



art Gold medals all round

Two exhibitions champion an age-old counterculture of creating disdainful medals as art — thanks largely to the vision, expertise and skill of Felicity Powell



ANDREW
GRAHAM-DIXON

Medals of Dishonour ★★★★★

British Museum, London WC1 (020 7323 8000) to Sep 27

Felicity Powell ★★★★★

Domobaal, London WC1 (020 7242 9604) by appointment only, to Aug 31

The medal as a medium of art was rediscovered during the Renaissance. Many of the rulers of Italy's city states were mercenaries who achieved wealth and power on the battlefield. They longed for dynastic and political legitimacy and sought to claim it by attaching themselves to the myths and legends of classical antiquity. The Caesars of old had been depicted in profile on their coins and medals, so that was how the Italian soldier-rulers of the 15th century decided they should be portrayed too. Piero della Francesca painted the thin-lipped despot of quattrocento Rimini, Sigismondo Malatesta, in profile as if he were a Roman emperor on an intaglio gem.

The court artist of the d'Este in Ferrara, Antonio Pisanello, went one step further and revived the medium of the portrait medal itself. In his hands, the portrait medal became a powerful tool of dynastic propaganda. On one side of the medal, the ruler or his bride would be depicted in the standard profile pose. On the other Pisanello would invent some subtle device, an allegorical pattern meant to symbolise the powers and virtues of the man or woman to whom the medal was dedicated — a rock for steadfastness, an eagle for far-sighted calculation, a unicorn for chastity.

The British Museum has a strong collection of medals by Pisanello. So it might seem surprising that none should have been included in its enthralling new exhibition of medallic art, from the Renaissance to the present day. But Pisanello's medals were designed to honour those for whom they were struck, whereas the new exhibition explores subversive medallic art. Its title is **Medals of Dishonour** and it takes as its theme a rich and often bizarre counter-tradition of medals made to insult, denigrate and disparage. The brainchild of contemporary artist and medal-maker Felicity Powell, it is one

of the most original shows of the year.

It takes its title from the *Medals for Dishonour* series, created during the late Thirties by American sculptor David Smith. Two have been included in the present show, although they are so large and complex in their imagery that they might more aptly be described as small bas-relief sculptures. One, *Private Law and Order Leagues*, is an assault on the murderous racism of the Ku Klux Klan; the other, *Co-operation of the Clergy*, is an attack on priests and ministers who distort the teachings of their faith to foment war.

Even more touching is the medal designed by a German Jew named Arnold Zadikow and simply entitled *War*. Created in 1915, as a protest against the horrors of the trenches, the medal shows an emaciated figure of Death sitting astride a phallic cannon. Having fought for Germany in the Great War, Zadikow would eventually be betrayed by the grinning spectre of Nazi evil. He met his death in Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1943.

Medals of misrule form a

IT TAKES AS ITS THEME A RICH AND OFTEN BIZARRE COUNTER-TRADITION OF MEDALS MADE TO INSULT, DENIGRATE AND DISPARAGE

distinct category, a form of counter-coinage to set against the actual coinage of a kingdom or domain. These might show Cromwell as a devil; Louis XIV as a vomiting, defecating buffoon; or Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte as a scarab. But the anti-medal really comes into its own in the early modern period, propelled by the humanitarian energies and ideals of the Enlightenment. John Gregory Hancock's *The Uncharitable Monopoliser*, created in Birmingham in 1800, is a masterpiece of early social protest, a brilliantly emetic cartoon on a tiny disc of pewter. Outraged by the activities of speculators in grain, whose hoarding of the commodity had caused widespread famine in the



Compact discs from top, 'The Uncharitable Monopoliser' by John Gregory Hancock; 'For Faith in Shopping' by Grayson Perry; and Felicity Powell's 'Skull in Grass'

Midlands, Hancock struck back with a concisely horrific image of obscene greed — a man, mouth stretched open like the maw of a boa constrictor, attempting to devour the world.

The range of the exhibits is magnificent. From the 20th-century, it includes Marcel Duchamp's *Sink Stopper*, a Conceptualist assault on the very notion of a medal, cast not to proclaim anyone's virtues, but simply to stop a leak in the shower of his home in Spain. The father of English Pop Art, Richard Hamilton, also contributes a medal, specially created for the show. It is the ghoulish *Hutton Award*, with a horribly grinning likeness of Tony Blair.

Fittingly, the most brilliant reinventor of the medallic tradition in the modern day turns out to be Powell herself. Her medal *Hot Air* is a diatribe on the theme of global warming. On one side, a hydra-headed monster speaks with forked tongue; on the other, a pair of human buttocks surface from water like the back of the whale, farting clouds into the sky.

Her medal reinvents the form itself: it's a satirical spool, on which is wound a ribbon of text, fatuities spouted by self-interested politicians.

POWELL'S MEDAL not only serves as a coda to the British Museum's exhibition, but as an introduction to a breathtaking display of her most recent body of work, at the Domobaal Gallery.

Here, once more, she takes as her inspiration the gems and intaglios, the coins and medals of the Renaissance past. The result is a series of virtuoso, compelling and haunting miniature bas-reliefs on the theme of Ovidian metamorphoses — human heads that are turning into outcrops of coral; figures shape-shifting into trees; or octopi, faces wreathed in snakes. Worked, with wondrous subtlety, from white wax on dark mirror glass, each is a miracle of ingenuity.

Single-handedly, Powell has revived and reanimated an entire Renaissance tradition — a rich and intricate tradition of subtle workmanship and symbolism, that includes not only the work of a medal-maker such as Pisanello, but also the curious Mannerist fantasies of later Renaissance art and indeed the delicate traditions of relief sculpture as it was practised by sculptors from Donatello to Arnolfo di Cambio.

She brings a dead language suddenly and startlingly back to life.