



**RINGLEADER**  
Elisabetta Cipriani wears a ring by Jannis Kounellis. Inset: pieces by Ifeanyi Oganwu (left) and Ilya and Emilia Kabakov (above)



# ART COUTURE

Elisabetta Cipriani commissions contemporary artists to create works of art to wear, not hang on a wall. *By* DORIAN MAY

In a gem of a cobblestone mews behind bustling Regent Street in central London, gallerist Elisabetta Cipriani has, in six short years, built a business commissioning well-known contemporary artists to create beautiful and extremely limited-edition jewellery. Her goal in commissioning wearable works of art is for women to have something truly unique, something that money alone can't buy.

Enter Elisabetta, whose eyes sparkle possibly even more than some of the pieces on display. "If you want to buy an Aston Martin, you buy it, but what are they missing, these people? They are missing stories," Cipriani explains in her staccato Italian accent. "They are missing something that speaks to them and that brings joy. This jewellery is an investment; it is also part of our era. They are our stories. I'm not interested in doing anything commercial."

Hence artist Ai Weiwei's rebar 24ct gold bracelet—designed to look like reinforcing bars used in construction and created to commemorate the lives lost in the Wenchuan earthquake in China—bent to fit the owner's wrist precisely. Jannis

Kounellis, who recently passed away, cast his own lips to create the Labbra ring, a wearable miniature sculpture paying homage to ancient Greek masks. In total, there are 23 artists on Elisabetta's roster.

Cipriani's gallery was chosen this year to participate in the Showcase at TEFAF Maastricht, which features five of the most

interesting emerging galleries from around the world. She explains that this honour was not about her, but solely about the artists and their creations, because the wearable jewels are different to the pieces which could theoretically hang on a wall. "The energy that they put into the work is the same, but when they do a work of art it is for themselves. This? No, they are doing it for you."

And indeed, each artisan's work has an intriguing story of courtship and creation. Take Enrico Castellani, who hasn't left his home and studio in Celleno, Italy, since the 1970s. "I went to see him many times and then one day, he takes a square metal sheet, and a chisel, and a hammer that he used in the '60s to do works on paper, and he started to hammer in front of me: *bombombom!* I was not expecting that—and he gave it to me and we worked together to complete it." The finished project, from a man considered to be one of the most influential living Italian artists, resulted in his bold geometrical Superficie bracelets and necklaces in three colours of highly polished gold.

"I took the original work from Castellani, drove to the top of the village and stopped my car and cried. All of these pieces are very emotional moments for me. I love to work with the artists and there is a proper relationship, which is not economic; it is doing something different together," smiles Cipriani. "They like this challenge of doing a jewel." □

## BEST ARTIST PIECES SOLD AT AUCTION

Susan Abeles, director of US jewellery at Bonhams, picks her top four



**ANDREW GRIMA (1921-2007)**

In 2015, Bonhams achieved a world record for a Grima jewel (£1,482,500); my own favourite is this characteristic, highly textured green tourmaline, diamond and gold "sunburst" pendant necklace from 1972 which makes me feel happy.



**GEORGES BRAQUE (1882-1963)**

The flying bird—a personal symbol of his art—became the dominant theme during Braque's introspective later years. I am drawn to the hidden meanings carried in this 18ct gold and ruby bird brooch, engraved *Phaeton* on the reverse.



**ED WIENER (1918-1991)**

I am attracted to this multi-coloured sapphire and gold pendant brooch because of how the gold is worked, and the movement captured by the pattern of the sapphires, which is typical of Wiener's modern Byzantine style.



**MARY KRETSINGER (1915-2001)**

A little-known, avant-garde jeweller who specialized in enamels that showcase multiple textures and colours in her hinged and motile work. I adore this interactive pendant as it represents one of her later works set in gold.