

Elisabeth Jesus Guennaibin Defner

A memory.

17 May 1931 – to 5 June 2017

By Birgit Wiesinger

Born in Igls in the Tyrol, as Elisabeth Defner, she used the double-barrelled name Kodré-Defner after marrying Helfried Kodré. From 1990 onwards, she called herself Jesus Elisabeth Gu. Defner. The name on her monography, which was published in 2012, is Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner and is used here.

She grew up in an artistically active family; her father a passionate photo artist; her mother, who was from Berlin, played the piano. Today her family still engages in artistic endeavours in every direction, be it photography, illustration, music or sculpture. In this kind of environment Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner began to draw in an exquisitely nuanced manner by the age of 12, and later she also painted in watercolour. Her interest was drawn not so much to the representation of nature, but much more so to the essence of nature. How does the decay of plants present itself, why is a snail shell so coiled, what structure is discernible, how do the veins of a leaf run? She meticulously explored every detail of the natural forms that she studied closely.

This was crucial for her study at the College of Applied Arts. She fondly recounted an episode where her future professor Eugen Mayer said, upon her application to the College, '*Freilein*, I see, you are able to sit on your ass.' She joined the metal master class (originally, she intended to study dancing and singing) as she had to fund herself and thought that she would be able to do so by working as a goldsmith.

After completing her studies, she joined the *Österreichische Werkstätten* (ÖW) and led the '*Kleinkunst*' (arts and crafts) section for two years. With the opportunity to present her own artwork at the ÖW, she worked there by day and at her workbench in her live-in studio at night. As the traditional techniques such as embossing and chasing proved too noisy for working at home at night she began, in collaboration with Helfried Kodré, testing out various alternative techniques. Soon casting, which was frowned upon then, became her metier. She did not apply this technique for the purpose of reproductions. Rather, by casting the metal she was able to render the details and shapes of the natural world and plant world into metal, thereby achieving the desired artistic expression – one of hyper naturalism. The particular structures of individual surfaces of the natural world gained presence and, by means of selected representation and intentional accentuation, a continuation of her delicate drawings, was carried over into cast objects.

Nature's infinite forms and structures motivated her. The smallest snail shells, a ginkgo leaf, feathers, birds' skulls, beetles, pine bark, the golden ratio which she observed in insects, the crystallised form of minerals, the particular shape of black walnuts, all inspired her. She delighted in the peculiarities of the smallest bug and of a baby crocodile's skull alike, used both in her work, as well as the skull of

a deer and the lily pad. She took selected natural forms and reconfigured, integrated and harmonised them with each other.

Her work referenced the earliest attributions for jewellery: Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner transformed animal skull bones into metal and made these metal casts into contemporary, wearable symbols of overcoming death. Her joy at innovation, of overcoming conventional standards, her keen interest in advancing the quality of distinctiveness with unique objects, led to the development of her extraordinary and individual artistic language.

From out of the intimacy of the atelier as a laboratory for experimentation her works found public recognition in her first exhibition in 1964 held in the *Eitelbergsaal* of the Museum of Applied Art (MAK). Together with Helfried Kodré she exhibited jewellery and Renate and Dieter Schrage ceramics. This event sent a signal out into the international jewellery scene, which caused the MAK under its then director Wilhelm Mrazek to found the collection for contemporary jewellery with two pieces by Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner.

However, “radical” – the word frequently used to characterise the Austrian jewellery art of the 1970s, did not apply to her. Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner did not want to demolish certain traditions that inspired aspects of her art, nor call aloud for revolution. She was a sensitive artist whose use of materials and techniques reflected her sensibility for nuances. She created innovative and distinguished works characteristic of her independent and self-directed path. The only considerations she had was for the people who appreciated and wore her jewellery. Regardless of the object-ness and size of her jewellery, it is eminently wearable, because she paid considerable attention to this feature in the making process.

Her love of nature and natural forces provoked her to work with raw crystals, a novelty in jewellery. Quartz crystal druses, ammonites, rock crystals and shimmering opals in their multitude were all appropriately worked into jewellery. The jewellery was precisely crafted and designed to be worn close to the body to benefit from the potential healing powers of rocks, metals and magnets.

Owing to her exquisite eye for design and her open-minded nature that allowed space for coincidences, she discovered her first magic wand in an ordinary chopstick. Here, the free style sculptural element of her work developed with a considerable amount of quantum mystical intent. Using the idea of magic wands as transmitters, receivers, totemic symbols of resurrection and meditation, her major concern was that the magic wands, in their application, were dividable into re-connectable parts. What, without using visible technical sophistication, was closer than the use of magnets for this purpose?

Magnets, used in traditional Chinese medicine for healing, held a particular significance for Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner because of their connectedness to the polarity of the geomagnetic field; and so magnets found their way from the magic wands into her jewellery as well. Magnets proved to be

ideal because of their energetic effects on the body and because their magnetic properties could be used optimally as the closing function in fastenings for necklaces. Here again, her innovative approach was exceptional.

From that moment on production quantity was required and the atelier was turned into a small manufacturing place. The worldwide patented ball necklace closure was on a roll until larger manufacturers and industrial producers respectively recognised the ingenious idea. Today, the magnetic clasp has become indispensable for many kinds of fastenings of necklaces.

The art facilities changed once again – back to an atelier, and once more full attention was dedicated to the making of unique art pieces in her live-in studio in the *Wiesingerstraße*, where, on the small balcony, next to the giant lemon tree, overgrowing plants brought nature into the inner city of Vienna.

There, she worked productively until late into the night. Until shortly before her death she danced, was incredibly active and still had her head full of plans for what was yet to be done, what could still be accomplished. Her agility may have resulted from her passion for experimentation and self-awareness, which is also the reason why she expanded her forename to Jesus Guennaibim in 1990.

Such an intensive life cannot be contained in a short article and therefore the following monograph is highly recommended for further reading: Bollmann, Karl. (2012) *Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner – Mensch /Natur /Kosmos – Schmuck und Gerät*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publisher.

Birgit Wiesinger met Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner at the time of the production of the magnetic balls and had the privilege to assist her with and contribute to numerous works. In the process, she recognised the distinct sensibility in the works of Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner and she enjoyed a friendship of 23 years with her. Auspiciously, she owns a pendant by Elisabeth J. Gu. Defner, which contains the small skull of a nightingale. As author jewellery maker, Birgit Wiesinger was the co-founder of the atelier *STOSSIMHIMMEL* and of the college *SchmuckDesign* in the *KunstModeDesign Herbststraße* in Vienna.

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