

Few artists produce bodies of works that are as unique or as consistent as that of Mari Funaki (1950–2010). Over a career nearing twenty years, using a limited material repertoire of gold and blackened mild steel, she produced a distinctive body of jewellery and metalwork: a diverse range of engaging forms within a singular aesthetic style. Formidable in their complexity and vital charge, and in their expressive and associative capacities, her crisp geometric forms stemmed from a desire to express the way she saw the world around her. This exhibition encompasses a range of the artist's mild-steel objects dating from the late 1990s to 2010, following her gradual shift during that decade from functional objects towards purely sculptural forms and the recent transition in her work to large-scale sculptures.

Funaki was born in Matsue, Japan, in 1950, and studied law in her early twenties. After arriving in Australia in 1979 she followed her creative ambitions, initially by studying painting at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. By the late 1980s, inspired by Melbourne's thriving contemporary jewellery scene and seeking an alternative medium for her art, Funaki took private lessons in gold and silversmithing from the jeweller Viliama Grakalic. Soon after, she enrolled in RMIT's gold and silversmithing course and studied under prominent jewellers Marian Hosking, Robert Baines and Carlier Makigawa. It was during her student years at RMIT that Funaki discovered her true ambitions as a jeweller and metalsmith and began to develop her uniquely personal visual language of precisely constructed forms.

Not long after graduating from RMIT, in 1995 Funaki established Gallery Funaki in Melbourne, the city's first space dedicated to contemporary jewellery. Through the gallery she forged connections between European, Japanese, New Zealand and Australian jewellers, and provided them with a new and prestigious platform for showing their work. Balancing her life as a gallerist with her life as a maker, she attracted many leading international and Australian jewellers to her gallery while steadily gaining widespread respect for her own work, winning the prestigious Herbert Hofmann prize in Munich in 1996 and 1999. Through her growing reputation as an artist and the relationships she fostered through her gallery, Funaki quickly established herself at the forefront of the international gold and silversmithing community.

Funaki's approach to her art was intuitive and inventive. Initially she made works in direct response to the natural world, finding inspiration in the structures of plants and insects. However, as her visual language developed its own momentum throughout the 1990s, her focus shifted inwards as she explored and expanded her own sculptural syntax. From her earliest brooches, rings and bracelets to her more recent sculptural objects, her works have been defined by rigorous investigations into form and space.

The dynamic tension in Funaki's works emerges from a delicate interplay between positive and negative, exterior and interior, volume and space, concealment and revelation. When viewed from multiple angles, her objects often reveal surprises as elements appear to shift, unfold and rearrange in endless variations. Hidden spaces and unexpected details lie waiting to be discovered. These are works that require a particular kind of looking. They narrow and focus the eye's attention; they demand the intimacy of close observation.

Experimentation was central to Funaki's process of construction. Guided by her clear vision for the arrangement of line, volume and form, she would begin by sketching out her ideas on paper. Using her drawings as a guide, she would then translate her ideas into three-dimensional forms. Manipulating her preferred material of mild-steel sheeting through processes of scoring, folding and cutting, she would continue to resolve her compositions throughout the making process. Once she had settled on an arrangement of forms, she would solder the delicate constructions with formidable precision, then sandblast and heat-treat them to achieve the desired pristine black, matt surfaces.

The blackness of Funaki's objects is an important unifying feature and the origin of much of their evocative power. Drawn to the dark, deep qualities that black can offer, she used it in her works to create shadows and depth and to convey a sense of mystery or foreboding. Blackness also lends Funaki's objects a graphic quality. It flattens details and sets them into images that read like notations or signs. Blackness also inevitably accentuates the surrounding space. It articulates each object's forms and lines as much as its gaps and voids.

