

# BEYOND THE FRAME





Elisabetta Cipriani's wearable art creations might be smaller in scale than a painting or a sculpture, says Lucie Muir, but as her latest collaborations show, they have no boundaries

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Elisabetta Cipriani, the London-based gallerist, is on a mission to get art out from the wall, plinth or public space and onto the body. Today, at her Heddon Street gallery in Mayfair, she represents more than 40 leading lights from the world of contemporary art, including Ai Weiwei, Rebecca Horn and Giuseppe Penone. Their exquisite one-of-a-kind statement necklaces, cocktail rings, bracelets and earrings are the result of a unique collaborative journey.

But do not be fooled by the functionality and form of each piece. This is not jewellery per se. Instead, it is 'wearable art', a term first coined by Cipriani when she launched her art business in 2009. Before then, this relatively obscure section of the art market was referred to as 'jewellery by artist'.

"Each piece is the continuation of an artist's work – not a separate project," explains Cipriani. "In wearable art, the preciousness of the art is not defined by the materials, it is defined by the story behind it along with the sculptural element contained in the piece, the name of the artist and how their practice and vision as an artist is imbued in the work. It just so happens that the piece becomes a ring when a shank is added, but if you remove the shank then it's a sculpture, a beautiful thing to behold."

And with that she plucks out a new piece by the French-Italian painter Faust Cardinali from its glass case. "When an artist sees the final piece, I know they are happy because their art becomes alive on the body, whereas with a painting or a sculpture, it remains in a static setting," she says, coiling the silver necklace around the neckline of her black sweater. The work, entitled *Botellum*, inspired by 15th-century Mazzocchio hats, ripples when it captures the light, causing her to make a satisfied "ah" sound when the magnet in the clasp closure shuts with a gentle clunk.

*Elisabetta Cipriani (left) has collaborated with the artist Faust Cardinali (below), who is inspired by the themes of liquidity and the fluidity of matter, creating refined wearable art pieces, such as the Botellum necklace (above) and the R.F. cocktail ring (opposite)*



FAUST CARDINALI

Next, she removes a black fingerless glove to show off another exquisite piece by the same artist – *R.F.*, a magnificent cocktail ring crafted in silver and bronze, which is inspired by *Objet Trouvé*, with a French 25 cent coin forming the focal point of the design.

The work joins a limited edition of 10 pieces, each one signed and numbered, by the Italian artist Giuseppe Penone, one of the leaders of Italy's *Arte Povera* movement. *Salvia*, meaning sage, is a delicate ring that explores the connection between man and nature and features a white gold musical note on top of a highly detailed 18-karat yellow gold sage leaf. The musical note provides a reminder of the melodic sound of nature.

Cipriani points out a piece by Giorgio Vigna, titled *Segmenti*. It is part of the Italian artist and designer's latest series of rings made with 18-karat gold and interspersed with sapphires and pearls, which explore the relationship that connects form and matter. An interlinking necklace crafted in 18-karat yellow gold and oxidised silver also comes under the spotlight.

## A MEETING OF MINDS

As for the collaborative journey, Cipriani says: "It takes a lot of time and research to find the right artist to work with. If they approach me, then it means they are not that good! In a year I manage to find one or two new artists if I am lucky and even then, they tend to be elusive creatures. Most of them don't even have a website or if they do they don't list their contact details. I always find a way to meet them, of course, but if they are very famous, that's when it gets complicated."

Take Ai Weiwei, for instance. It took months before Cipriani received a proper response from the revered Chinese artist, to one of several introductory emails. Then, one day a call came out of the blue from his assistant inviting her to Beijing. "Weiwei had just been released from prison, so I immediately jumped on a plane and went to see him in the studio, which is when he said 'OK, now we can start the project'. More impromptu meetings ensued around the globe and it took another three years for the first of several pieces to materialise. "Looking back, I realise he was

*Referencing ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, the 24-karat Ring M (below) by the renowned Chinese artist Ai Weiwei features depictions exploring human migration on the ring's face*





probably testing me to see how committed I was and as a result, we have enjoyed a great creative relationship ever since.”

Would she have briefed Weiwei or any other artist for that matter? “Absolutely not!” she says, aghast. “That would be like saying to Pablo Picasso, ‘Could you please just add a different red or tone down the brush strokes?’ If I did that, you would lose the beauty, the art of the piece. The only thing that I ask of the artist is that the piece is wearable. And once the artist has made the initial sketch or wax model, then it is my skill to shift that into metal and make it a two- or three-dimensional object, which I can do with my goldsmith in Rome if need be.”

Her well-heeled clients are mostly art collectors – including Diane Venet, one of the world’s leading collectors of wearable art – and each specially-commissioned piece has its own energy. According to Cipriani, when you wear it, you might even find yourself putting on a new persona.

“One of my clients told me once that whenever she wears an artist’s necklace, she doesn’t feel shy anymore,” she says. “People always stop her and want to know all about the piece so she starts to perform with it, wearing it this way and that, and soon the words begin to flow from her and she becomes an extrovert.”

#### PUSHING ARTISTIC LIMITS

Born in Rome into an antique-dealing family, Cipriani’s passion for jewellery began when she was a child. “Instead of playing with dolls, I would sit on my mother’s bed and spread all her precious jewellery around me admiring it and trying it on,” she recalls. “I would also advise her on which piece to wear with a particular dress. Back then, it was common to wear the parure (matching set) but my mother ignored all the rules and instilled in me a different vision of fashion and to never follow the crowd.”

*Wearable art by Italian artist Giorgio Vigna includes the Geodi necklace and earrings (above), which combine geometric structures of oxidised silver and 18-karat gold*





And while fashion might have been the obvious career choice, the 19-year-old Cipriani decided to take an internship in the Old Masters Department at Christie's on Old Brompton Road, London, mostly changing lightbulbs and lugging large paintings around. Then, she returned to Rome to do a history of art degree at John Cabot University. Newly graduated, she took an internship with the former Italian culture minister, Vittorio Sgarbi. Later, as a co-curator at Rome's Museum of Contemporary Art (MACRO) she hit the ground running and learnt everything you need to know about staging a major exhibition.

Eventually, in 2005, she moved to London permanently, securing a job at the prestigious

Ben Brown Fine Arts gallery in Mayfair where, eager to learn the commercial side of the art world, she gained a unique insight into the secondary art market – selling and buying from art collectors and auction houses – all of which put her in good stead for her thriving art business today.

Looking ahead, in June 2023 she is hosting an exhibition at the Heddon Street gallery of 12 new pieces by Sophia Vari, the 83-year-old Greek artist with whom Cipriani has been collaborating since September 2022. The artist's portable sculptures begin life as a plasticine prototype and are painstakingly crafted into curvaceous jewels from materials, including lacquered wood and yellow gold, by artisans in the Place Vendôme, Paris.

Cipriani is also excited to develop EC Lab, an experimental arm of the business that features young jewellery designers and goldsmiths. In order for them to make the cut, a painterly and sculptural approach to creating a jewel, as opposed to the preciousness of the stones, is essential. Joy BC, an Italian-British artist is already making waves in this category. Her latest work references ancient Greek and Roman mythology and female heroines of the past. These include Hypatia, the Greek philosopher, astronomer and mathematician,

*Among the acclaimed Greek artist Sophia Vari's 'portable sculptures' are the Thalia dark wood and gold earrings (above)*



who is celebrated in beautiful green and red bronze brooches and pendants topped with tear-shaped garnets. Once unleashed from the confines of Cipriani 's glass cabinets, who knows what effect they might have on the wearer? **B**

*Joy BC creates jewellery that is evocative of ancient Greek and Roman art, including the Hypatia bronze brooch and tear-shaped garnet pendants (below)*

*The new pieces of wearable art by Sophia Vari will be on show at Elisabetta Cipriani's gallery, Heddon Street, London W1B 4 BQ, from June 2023. For dates and more information, please visit [elisabettacipriani.com](http://elisabettacipriani.com)*



JOY BC