, 2008.
2. Smit’s jewelry has received many awards, most recently the prestigious Golden Ring of Honour, to be presented in 2014 by the Gesellschaft für Goldschmiedekunst e.V. Deutsches Goldschmiedehaus Hanau.
3. Ralph Turner, *Contemporary Jewelry: A Critical Assessment, 1945–1975* (London: Studio Vista; New York: Macmillan Inc., 1976), p. 172.
4. Anny Talli Nencioni, ed., *Robert Smit* (Zurich: Aurum, 1992), p. 28.
5. Robert Smit, interview by the author, Amsterdam, February 11, 2013.
6. Godert van Colmjon in gesprek met Gijs Bakker en Robert Smit, “Een onpersoonlijk lijf tegenover de horst van Rob van Koningsbruggen,” *Museumjournaal* 3–4 (1986): 169–79.
7. All translations from the Dutch are by the author.
8. Liesbeth den Besten, “Weergaloos Schoon,” *Museumtijdschrift* 7 (November 2004): 12–16.
9. Smit, interview.
10. Robert Smit and Jacob Groot, *Madonna delle Dolomiti (Synopsis of the Project)*, exh. cat., April 2007 (Amsterdam: Galerie Louise Smit, 2008).
11. Smit, interview.
12. Ibid.



*Madonna delle Dolomiti*, 2006  
computer drawing  
23 1/2 x 31 1/2"  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, THE  
NETHERLANDS

*Looking for Madonna delle Dolomiti*  
(necklace), 2006  
gold, silver, paint  
4 1/2 x 3 7/8"



*Letters to Madonna delle Dolomiti*  
(brooches), 2011  
tinplate, paint, Epson print  
3 1/8 x 3 3/8 x 1 1/2"