

Astrid Ubbink

AJF artjewelryforum.org/in-conversation-with-annick-zufferey

Since 1995, Annick Zufferey has devoted herself to representing contemporary jewelry in Switzerland and beyond. She is driven by the urge to search for jewelry that breathes a highly developed aesthetic sense, but that moves away from “traditional” aesthetic value. In this interview, she talks about how she came into contact with contemporary jewelry and how the jewelry artists she represents are received in Switzerland.



Astrid Ubbink: Can you first tell us a little bit more about yourself? Did you study to become a jewelry maker yourself?

Annick Zufferey: I first trained in interior design, in draftsmanship. However, after graduating I switched to jewelry design under the guidance of Esther Brinkmann, a leading figure in Swiss studio jewelry and the founder of the BA program in jewelry design at the School of Applied Arts and Design in Geneva (now HEAD – Genève).

I was attracted to making artifacts, rather than the more abstract discipline of planning and drawing up interiors. I wanted something more concrete, more hands-on, in direct contact with materials. While seeking training in object design, I stumbled by luck on Brinkmann's jewelry design teaching and never looked back. As a tutor, she opened new pathways for me in several fields, and studying under her guidance remains one of the most stimulating experiences in my training.



How did you come into contact with contemporary jewelry?

Annick Zufferey: I have always love art, design, and craftsmanship. I'm a keen visitor of exhibitions, I avidly read the art press and media, and I follow the work of designers, both established ones and newcomers on the block. As I started very young as a gallery owner, I soon got closely involved with the contemporary jewelry scene.



What made you decide to start a gallery?

Annick Zufferey: In 1995 there was no specialized gallery for studio jewelry in Geneva. I was approached to take over a gallery in Lausanne, and it was a tempting offer. However, I wished to remain in Geneva and, in partnership with a colleague, found a space in the neighboring city of Carouge.

Carouge is my hometown. I grew up there, as did my father. Carouge is a “concept town,” a merchant town that dates back to 1754. It was built by the Kingdom of Sardinia, which reigned just across the border in Savoy, as one of its main commercial capitals, alive with crafts and small shops and an Italianate lifestyle and “la dolce vita.” It offered a stark contrast to the austere Calvinist city of Geneva. The architecture is typically Sardinian: low, colorful three-story buildings, with beautiful gardens in back overlooked by sheltered wooden balconies. An ideal setting for a jewelry gallery. In 2003, I opened my own gallery space in Carouge, adjacent to my family home.



Do you seek a common theme or a common aesthetic among the artists you represent?

Annick Zufferey: I believe one can find a coherent vision when looking at the entire collection housed in the gallery even without a guiding theme. I believe in supporting and showcasing designers, makers, and creators, whether newcomers or well established, but always dedicated to their work. Over the years, I have met many artists who give up as it becomes more and more difficult to earn a living with their craft and designs. You need dedication and staying power through thick and thin.



How is contemporary jewelry received in Switzerland?

Annick Zufferey: There is an audience that is interested and very open, attracted by the designers of contemporary jewelry. This audience understands the value of one-of-a-kind pieces, in small editions and exclusive designs, and prefers quality to quantity.



You've been present with your gallery at Frame during Schmuck in Munich since 2018. Has being surrounded by other jewelry gallerists from across the world influenced you in any way?

Annick Zufferey: The joy and stimulation of meeting like-minded galleries and people at Frame is huge. It creates an exciting emulation and a great opportunity to meet the curators, collectors, other enthusiasts, and connoisseurs, and even set up partnerships while sharing ideas.

I believe in cultivating your difference, even to sharpen it. That's what we wished to do in Munich. Our buyers have, in the long run, also had an impact on our selection, through their own taste and choices. It's a constant and fertile dialogue. Geneva remains a city of traditional, classic tastes, very attached to the value of materials and craftsmanship (reflected in its long-standing high jewelry workshops and brands). Jewelry made with what could be considered "poor" materials may quickly be associated with costume jewelry. That's where studio/contemporary jewelry, made by a designer supported by a gallery, comes in as a reassuring investment, not linked to trends or fashion. On the contrary, it offers a work that will stand the test of time and that can change hands or end up in a museum.



You've been a gallerist for almost 25 years. Where do you see yourself in the next five to 25 years?

Annick Zufferey: I wonder myself!! We're going through a time of upheavals and transformation in consumer tastes, values, and ways of buying. We work, live, travel so differently now. Exciting but also exacting and testing times.

Women have acquired a new level of independence and income. They are very busy, with less time to shop around and find that rare gem. They go about it differently, as reflected by the growing success of online shopping.



Is this platform adapted to the needs and ways of contemporary jewelry? I'm not absolutely convinced. I do believe that seeing and trying on a piece are crucial in this particular niche of the jewelry market, to find the one that gives the buyer that special kick. However, new generations of consumers accustomed to e-commerce from a young age are able to get that feeling "online," and I'm ready to take that on. It's always stimulating to find new outlets, invent new opportunities to work with the pervasive digital media that's now part of our daily lives.

Paradoxically, I also see that a whole range of consumers is attracted by a more close-knit market, with live interactions between sellers and buyers, where the consumer is an actor in a real-life exchange, and where the seller or designer can also make a statement.



Have you seen, experienced, or read anything recently that has inspired you and that you'd share with our readers?

Annick Zufferey: In 2018 I launched a jewelry design project with the jewelry design students of HEAD – Genève on the very American theme of the Christmas tree brooch, which is not so common in Europe, even though families gather around the tree to celebrate. The project is a huge success, both for my clients and more especially for the students, who find it challenging to create something different and out of the ordinary with a very mundane subject that has been masterfully interpreted already by all walks of great jewelry designers. I leave the brief very open, to encourage all kinds of interpretations and shapes, whether the theme is familiar to them or not, a tradition they embrace or not, with religious connotations or not. The results have amazed me and the gallery's audience. It has even sparked the beginnings of some collections!

