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Moderator: Hello and welcome to this webinar hosted by The Goldsmiths Company. I'm Rajesh Gogna, Chair of Contemporary British Silversmiths, and I'm delighted to introduce you to two of our members today, Jessica Jue and Sheng Zhang, as part of our 25th anniversary celebration talks in partnership with the Goldsmiths' Fair. Jessica Jue is a London-based silversmith known for her sculptural aesthetic. Jessica completed her training at Edinburgh College of Art and Bishopsland Educational Trust, where she received extensive training with many established silversmiths. She is a full member of Contemporary British Silversmiths and is based at the Goldsmiths Centre in London. Hi, Jessica.

Jessica Jue: Hello Rajesh.

Moderator: We've got Sheng Zhang here who graduated from Edinburgh College of Art in 2018, having previously studied at the School of Jewellery in Birmingham, and in China, at the University of Geosciences in Wuhan. He is currently an artist in residence at Glasgow School of Art, and a graduate member of Contemporary Silversmiths. So welcome Sheng Zhang.

Sheng Zhang: Hi Rajesh.

Moderator: It's a pleasure to speak to you both today to glean a deeper insight into your practice and hear how The Goldsmiths Company and Contemporary British Silversmiths may have helped you to develop and shape your practices and careers. I'm just going to start off by asking you a couple of questions about how you've been coming into this industry and how also you've developed your processes, design aesthetic, and also talk about little bit about your career aspirations. I want to start off by posting this question to both of you. How long have you both been a member Contemporary British Silversmiths? So we'll start with Jessica, please.

Jessica Jue: Wow. Well, with Contemporary British Silversmiths, I think I started becoming a graduate member in 2017, when I first left Bishopsland and came to London. So at that point, I think I rented a bench from Angela Cork. She was chair of CBS at that time, so I got to know the entire association, and all of its events and involvements through her. I think at that stage of my career, I wanted to be a bit more involved and understand the wider silversmithing community. Through that, I just joined as a graduate member.

Sheng Zhang: I think it was in 2016 when I was in the New Designers, during the exhibitions of CBS they came to me and asked me to join them. It's kind of like an award from CBS, so I've been awarded, free of charge one-year student membership. Since then, I say it's been five years now. Yes, and it has been a very exciting and impressive memory actually.

Moderator: And I guess, when you're presenting your work at New Designers, you're still very fresh and you're exploring your field and starting to put yourself out there. So it was great that you were recognised by Contemporary British Silversmiths and awarded the prize to join us, the free membership prize for graduate membership.

Sheng Zhang: Yes, absolutely!

Moderator: I want to ask you both what inspires your work

Sheng Zhang: So I think my work or my designs, are usually influenced or inspired by minimalist art and contemporary architecture, sculptures and some geometrical forms or shapes. And of course, I've also got inspirations from other well-established silversmiths' work, such as work from Angela Cork, Adi Toch, and also the works, the sculptures from American sculptor Richard Serra, and so many other contemporary designers or makers, even some photographers' work. The key elements or the key topic about my works or my design is the boundary, the volume, the capacity, the shadow and the subtle details. And my practice concentrates on exploring the connection of internal and external positive and negative spaces in my vessels, in my large-scale sculptural silver objects. So for example, for my 'Inside Out' work, that collection involves the utilisation of highlighted incisions and openings on the edges of the work. I treat those edges as a gate to review and emphasise the link of internal and external spaces inside and outside of my work. It also introduces the change of light actually, as a catalyst to go through the work and formulate the different shadows as a changeable echo of the work itself.

Another example is another collection named 'Off-vertical'. So you will see there is a little gold dot within that work. So that collection contains the indentation accident with the precious metal grains to complement the special qualities of these, you can say, beakers or vessels or containers, and it conveys a sense of integrity, and celebrates and connects the positive and negative space that an object dominates. I think my work, the style of my work is quite a minimal style. I think it's my taste of aesthetics. The purity of language is also another important preference of my work. I think a key theme of my work is to keep questioning the relationship between the work itself and its surroundings, as well as the role or function of conceptual, sculptural, aesthetic works of art.

Moderator: It's really interesting to hear that you pick up on Richard Serra, who's a very minimalist designer, who explores real large-scale architectural forms, almost overpowering the interior space of a museum or a gallery or an exterior outdoor space. So it's really interesting to see that comparison you make with slightly bringing your work down to a smaller scale, but on a tabletop environment.

Jessica Jue: Yes, I mean, that's really interesting for me to hear as well, because I think my work is actually so different, in contrast, but it's amazing how we all draw inspiration from such different things. But in terms of my visual source of inspiration, I think the things that usually inspire me include organic things such as floral detail, or the curvature of shells, or the dramatic motion of water. But a lot of what I do also aims to create a certain kind of balance and harmony within my work. And I tend to be inspired by the kind of natural and organic fluidity which creates a sense of rhythmic movement between my work. A lot of the process of inspiration derives from material inspiration and I tend to manipulate a lot of my forms through the techniques of hammering while also applying rich surface textures. And I think the contrast between texture and colour has always been a huge influence in my work. And in recent years, I tend to create my own textured hammers, which have unique and sort of quite rippled and rough surfaces. I'm very much influenced by the kind of experimentation between materials. So I've begun to explore the art of fusing gold and silver together, which is done through the Korean gold fusing technique of Keum-boo. And for me, this has been a huge source of inspiration just because it's opened up so many possibilities. And it's just created so many more differences in texture and colour and, a sort of, richness within my work. And that's definitely something I tend to explore further and further.

Moderator: It's really interesting to hear how you're combining a range of layers of thought, and I think you've got the cultural kind of connection, but you've also got the fluidity of line form. And also maybe that functionality comes across through handling the object as well. That's really interesting also to hear you using or modifying or developing your own tools to be able to encourage another way of mark-making on the on the object. I guess that opens up a lot of new opportunities for you in your design process?

Jessica Jue: I think unlike a lot of people I know, actually, my design process is very intuitive. So I don't usually work from drawings or models, but I usually have a vague idea. I just begin straight working into the silver. I think part of my design process is to follow the natural behaviour of the metal and let it guide me towards its best form, rather than being in control of it from the beginning to end. If I do do any drawings, it's usually more to work out the, sort of, essence of the piece, such as its fluidity, as my pencil strokes on paper are sometimes quite vivid and uncontrolled, which often leads to unexpected forms and designs. But I mean, like I said earlier, for me, the forming part of the piece of it is really quite intuitive. But I think what I really enjoy out of the whole process is doing the finishing and the texturing, the last touches to a piece. For me, it's often the finishing that defines the quality of my work. As I mentioned previously, I tend to combine textures with colours. In the last years I've fused gold to silver, and that's done through heat and pressure treatments in order for the two metals to actually bond. This is definitely by far my favourite way of working, because it's literally just like brushing the strokes of gold onto the silver, which is completely intuitive, and nothing to do with precision or, kind of, just thinking ahead of how it's supposed to be. It's completely, I think, approaching it like I'm splashing paint on the canvas, but in this case onto the piece of silverware.

Moderator: You talk about your personal work and your personal approach. Can you describe a little bit about how you might work with a client then? So if somebody's commissioning you, is it different?

Jessica Jue: I think if it comes to a client and a commissioned piece, it probably needs to be a bit more thought through, I do try to sort of work with them based on drawings and, kind of, a bit of model making and such, but I think even with clients, I make it quite apparent that even though certain areas of the design is defined and controlled, a lot of it is actually not within my control. And that's just something that is part of my aesthetic, and my approach to art and design. Frankly, speaking, a lot of the times, I'm like, 'You just need to trust me with this.'

Moderator: So it's almost like giving you a bit of creative license to have a bit of freedom. There's still a structure but there's a bit of freedom within that. So that's great to hear. So Sheng Zhang, can you explain how your design process works?

Sheng Zhang: So basically, my design process is like many other designers or makers. You come up with an idea and then you do some research about that, and do the 2D sketches or drawings, doing some development, and then making some 3D models, then test pieces and final work. It is sort of like a loop, you know, I mean, all these steps, it's like a loop. So we go in back and forward to refine, or modify the designs and then produce the final work. I mean, as Jessica mentioned, she really enjoyed working with materials without any, like, drawings or something like that. I think it's really important for me to start my design process by like playing with the materials, explore the possibilities, or the potentials of the material. I think that kind of sense of, like, you touch it, and you handle it is quite important for me. You can feel the materials and it really inspires you. Sometimes, you know, very accidental ideas just spark in your mind. I think especially these days, I really enjoy that sort of design method. But of course, if necessary, we come back to the table and do some drawings, making models, test pieces, again, it's always like a loop. We make progress, slowly but surely. During the design and making process, I do subtraction actually. So, because I remove some distractions from my work and let people concentrate on the details of my work more. So they know what I'm talking about and they know what I want to speak through my work. I believe less is more and I think using a minimal language to express my ideas and concepts are quite important for me. I think that's why my work is quite simplistic or minimalist in style.

Moderator: Lovely, that's really interesting, again, to hear the contrast between the different ways you both work. But I think one of the things really comes across is about the kind of material experimentation, time to develop new languages with the material. But also, you're talking about responding to accidents which can almost develop new forms.

Jessica Jue: I think that's really interesting that both of us have this sort of accidental experimentation and development within our pieces. Because I know for a fact that a few of my best works happened through complete accidents, if not actually disasters, where it involves

a bit of melting down, a bit of falling over from time to time, you just roll with it, and then you develop it into something quite beautiful when something happens to it that you least expect.

Sheng Zhang: Yes, absolutely. I think I totally agree with you, Jess. Sometimes because I'm doing a teaching role in the university, I told my students, 'Don't worry about making mistakes or making accidents.'

Jessica Jue: It's part of the process.

Sheng Zhang: Yes, it's really an amazing part of the process, because you learn from that process. Sometimes, some very excellent ideas, or some very exciting shapes or textures come from an accident, so don't worry about that, just embrace it. I'm not like most other makers, like Jessica, because she uses hammers to use the raising or chasing techniques, hammering a lot. I don't use these very traditional methods a lot, actually. I basically fabricate or assemble, like, different silver metal sheets together to produce, to fabricate, my work. It's quite important to use some new ideas and new methods to fabricate this. We use different methods than contemporary silversmiths. So I guess-

Jessica Jue: Technology as well.

Sheng Zhang: Yes, sometimes I use like, a blend of traditional metal skills like soldering, piercing, like, very precise fabricating. Sometimes I use the aid of digital technologies like Rhino or some other software to help me to do my designs, because in that way, I can very quickly see how it eventually looks, so it really helped me [with] the design or the making process.

Moderator: So do you see CAD and technology as a tool? Is it an additional tool to your practice?

Sheng Zhang: Yes, I think so. It's quite important for me, because I think that's a very convenient way to produce something, to visualise something in front of you, we can actually see that. But of course, I use papers a lot to make my test pieces or models. But I just feel like the technology, the digital technology, is also a very useful helper.

Moderator: [That was] a really interesting insight to both of your creative and practical processes. So what does it mean for you to be part of Contemporary British Silversmiths, the association?

Jessica Jue: I think being part of CBS definitely feels quite aspirational, especially when it is the leading association for contemporary silver in the UK. Being part of CBS definitely feels like it's being part of a wider community actually, especially when everyone, all the members, are so dedicated to maintaining and advancing the craft of silversmithing. So, it is actually very meaningful for me to be part of this but I think what's been really interesting is that a lot of these, sort of, core objectives of CBS have become quite important to me over the last few years over my career. And I think it's because as an association it's actually very focused, and

you all have a very clear goal. When I first graduated and came out of university, this motivation, energy and enthusiasm that came from all members was actually quite infectious and it really sort of drew me into this trade. And now I realise that over time, a lot of what CBS supports has become my motivation as well.

Sheng Zhang: Yes, like Jessica said, Contemporary British Silversmiths is a leading association for contemporary silver in the UK. And I just feel like being a member of CBS, since I just graduated from my BA course, was such an honour for me. Another feature of CBS is that diversity is another inherent value of CBS. CBS don't only inherit entrenched traditions, but also embrace and support new, exciting, innovative ideas, and bring a fresh dynamic spirit to the exquisite, crafted, contemporary silversmithing world. For me, to be a member of CBS, that means being inspired, being supported, being recognised, being bound to other generations of mature silversmiths, working as a community, and also many people who are interested in contemporary silversmithing.

Moderator: Great, yes. That, again, is a slightly different perspective but it's really great to hear that you're looking at the full spectrum of membership and gaining from being part of that community. That leads me onto my next question, which is very much about how Contemporary British Silversmiths may have helped you with your career. Can you describe if there are any examples you can give where CBS has done that for you?

Jessica Jue: CBS has actually been a really big part of my career development over the last few years, and I think the most significant part was probably the mentoring I received in the beginning. When I first graduated from uni and Bishopsland I had limited experience, and pairing with my mentor at the time, Angela Cork, you could see how she operated her business, how she works around the workshop, and you could basically first-hand experience what it is like to be a silversmith. Back then it was with Angela, and then I also rented a bench from Howard Fenn, and later on when I went into the Centre I also met Clive Burr and Ray Walton who have, over the years, given me a lot of help and support. Especially, with my technical improvements on making. I think the best thing to know about this trade is to just first-hand see how it works and by being in these environments you really understand this discipline you need as a silversmith, as well as the ethos behind this trade and this craft. I think this whole mentoring scheme was actually really helpful, and it was just a really natural and nurturing transition from university to becoming a silversmith.

As much as I've received, I've also been quite involved in a lot of what CBS had to offer over the last few years. I participated in quite a lot of their events and such. I remember when I first started off I basically signed myself up for everything, for every event, and everything that was going on in CBS from Make Your Mark, to London Craft Week, London Design Festival, and everything. And a lot of this was, guiding visitors and helping setting up exhibitions and organising demonstrations, and just getting to see what it was like to do all the planning behind these events. I think I've quite quickly realised that being part of these events very much meant that I could meet people all the time, I could meet new people, people of the industry, from

fellow makers, to curators, collectors, and everybody. The more active I became, the more exposure I had, in a way, and the more invites I would get to these places.

But, as well as that, CBS also really helped me with my growth and exposure of my work as well as just pushing me into the spotlight as an emerging silversmith. I remember participating in London Craft Week, for instance, where we made a virtual preview, because that was during the first lockdown, I believe. And during that video I spoke about the commission I had from the National Museum of Scotland, I spoke about how I cope with lockdown, how I work from home, how I've set up my little desk and basically covered it with steel blocks, and tools, and hammers, and everything, and tried to work from there. It was quite an interesting video to make during that time, and what we didn't expect is that that video just suddenly took off, it became the fourth most viewed video, I think, on London Craft Week's website, where I gained loads of publicity and made new contacts and loads of sales as well. So that was quite nice. And, later on, I also helped out quite a bit with CBS's social media, and how they were running all their social media platforms, from Instagram to Facebook. Through that I learned how to do lots of this kind of digital networking, where I kept track of the statistics and reports and everything. Through doing these little things you actually acquire quite a lot of knowledge and capability of doing things because even if it's about social media you're still networking with people digitally, where you're reaching out to our partners and organisations, like The Goldsmiths' Company, like London Craft Week, or the Michelangelo Foundation. So through getting involved I really did learn a lot, and it gave me an incredible launch to my career.

Moderator: I think it's really great to hear that you took up everything that was on offer. And I know that's not always possible when you're trying to run your business and you're still developing. There are a lot of things that we have done in London which have made them more accessible for you, but at the same time you've shown initiative to come and join and participate and support. So it's that cycle that we work towards, in evolving as we continue through the association.

Sheng Zhang: I would say working so closely with CBS, that's been really great. For me, CBS has helped me a lot as well all the way through. So I would like to give you some examples, like, I think these are all my milestones, not only during my time of study, but also in my earlier career stage. I think it was in 2016, as part of the Award of New Designers, Goldsmiths' Company Silversmithing award, I'd been invited to take part in a one-week workshop with a CBS member and master silversmith, Clive Burr, in his studio in London at The Goldsmiths' Centre. Working with Clive is a very impressive and invaluable experience for me. Based on what I was making at that moment, it was named 'Inside Out', he taught me a different method to produce my work, and I think it started to push me to think about how I can produce finer work in multiple ways, either in a traditional way or a more contemporary way. More importantly, as a new graduate, or a new generation of silversmith, working with Clive, it was actually my first time to visit and work in a very professional silversmithing studio, so it allowed me to see what a professional, or a well-established silversmith's studio looked like. And it also gave me a lot of ideas in my mind, and it gave me hope, actually. I would call it hope. You know, I was really looking forward to establishing my own studio like that in the

future. It was really exciting! It felt equipped and very, very organised. And I think it's just like his work, you know, it's very clean and beautiful, and everything's well organised.

Moderator: It sounds like you were married with a really perfect partner as a mentor. Because you were gaining a similar sort of way of working but learning new approaches at the same time.

Sheng Zhang: Yes, exactly. Not only the practical, making method, but also more about the silversmith itself. How does he work and what does it look like in his studio. You know, as an international student it's quite hard.

Jessica Jue: Sheng and I were actually talking the other day, and we were talking about this matter, that for a lot of us international students who come in here actually-, first of all we don't have these contacts and stuff, but being part of CBS was not only sort of a leap into this kind of career path, but for us it was also a bit of a cultural bridging. That was actually extremely helpful for us because being amongst so many British silversmiths and amongst this community really helped us into this culture and environment, as well as doing a lot for our career development.

Sheng Zhang: Yes. It's really important, I think. Because we always feel like we're being supported. It's really important, especially for a student who just graduated or who wants to stay in this area for maybe ten, twenty-, even their entire life, being a part of CBS means we can get all the support from them. It's really important for me.

Moderator: I think it's lovely to hear this sort of personal story because we aren't all aware of these things, and how the impact of CBS has improved your ability to remain in contemporary silversmithing and keep pushing and furthering the aesthetic. So that's really encouraging for other graduate members who might want to join us and be part of our association. I'm just going to ask you another question about your links to the industry and the wider industry, but firstly I want to start with your links with The Goldsmiths' Company.

Jessica Jue: I think The Goldsmiths' Company has actually been a really major part of my career development, out of all the things, I think to begin with there's Goldsmiths' Fair, which just happened to be the first fair I had ever done since finishing Bishopsland. So I was, just suddenly catapulted into this platform, and I just remember it being an absolutely incredible experience to have this instant launch to my career. First of all, it's very unique, and a very prestigious platform of showing your work and exposing you to all sorts of people who are interested in our craft and us as makers, and our work and, most importantly, in buying our work. Before the fair I had a very vague sort of direction of what I wanted to do, but after doing this show it just gave me an immense boost in confidence in pursuing silversmithing and this career path. Being a graduate at that time we were offered all kinds of mentoring and support to prepare us for the fair, so it wasn't actually just a career launch but it was actually a very great learning experience as well.

I think another major influence on my career has probably been The Goldsmiths' Centre, which is the leading charity for the professional training of goldsmiths and silversmiths. I've been with the Centre for the last three years now and, initially, when I was exposed to them-, I think it was during Bishopsland where it was just a bit of contact here and there, but then in 2017 I started their business incubation programme called Setting Out, and I ended up on that course for two years I think. During that time I received a lot of mentoring around building my business, such as marketing, pricing, branding, customer profiling and such. This really helped me to structure everything and realise my strengths and weaknesses, and it helped me turn what I had into a more viable and more well-rounded business. That's really helped me to take my career to the next stage. Now I've got my little workshop at the centre and to, hopefully, permanently stay there.

Moderator: And it's an excellent facility which, I think, does really support makers like yourself, and the support generally from The Goldsmiths' Company has definitely impacted your development, hasn't it, in your career?

Sheng Zhang: Yes. I think the first link between me and The Goldsmiths' Company was in 2016 when I was in the New Designers, I was quite lucky to be selected and awarded a New Designers Goldsmiths' Company Silversmithing award. I was really, really excited and overwhelmed. That award from The Goldsmiths' Company really effectively brought my work in front of the public and let more people see my work, to see me. And I think it really boosted my practice in my early career stage, although I went to Edinburgh College of Art to do my MFA, but, I would say my career stage from that point. It was a truly amazing experience to be recognised by The Goldsmiths' Company, a very well-established, world famous company. Also, as Jessica mentioned, there is some mentoring and tutoring within The Goldsmiths' Company, The Goldsmiths' Centre. I took part in the Getting Started in 2017 and I've been taught a lot of very useful and very handy skills, like pricing, marketing, and how to run a business, stuff like that. I think, especially for a student who just graduated from uni-, so from the perspective of a very well-established industry or company, they can teach us a lot of very practical skills. And also, financial support, definitely, from The Goldsmiths' Company is very, very important. For example, I got the Goldsmiths' Precious Metal grant in 2018 when I was about to graduate from Edinburgh, so every year they select twelve silversmiths and eight jewellery students from universities, colleges across the UK, and we were given £750 to buy the materials. I think this kind of financial support is a very effective way, or the most powerful way, to support a young generation of silversmiths, you know. And I really feel grateful for that, actually.

So, the GC&DC, the Craft and Design Council, so yes-, and it was, like, 2017 I received that award from them, and I feel like it's really encouraged me to continue my practice within the field of contemporary silversmithing. When I got the award I just felt like everything was worth it.

Jessica Jue: Recognition, definitely.

Sheng Zhang: Recognition, definitely. Yes, as Jessica mentioned, the Goldsmiths' Fair, it's truly amazing. We design something, we make something, and then we can sell it during the Fair. That's a really amazing experience. And though I've been only in the Goldsmiths' Fair only once, I mean, physically, it was in 2019. So, being part of the graduate bursary scheme I was awarded £1,500 for buying materials and a £3,000 free-interest loan, and also free of charge stamp fee. All this support from them is a really powerful thing in my career life.

Moderator: I think it's clearly given you the confidence to pursue your career and given you a good start. It sounds like it's given you a good head start to becoming more professional and getting ready to meet the audience and to sell your work. So I think that's been really encouraging for you right from graduating, or, from what I guess, from your final year of your degree. When you got the bursary it was almost a start of a few doors that opened for you. So that leads me onto my final question, and this is very much about your future plans. So, for both of you, what does silversmithing hold for both of you in the near future or the long-term future?

Jessica Jue: Well I think, for the next few years, I'm hoping to expand on what I've already started. I tend to show and sell my work at exhibitions and shows, such as Goldsmiths' Fair, Collect and Desire which I would hope to do more of, especially in other parts of the country as well as internationally. Especially in countries like Germany, or in China, where I've already got existing ties with, but I would hope to have more of.

Sheng Zhang: Yes I think my goal is quite similar to Jessica's. Yes, take part in a lot of exhibitions and expose our work in front of the public as much as possible, both nationally and internationally.

Moderator: I think with our future plans as well, with Contemporary British Silversmiths, we are obviously trying to continue to expand to global audiences and hopefully you will be part of that as well. We've got some great ambitions for the next twenty-five years. This is our twenty fifth anniversary year, so this is a real huge milestone for the association. And I think, with people like yourselves in our membership we continue to grow, and we continue to explore new ideas, new ways of working, but also learning from each other to expand the field.

I wanted to just thank you both for being such incredible guests here today as part of this platform for The Goldsmiths' Company, the Goldsmiths' Fair. Keep pursuing your distinct style, keep developing, keep growing, and we hope we can keep on supporting you as we go through, or take you through your career, and I'd love to see you still in Contemporary British Silversmiths in twenty-five years' time.