

handshake2

Handshake 2 mentee, Sarah Walker-Holt tells us about her experience with mentor Helen Britton

Shook in to Being: Reflection of a mentor-mentee experience

When I considered making a submission to Peter Decker's call for Handshake 2 there was hesitation in the air, as I was caring for my dying father, but being someone who wholly believes in 'what will be will be', I decided to put the decision of whether I was meant to do this or not with the Handshake 2 gods – the selection panel. Of course, my faith in my philosophical thinking rang true – my father passing away just as Handshake 2 shook into being. I inevitably miss my parents and find myself constantly dwelling in nostalgia but everything happens for a reason and, for me, Handshake 2 was the encouragement I needed to look to the future. While a student I realised the significant part both my parents played in my creative endeavours and, 4 years on, I find myself sorting through their creative tools and materials, especially my father's, and letting them influence my making once again. Therefore, for me, it is fitting that the most common definition of a handshake is a greeting or a farewell.

From what I can gather, the 'handshake' dates back to the 5th century B.C. in Greece. It was a symbol of peace, showing that neither person was carrying a weapon. [Others] say that the shaking gesture of the handshake started in Medieval Europe. Knights would shake the hand of others in an attempt to shake loose any hidden weaponsⁱ. This is certainly not the case with my mentor/mentee relationship with the renowned Australian jeweller, Helen Britton, as she couldn't be more accommodating and embracing of my emerging path. Instead, I would have to compare our new-found relationship with the handshake definition described as an exchange of predetermined signals between a computer and a peripheral device or another computer, made when a connection is initially established . . . in order to assure proper synchronizationⁱⁱ. Metaphorically, Helen and I are the two computers, Helen on one end of the Skype software application and me on the other.

While doing my first big Schmuck adventure earlier this year, just prior to the start of Handshake 2, I was fortunate enough to be briefly introduced to Helen and, thanks to Renee Bevan, tagged onto the Talente group visit to Helen, David Bielander and Yutaka Minegishi's workshop. This definitely made the preliminary Skype session a whole lot easier on my nerves. Subsequently, I became instantly at ease with Helen and her generosity of spirit became quickly apparent. I couldn't have picked a more suitable mentor if I tried; being Australian she instinctively understands my sense of place. Helen also has a history of building up car motors and riding motorbikes, an environment that likewise is comfortable for me as I live with motorbikes in my living room and hall and listen to 'motor racing talk' like it is a foreign language. Some left over motorbike parts even ebb their way into my studio and subconsciously contribute to my mechanistic infatuation. From here our engaging and lengthy discussions begin.

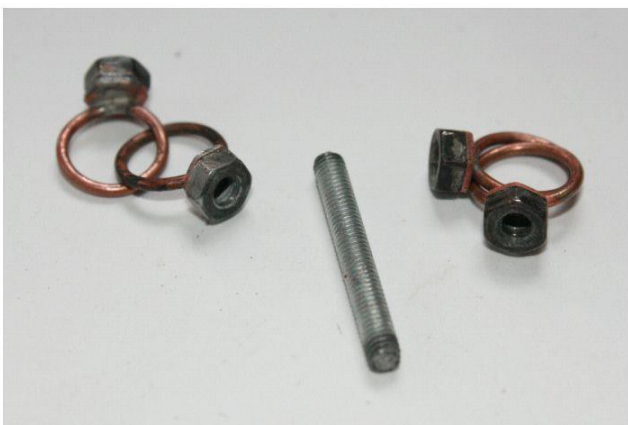
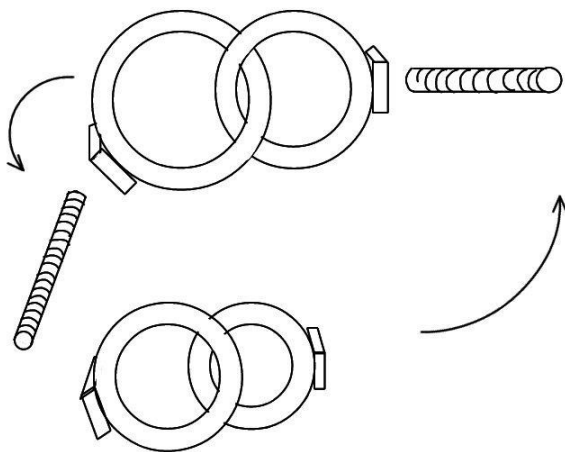
Essentially our dialogues comprised of my kitchen and its array of kitchen utensils. Helen and David similarly have a kitchen full of hung utensils that they use. While we Skype, Helen's observant eye catches the old toasting irons perched behind me and tells me how they still use theirs in their studio for a quick lunch. I spasmodically bring home found utensils; initially there is a fine line for them to cross, as I determine whether they are elevated to a position of preservation, recognised as still usable or temporarily lowered into a box, already full, as potential materials for deconstructing and reconstructing into jewellery.

Either way their status as objects is raised in one form or another from the place that I found them. In an early conversation Helen suggests I consider the depth of the utensils as a material, the history of domestic objects and how they fall out of monumental history as well as the history of communal eating. This, she points out, is consequential to looking at the very long history of wooden jewellery. As I still haven't gotten to the utensils' essence, these are important points of research that I feel will be with me for a while; something I will refer to, leave and then reflectively come back to.



In another Skype session Helen encouraged me to experiment with making my own mechanisms while brainstorming their relationship to jewellery. This was the most liberating suggestion I have had from our time together so far. It opened up a can of worms for me that felt so obvious, giving me copious amounts of possibilities and considerations that I quickly realised I should not try doing all at once. I decided to resolve just one mechanism that I could use to create multiples for a solitary work. From here our conversation developed into my long-term desire to juxtapose some jewellery with a moving image, in the form of an instructional type dialogue, with the work. Helen has used moving image in her work also, which she generously shared with me.

This subsequently tailored our discussions into the final presentation where Helen's expert guidance helped me solidify my idea; fusing the jewellery, its physical support and the moving image, while also thinking through the finer details to integrate it all into a single work.



I knew Toi Poneke was a space in which I could work towards a presentational outcome for the first of the Handshake 2 exhibitions and was conducive to my initial reasoning behind requesting Helen as my mentor. It was her constructive process, orientation to structures from her immediate environment, reference to her personal history, her savvy use of presentational outcomes and her incorporation of drawing that made her my heroine of jewellers. Recently Helen sent me a parcel. As I opened it with Renee Bevan and Raewyn Walsh at my side, their mouths dropping open as its contents spilt onto the table - veneer samples, a shapely piece of aluminium, a box of bits you'd find lying around in a mechanic's workshop and a wooden handle - their disbelief that Helen had only just met me was apparent.

The box sits on my workbench with its insides impatiently waiting for what comes next and everything that has happened in the wake of my initial hesitant submission is an absolute bonus. I am looking forward to the next 12 months of Skypes, emails, and the like that will work towards exhibitions at Sydney's Stanley Street Gallery, Avid in Wellington and Pah Homestead in Auckland. Roll on Handshake 2 2015.....

