



The
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Tom Rucker

By Sally Dodson



Tom Rucker

I first came across Tom Rucker's work three years ago. I had never met him and assumed that the man in his thirties who called himself master goldsmith and 'Mr Laser' might perhaps be a little arrogant and his work would not live up to his talk. My hasty judgements could not have been further from the truth. Tom is a patient, unassuming and calm character and is an absolute pleasure to work with. On paper he describes his work with justifiable confidence but in person his quiet and friendly nature disguises his frenetic but

forms. I have often seen jewellery which is described as original but, if you look back in history, you will find that most jewellery is based on age-old ideas. However Tom's inspiration is 20th century architecture and his tool of choice is a machine which was not available until the late 1990s; his work really does stand out from the crowd.

In press stories about Tom, the text usually concentrates on his specialist techniques and his awards. From my perspective, having not discovered Tom before Goldsmiths' Fair in 2007, I was intrigued to find out how he made such an impact. Like the galaxies and space that inspire him, Tom has crash landed on the London jewellery scene like an alien spaceship bringing new forms and a strange technology. When I see work by fine jewellers I have a sense of their background and how their work has developed. Typically I would have seen earlier work at degree shows or as 'masterpieces' made at the end of an apprenticeship. Additionally, when you

examine a piece of fine jewellery – even if you have no experience of jewellery making yourself – you can imagine the processes which were involved in making the piece. However, when I first saw a piece of jewellery by Tom, I was stumped. When he explained how it was made, I was in awe. Wanting to learn a little more about the man behind the machine, I met up with him and we discussed his childhood, education, inspirations, aspirations and working life.

Tom Rucker was literally born to be a goldsmith – in 1970 to a family of jewellers in the Munich suburb of Ottobrunn. Growing up he was never pressured to become part of the family business but he was inspired by the work that he saw his father making and by the tender age of eight he had started to experiment and play with metals. At fifteen he had to start thinking about career choices. His first instinct was to become an architect – he had always been fascinated by complex structures of buildings by architects such as Buckminster Fuller. However,

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dedicated working life. Like many jewellers, Tom makes fantastic creations using platinum and precious stones but what sets his work apart is its structure. New technology allows Tom to create truly unique



*Geo Galactica ring, 2009,
platinum, pavé set brilliant cut
diamonds (natural fancy grey)
Hanover Saffron for PGI UK*

he admits he was not a natural academic and so this did not seem the best choice. Instead, a love of materials, form and creation naturally led Tom to a career in which he could excel – after all he had the example of the three generations before him. “Jewellery is architecture on a smaller scale. What I do is not much different to buildings – and like buildings what I create has to fit in its environment”.

Tom was already fairly skilled before he went to the Luisenschule School of Jewellery and so had found an outlet where he could be top of the class. The work itself was relatively easy for Tom so he set a challenge to himself to be always the best. After school, Tom attended the HBZ (Das Handwerkskammer Bildungszentrum Münster) to complete his Master of Arts. Here his work was always different from that of his contemporaries. He made collections that were kinetic and included ball bearings sourced from a specialist medical supplier. I was now beginning to learn that Tom never settled for the norm.

At this time, in 1994, Tom heard that a manufacturer was planning to design a laser welder. In his bid always to be different and to push the boundaries, Tom saw in this machine an opportunity to lead his work into an entirely new field. Using money he received from selling his ‘masterpiece’ he had, by 1995, the funds to purchase one of the first laser welding machines specially designed for the jewellery trade. At that time there were no courses or workshops he could attend to learn how to use it, so he practiced and, by trial and error with different alloys and techniques, he started to develop the pieces for which he is known today.

That same company also sold a laser welder to the Jewellery Industry Innovation Centre (JIIC) at Birmingham City University. By then Tom had three years’ experience of using the welder so he was an obvious choice when the company was approached by JIIC to suggest someone who could teach laser welding. This was such a new technology that very few people knew how to

use the lasers successfully and resources were limited. In 1997 Gay Penfold at UCE was instrumental in bringing Tom to the UK and hiring him, on a freelance basis, to lead workshops and short courses on how to use the machine. Gay recalled how popular the courses were. Hitherto, laser welders had only been used to repair jewellery and to fix problems in cast items. A machine which had originally been developed for the dental industry was mainly used for very functional purposes. However, under Tom’s tutelage, students were introduced to ways in which the laser could be used for creative projects. This was a hectic time for Tom as he was flying between Birmingham and Munich, teaching at the university and running his own business back home.

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He remembered it fondly and expressed his gratitude to Gay for his introduction to the UK. She also has happy memories of that time – she recalled that Tom had become friends with the other tutors and, as a result, they all wanted to teach in the same week. Together with Tom, the sculptor



*Geo Crystalball earrings, 2009,
platinum, laser set rose cut
diamonds (white)
Hanover Saffron for PGI UK*

Geo Sunburst pendant, 2009, platinum, pavé set brilliant cut diamonds (white) and South Sea pearl

Hanover Saffron for PGI UK



Julian Cross, the US based metalsmith Phil Poirier and platinum expert Juergen Maerz. Gay formed a close knit group based particularly on their social 'cooking' evenings and they are still in contact today. By 2004, these friendships, and an even closer one with his English girlfriend, persuaded Tom to make the jump and to settle in the UK.

Tom based his business in a studio at Yorkshire Artspace in Sheffield and for the next few years he developed his work and started to build up a UK client base. His own laser welder was still in Germany but Ashley Carson gave him the freedom to use the one at Sheffield Assay Office, for which he is still very grateful. Tom described the jewellery which he made before he started to use laser welding as "quite commercial" and commented that the range he made in his early days was never as popular as his laser welded creations. But throughout his studies and professional life he has always aspired to create something different.

Tom advised his students "Don't blend in with the jewellery trade or you won't survive". He also urged his students to take their inspiration from the world around them, not from their own trade. For his own inspiration Tom looks to nature, technology and space. When you see his work it may not be a surprise to discover that the area of Ottobrunn has long been associated with technological companies and is currently the home to EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company).

To make a name for himself in the UK, Tom applied for several awards and started to gain some industry recognition. He won a gold medal at the quadrennial Benvenuto Cellini Competition, the Lonmin Design Innovation Award three times, and several awards from the Goldsmiths' Crafts and Design Council, including the Technological Innovation Award. He applied to Goldsmiths' Fair in 2007 and was offered a stand. Shortly before the fair took place, Tom's relationship with his

girlfriend ended and he was, in fact, thinking of returning to Germany. However, he had such a successful time at the Fair that he was kept busy with commissions for the next twelve months. Here at the Goldsmiths' Company, whilst we appreciated and admired his work, we never thought that he would take off so quickly. It can take some time for designer-makers to establish their reputation but Tom was an exception. By 2008 Tom realised that all of his clients were UK based and he decided to stay in this country but to move down to London.

Tom has loved the last two years living in the capital. It is a very convenient place for him to be, close to his clients, but also he loves the 'multiculturalness' of it. London is now his inspiration. At weekends he likes to wander around with a camera. His favourite areas are Brick Lane, Docklands and the City – he especially likes to sit by the Swiss Re 'Gherkin' building just to look up at it. He takes thousands of photos. The work of architect Norman Foster (himself a student of Buckminster Fuller) is his latest inspiration. Tom frequently flies home to Munich to visit his parents. As someone who seems to owe a great deal to his upbringing, the local environment and education,

I was surprised to learn that Tom prefers London to his home city. I discovered that it is first and foremost his family who draw him back to Munich. Or, as Tom more succinctly puts it, "business in London, family in Munich".

Tom's current jewellery creations are the result of a long-standing traditional goldsmithing heritage combined with over fifteen years' research and experimentation with new technology. His creations have not just appeared, they are born from his expert skills acquired through many years of hard graft. During this time he developed a special 95% platinum alloy, that allows him to weld his pieces successfully using wire as thin as 0.2mm. This ensures that the finished piece can be quite light but the structure is still strong enough to withstand daily wear. Using platinum allows for many joins to be made very close together. In layman's terms the laser creates a narrow burst of very intense heat and, if aimed at two pieces held together, will melt them at that point forming a bond. Platinum diffuses the heat less than other precious metals, therefore joins can be made closer together. In addition it allows precious stones to be incorporated into the design because the heat will not be transferred from the metal and cause



*Geo Supernova ring, 2008.
18ct gold, platinum, pavé and
laser set brilliant cut diamonds
(white and natural fancy yellow)
Hanover Saffron for PGI UK*

damage to the stone. Incidentally Tom is also a qualified gemmologist and diamond expert. All of the tiny pieces of wire, joined at different angles, catch the light beautifully giving the jewellery an unusual sparkling effect. Work on such a minute scale can only be done by looking through a microscope using a laser welder. Tom comments that "Laser welding has a ridiculous strain on body and soul" which might sound overly dramatic until you realise that his *Geo Geosphere* necklace is comprised of over 700,000 laser joins. The repetition can be difficult to cope with physically and mentally and, like any repetitive activity, using a laser welder so intensively can lead to muscle damage.

Earlier this year Tom celebrated his fortieth birthday and this landmark seems to have triggered a change in his outlook. Last year he took a holiday for the first time in several years. The man who described himself as going through life like a rocket now admits that he needs to level out and cruise at altitude for a while. Reaching to where he is today has not been without problems – "To achieve such skills is the result of working extremely hard. I have been so focused on my trade that I forgot to live." So Tom

tells me that he is taking it easier this year, looking after himself. I am not entirely sure that I believe him. A recent holiday to South Africa has sparked his enthusiasm for a new project. Tom tells me that his future plans are to make bigger creations and sculptural pieces utilising his laser welding technique (that he has called GEO.2) with platinum and diamonds. His rings currently are already quite large and there is a limit to how much one can wear on one's finger – so his next step is to go away from the body. "But what about your jewellery?" I cry. "Well I'll still be making some jewellery" he says, "...after all I couldn't bear to think that there might be women out there going without my creations." For those who cannot survive without his creations check out the Company's website www.whoswhoingoldandsilver.com or visit Tom at Goldsmiths' Fair from 27 September to 10 October 2010.

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"Don't blend in with the jewellery
trade or you won't survive"



*Geo Geosphere
necklace, 2008, platinum
Hanover Saffron for PGI UK*

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