Maria Militsi’s Floral Studies: kitsch and tacky 1950s ornaments, all white, all found in charity shops, some with handwritten price stickers still attached. Their glaze is glossy and glassy, and some have patches of gilding, although this is browned and dulled with age. There is a pie funnel in the shape of a little bird, a dog that sniffs at a tortoise, a girl with an open book in her hands, and a mother poodle attached by a chain to two poodle puppies. And on each found object Militsi has placed a little heap of newly-made silver blossoms, created from soft modelling wax shaped using the same techniques as her mother used to make clay flowers. The silver is unburnished, not glossy like the glaze of the little statuettes, but white and frosty. The dull metal chain that links the poodle family has been replaced by a very fine chain of gold.

Caroline Broadhead’s four-legged stool: a small, humble piece of furniture, of a design that gives little clue as to its age. Its varnish is worn and battered, rubbed away completely on the seat, darker on the legs, and everywhere heavily obscured by the net of tiny glass beads that Broadhead has constructed over the stool’s surfaces. This extends across the seat (in pale buff to echo the faded wood) and stretches down to clothe each of the four legs in a tight stocking (darker brown to match the surviving varnish). It even spreads onto the surrounding floor, in a brickish red suggestive of terracotta tiles. The stool is pinned to this imagined floor, entangled in a delicate and decorative trap, whose beads have a gentle sheen that sparks to a brighter shine when the light falls at a raking angle.

Old and overlooked things have been found, and new things have been made, and the new and the old are in knotty relationship to each other. Certainly there is friendly proximity, and the juxtaposition of techniques and materials that for the most part derive from domestic contexts and traditional ideas of ‘women’s work’, as well as from both artists’ origins within the discipline of jewellery design. There is a satisfaction in iterative and repetitive processes, building up an object from tiny pieces, one bead at a time, one silver petal at a time. But there is also something critical and sharp in both Militsi and Broadhead’s additions and alterations, that knows about the traps set by domesticity, and that speaks about them with a critical and confident voice, that is aware of the dangers of the decorative, especially around its long history with gender, but that is also alert to its possibilities. Penny Sparke speaks of the glass ornaments her mother loved, objects that were perceived by mainstream masculine culture...
as trivial, tasteless and even dangerous’. Yet David Brett asserts that ‘the impulse to decorate and to find sensuous pleasure in materials cannot be denied; IT WILL BREAK OUT, COME WHAT MAY.’

Militsi, has taken kitchen implements (again, old, found, time-worn objects) and embellished them with jewellery techniques: a strainer’s holes are pierced or filled with earring studs, and a nutmeg grater has had its tiny blades clogged with diamonds (it could no longer grate a nutmeg, but it could deliver a nasty scratch). Tarnished forks have small silver charms impaled on their tines. Broadhead has taken another four-legged stool, this time with a glossy white paint finish. This stool has been carefully dissected, one might even say diced—chopped and sliced into hundreds of little pieces that are then carefully threaded back together again. The iterative and the additive here has been necessitated by a prior act of disassembling, the effect of which is to draw poignant attention to all those techniques of domestic craft that require the meticulous and time-consuming repetition of small acts. To what end? Sometimes just to fill a space—empty time, or an empty surface. This stool has been found and remade. It started as an overlooked domestic object with a simple purpose (sitting). It ends as an articulated three-dimensional mosaic of a slumped form that was once a stool. It’s no good any more for sitting on, but rather useful for thinking with, and for remembering.

Victoria Kelley (2015)

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