



Silver Futures

St John's College



The melt process, Sheffield Assay
Office, November 2021

Simone ten Hompel working
on *Things Change*

Silver Futures

Silver Futures is a Hidden Objects Oxford project developed in collaboration with St John's College, Oxford.

Two new site-specific commissions for St John's College have been created using silver from the melt of damaged collection objects by contemporary silversmiths Maria Hanson and Chris Knight and Simone ten Hompel. *Silver Futures* has been specifically designed to explore contemporary responses to the historical process of melt and re-use of silver.

The two completed works are permanently installed on the Upper Floor of the Study Centre adjacent to the Sidonie Thompson bridge.

Silver Futures has been conceived and realised with the assistance of Amanda Game, Independent Curator and Modern Silver Specialist, Matthew Winterbottom, Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Ashmolean Museum, and under the guidance of Dr. Hannah Skoda and Dr. Georgy Kantor of St John's College.

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Silver at St John's College

We are delighted to see the silver collection of St John's invigorated and given new life by the Silver Futures project. Silver has lain at the heart of the college community since its inception. Tracing the development of the silver commissioned by, donated to, and recycled by the college tells us a great deal about how that community has evolved.

More of the medieval collection survives than is often assumed – though much was indeed melted down to support the royalist cause during the Civil Wars. A particularly fine eucharistic chalice and plate is still used in Chapel services: the continuity of purpose is extremely moving.

On the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, St John's re-established its institutional vitality. The ceremonial aspect of college life grew more prominent. 'Gentlemen commoners' were expected to make gifts of silver to the college. The silver from this period bears witness to a thriving institution, centred around the expression of community through feasting.

The silver of the early eighteenth century indicates a flourishing intellectual community, whose interests were often represented on the silver objects themselves. More fellows were granted permission to travel overseas; money was spent on improvements to the gardens; new books, on topics ranging from medicine to Arabic, were acquired for the library: a 1740 salver with a concave border, engraved around the base with scrolls and alternating elephants and storks is a vivid reminder of this.

By the late eighteenth century, the increasingly elite social intake is materially demonstrated in the gifts of silver, usually tankards, which all new students were now expected to present. The nineteenth-century and twentieth-century silver in the college's collection contains some remarkable pieces which remind us of the sheer wealth of scholarly interests which have found a home at St John's – from the reproduction Vapheio cups, to the magnificent various sporting trophies.

These new silver commissions represent an opportunity to celebrate



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the wonderful ways in which the community of St John's has evolved in more recent times. The pieces will be displayed in the Study Centre, reminding us that intellectual endeavour and scholarly collaboration, excitement and conversation lie at the heart of what it means to be a member of St John's. These commissions are the result of extensive discussion between the makers, curators and various members of St John's, and the creativity of the artists. They represent continuity of purpose over at least five centuries, quite literally embodying a sense of renewal: as the twelfth-

century Bernard of Chartres put it, 'we stand on the shoulders of giants'. Recycling a small part of our silver in this way is an acknowledgement of our profound connection to all who have gone before us at St John's, whilst celebrating the growing diversity, intellectual ambition and joy of being members of the college.

Professor Hannah Skoda

Tutorial Fellow in History, Keeper of Silver and Vestments

Information on the Melted Objects

The following damaged and disused objects were selected from the St John's Historic Silver collection to be melted and repurposed for the contemporary commissions.

An 1864 2 Handled silver tray engraved with much eroded Vine Leaf Pattern, central shield and donor dedication. Maker's mark. SS (Stephen Smith & Sons, Covent Garden). Sterling silver, London. One of the handles has been incorporated, unmelted, in the contemporary work, *Things Change* by Simone ten Hompel. Donor's name: Arthur Robert Adams.

A 1913 silver coffee pot with ebony handle hallmarked sterling silver, London. Maker's mark illegible due to degraded silver surface. Engraved with donor's name: Leighton Pullan.

A 1934 Cigar and Cigarette Box lined with cedar wood badly damaged by damp. Marked for sterling silver, London, Makers Stamp 'R'. Engraved with donor's name: William Dooker Drysdale

A 1934/5 Silver Teapot with Hinged Lid and Hardwood Handle. Maker's Mark C & Co Sterling Silver, London. No donor inscription.

A matching 1934/5 silver milk jug. Makers Mark C & Co, Sterling Silver, London. No donor inscription.

A 1964 pr. of grape scissors. Hallmark very abraded and hard to read, probably London, sterling silver. Engraved with donor's name. A. Sillery.



Donor's details where known

Arthur Robert Adams was a fellow of the college for around 50 years, though this was during a period in which it was possible to work as a barrister whilst retaining the fellowship. He spent his last years at the college as bursar and working in the VC's court.

William Dooker Drysdale graduated in 1934. William Dooker Drysdale got a 4th and became a successful barrister.

Leighton Pullan was a serious researcher and writer. He was one of the tutors at a time when there were only four tutors who oversaw the teaching of the College's lecturers (who might also be fellows). He is described as quiet, studious and incisive. During WWI, he explicitly welcomed Serbian refugees to the college, learned the language and attended their religious services – he was afterwards awarded the Serbian Order of St Sava.

Silver at the University of Oxford and the *Silver Futures* Project

As Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the Ashmolean Museum, I am responsible for one of the most important collections of historic British and Continental silver in the country.

In 2004, the Ashmolean hosted *A Treasured Inheritance: 600 years of Oxford College Silver*, an exhibition that explored the extraordinarily rich collections of silver acquired by individual Oxford Colleges. This showed how silver objects – for worship, dining, drinking, and lighting – had been an important and integral part of Oxford College life until very recently. Silver was commissioned by the Colleges themselves or was presented by individual members. What was also clear from the exhibition is that this is no longer the case. With some notable exceptions, few Colleges have been actively commissioning

contemporary silver and much of their historic silver often remains unused and unseen in store. As Colleges have sought to become more open and diverse in the 20th and 21st centuries, some have perhaps come to see their silver collections as outdated, irrelevant remnants of past privilege and elitism.

In recent years, I have organised an Annual Oxford Dinner, where a group of silver enthusiasts – curators, collectors, makers – visit an Oxford College to look at, handle and discuss its silver collection, followed by sharing a dinner together in Hall. In the course of organising these visits, I have had the privilege of being able to visit the storage vaults and safes of many Colleges to examine their collections. What was clear from these visits was that in addition to their wealth of historic silver, many have significant numbers of worn, broken or unused

‘everyday’ silver objects of little historic or aesthetic importance. As *A Treasured Inheritance* made clear, in the past such objects would have been regularly sent by the Colleges to be remade into something new.

It seemed to me that here was an opportunity to encourage Colleges to rethink their relationships with their silver collections. Why not recycle these worn out, forgotten objects into pieces that represent contemporary College values and life? In doing so this would create new objects to pass down to future generations that reflect the times in which they were made – just as the historic 17th, 18th and 19th century pieces do.

Silver Futures is the project that seeks to address that question. I have enjoyed working with modern silver specialist Amanda Game, to develop the project as part of our wider conversations

on modern craft, which have found a regular home in the informal curatorial group Hidden Objects Oxford.

We found in St John’s College and in particular in Keeper of Silver, Professor Hannah Skoda a great interest and appreciation for the existing historic collections but also a desire to explore silver’s relationship to contemporary College life in a more egalitarian, democratic way. Thus St John’s have been generous in supporting these two outstanding new, site specific commissions by contemporary makers, Maria Hanson and Chris Knight, working collaboratively in Sheffield and Simone ten Hompel, working in London. I hope the success of *Silver Futures* project will encourage other Colleges to follow their example.

Matthew Winterbottom

Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Damaged objects prepared for melt, Sheffield, November 2021



Silver Futures: the art of the modern silversmith



We set our designers the challenge of working from an earlier ‘raw’ state of melted silver to give a more intimate insight into the material and its changing states. They have risen confidently to the challenge.

For over forty years, I have been lucky enough to work with some of the most interesting and original silversmiths working in the UK and internationally as both gallerist and independent curator in the private and public sectors.

Oxford has been important to this experience as, back in the mid 1980s, I worked at the Oxford Gallery in the High Street which introduced me to the work of modern silversmiths. I had always seen silver as part of everyday life, as a grandfather (whom I never met), had collected historic tableware and flatware in the 1940s and 1950s, and we used it everyday in our (very modest) home. But I saw, in Oxford, a different possibility.

Following my return to Edinburgh, I was able to develop an active programme of exhibiting, selling and commissioning modern silver in my role as Director, Crafts at the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh (1986-2008). This introduced me to many colleagues at, for example, the Goldsmiths’ Company in London; the Incorporation of Goldsmiths of the City of Edinburgh (and I am proud to be members of both) and to silver enthusiasts in museums and within

the world of private collectors. And above all, it gave me the opportunity to visit studios and develop long term relationships, with silversmiths.

I have learnt a great deal from this and, as former Keeper of Metalwork at the V & A, Eric Turner commented in 2008 ‘if one is looking for aesthetic innovation in domestic metalwork, British industry... consistently failed to deliver from the late 19th century onwards... it is the studio system... small individual workshops... that has triumphed’.

I had always been aware of the existence of silver collections held by Oxford Colleges and knew of the comprehensive 2004 exhibition on Oxford silver, curated by Dr. Helen Clifford. I also knew about wider College art collections – and some examples in which contemporary commissions had successfully integrated into historic settings,



◀ Furnace, Sheffield

Silver in furnace



◀ Handle of 1864 tray, Sheffield 2021

which included the 1993 St John's College commission of a gate by jewellery designer Wendy Ramshaw CBE (1939-2018).

In 2018, now living in Oxford again, I met historic silver expert and Curator of Decorative Arts at the Ashmolean Museum, Matthew Winterbottom. I attended one of his Annual Silver Dinners and he became an influential part of an informal curatorial research group I had established with American colleague, Lauren Dyer Amazeen, Hidden Objects Oxford. www.hiddenobjectsoxford.co.uk

My involvement in *Silver Futures* was born of all the foregoing.

Matthew and I initiated conversations with several colleges about their potential participation in *Silver Futures*:

a project which would use the historic process of melt and re-use of silver to commission new works. Covid arrived which stalled a few conversations but, despite this, it led to the generous decision by St John's College to be the lead College to pilot *Silver Futures*.

Several experienced designers were proposed, and designs chosen by Maria Hanson and Chris Knight in Sheffield and Simone ten Hompel in London. Damaged and disused objects were identified by St John's with the help of Matthew Winterbottom. Robert Organ, then Assay Master at the Assay Office at the Goldsmiths Company in London generously helped with the organisation of the melt of the objects, which took place at the Assay Office in Sheffield, under the guidance of Sheffield Assay master Ashley Carson, and which has been documented in both film and photography by Julia Skupny. A final moving image work which weaves together all aspects of the process has been commissioned from artist filmmaker Matt Hulse.

Following the melt, designers were then given the cast billet which, as Simone describes, was just the beginning of an independent process of refining to create useable material. As a silversmith when you purchase metal, it will usually come in the form of sheet, or wire,

already refined. We set our designers the challenge of working from an earlier 'raw' state of melted silver to give a more intimate insight into the material and its changing states. They have risen confidently to the challenge.

The finished works, *Here I Am* and *Things Change* both combine silver with other metals. Both works are installed on the first floor landing, in an area which links the historic Laudian Library and the Study Centre (Wright and Wright, 2019). All the designers are grateful to Oliver Warner, Works Facilities Manager at St John's, for his assistance with installation.

Both works explore, in highly skilled and thoughtful ways, as requested by the commissioners, ways that the whole Community of St John's might think differently about silver and its place in modern College life. All three

designers talk further about their commissions in their following words.

Commissions such as these, in the field of modern silver, are rare. Too often the commissioners of contemporary work – whether private or public – seek to over influence the form of a commission. Although dialogue between designer, maker, commissioner/patron is always of immense importance, an imbalance can often deny the imaginative and intellectual, as well as technical, capacity present in small studios and through which a new language for silver in our times can be realised. This capacity is rooted in a profound knowledge of and interest in a material: its cultural, as well as physical properties.

The *Silver Futures* project team have had the immense privilege of working with Professor Hannah Skoda, Keeper of Silver at St John's and her colleague, Dr. Georgy Kantor, in realising this project. This booklet marks a new development in the field of silver, enabled by their time, care and generosity.

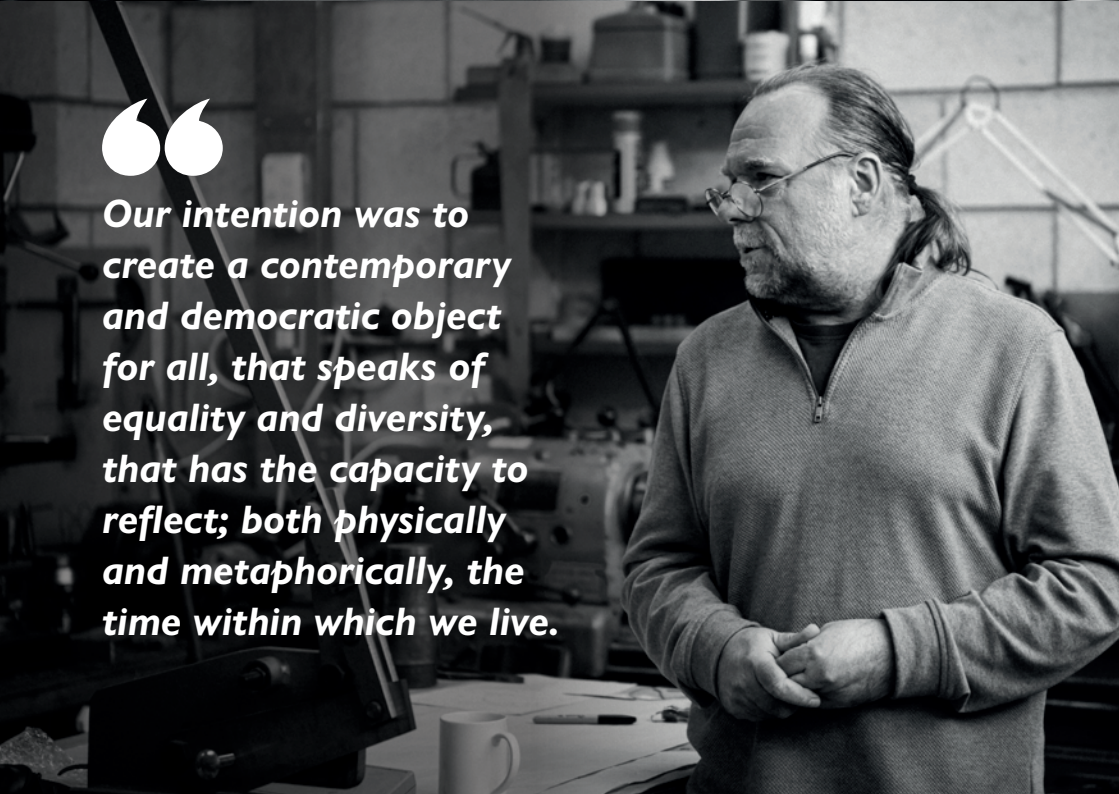
Amanda Game, Oxford 2022
www.hiddenobjectsoxford.co.uk



◀ The molten silver is poured into a mould. Sheffield, November 2021



Maria Hanson and
Chris Knight (below) in
their Sheffield studio,
November 2021



Our intention was to create a contemporary and democratic object for all, that speaks of equality and diversity, that has the capacity to reflect; both physically and metaphorically, the time within which we live.

Here I am

Maria Hanson & Chris Knight

***“I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful –”***

(Sylvia Plath, 1961)¹

Since ancient and medieval times, fine crafted precious metal objects were understood as luxury commodities, integral to the social, political, and cultural lifestyles of those who were able to afford to own and use them, providing visual evidence of status and wealth. As contemporary researchers /practitioners /makers, we found ourselves, through the *Silver Futures* project at a significant moment in time. Early discussions with curators and commissioners allowed us the opportunity to question the role, purpose and value silver objects have today, challenging established conventions that hopefully allow for new discourses to take place.

The creative research and design process that has resulted in the sculptural mirror, *Here I am*, explores ways to engage with the evolving academic community of St John's

College, celebrating the inclusive and outward looking ethos that is at the heart of contemporary college life. Our intention was to create a contemporary and democratic object for all, that speaks of equality and diversity, that has the capacity to reflect; both physically and metaphorically, the time within which we live.

The aesthetic language used within the work is both symbolic and representational. The cast iron frames speak of the process of transformation through making, referring to traditional casting frames used within the manufacturing of silver forms. The imposed surface treatment and colouring of the iron evokes the passage of time and gives resonance to the contextual positioning of the mirror within St John's; on the threshold between the old and the new. The silver oval held within

the cast iron frame, harnesses in its centre the reflective material properties of this noble metal which has been instrumental throughout history in the production of mirrors.

As an object the mirror transcends cultures and crosses disciplinary boundaries. It is referenced in ancient history, mythology, literature, art, and science. As Melchoir-Bonnet states, “Man has been interested in his own image since prehistoric times, using all sorts of expedients – from dark and shiny stones to pools of water – in order to catch his reflection” (Melchoir-Bonnet, 2002).²

In the 21st century where we are constantly exposed to the digitised image of ourselves and others, how often do we pause to really see, and reflect upon where we are? We catch ourselves casually as we pass a shop window, are often reflected back to ourselves through social media, and at times we might stare into our own eyes within the bathroom mirror... moments of questioning, joy or despair... we all seek validation

www.mariahanson.co.uk
www.chrisknightdesign.co.uk/silverware

¹ Plath, Sylvia. (1961). Extract from “Mirror”; in ed. Hughes, Ted (1971), *Sylvia Plath Crossing the Water: Transitional poems*, New York, Harper and Row. Reproduced with kind permission of the Estate of Sylvia Plath and Faber and Faber Ltd.

² Melchoir-Bonnet, S. (2002). *The Mirror*. London, New York: Routledge.



Here I Am installed at St John's College

of ourselves... this piece offers a moment to reflect, acknowledge and celebrate being here.

Maria Hanson MA (rca)

Reader – Jewellery & Metalwork:
 Sheffield Hallam University

Chris Knight MA (rca)

Senior Lecturer – Jewellery & Metalwork:
 Sheffield Hallam University



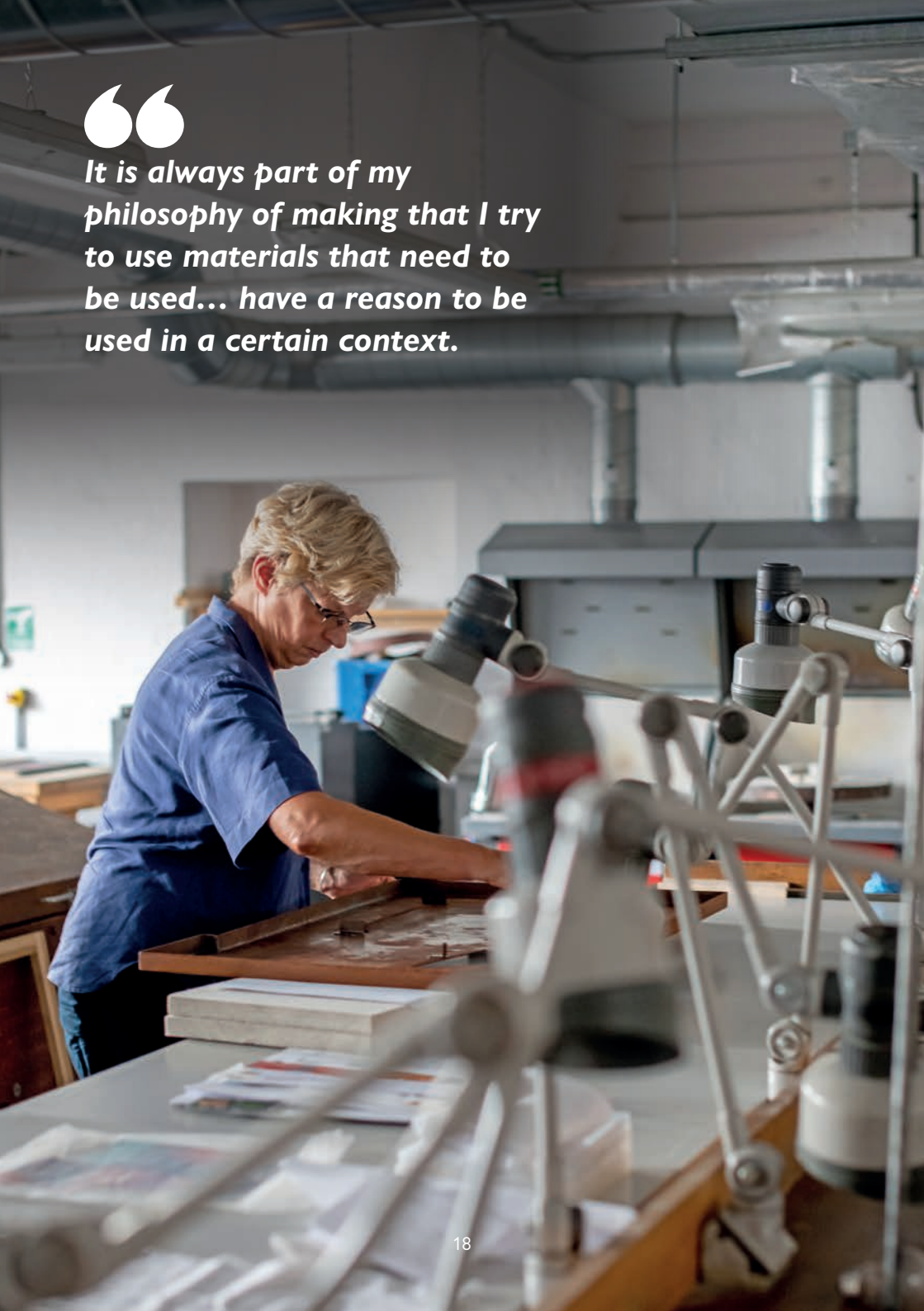
Maria Hanson and Chris Knight with the completed work, in Sheffield, August 2022



Installation Day, September 2022; Maria Hanson and Chris Knight, Installation Day, September 2022, showing detail of Mary Lum Jacquard Tapestry



It is always part of my philosophy of making that I try to use materials that need to be used... have a reason to be used in a certain context.



Things Change

Simone ten Hompel

Things change but still they remain in our presence, under our skins through memory and touch.

My interest lies in giving metals their own voice. Material has power, of its own, in all its changing states.

From the early model I decided to include an unmelted fragment of a Victorian tray. I felt this would bring out the aliveness of the tradition... which I understand as a maker. When I examined objects, I could see how they had been made – some shortcuts, less good parts, differences... it is like handwriting, or a photograph... you can read it.

It is always part of my philosophy of making that I try to use materials that need to be used... have a reason to be used in a certain context. In the early stages of Covid there were discussions about coating door handles in silver as the metal has anti-bacterial properties. This idea that silver, as a metal, can encourage touch is important to this work.

The use of corten steel for me represents, as a material, the earth, the ground we are standing on.

I am always interested, about how others experience my work. This notion of perceiving and understanding is, for me, very related to touch. The inset silver braille reveals the title when touch read.

There were two important catalysts for me in the commission process.

Firstly, when we were unable to visit St John's Professor Skoda agreed to create an iPhone video to give a sense of place. This opened a poetic sense of how important different college spaces are to the St John's community: the silver insert takes the form of a plan of St John's.

Secondly, when we all met, for the first time, at Sheffield Assay Office, for the melt process, this was an amazing time: metals in the workshop in different states... different weights... different contexts.

◀ Simone ten Hompel finishing *Things Change*, London, August 2022



When I collected my melted billet, it was difficult to draw a complete sheet because melts such as this can, and often do, contain imperfections from the casting process. I sliced off a section from the billet, forged it with a big hammer on an anvil then took it to the School of Art in Glasgow where I was doing some teaching and used their electric rollers to create the sheet.

I did not use all the billet. I have returned some of the silver billet, test sheet pieces, wire and dust to the St John's Collection so they have all original silver molecules back in the collection: some as a new work,

some as a study collection of silver's different states.

Things change is a transferable title: not only about states of being in metals... but being in terms of the times in which we live... the experiences we have... throughout my life I have learnt to understand, and be, with difference and change due to my very profound dyslexia.

Simone ten Hompel

Reader, London Metropolitan University

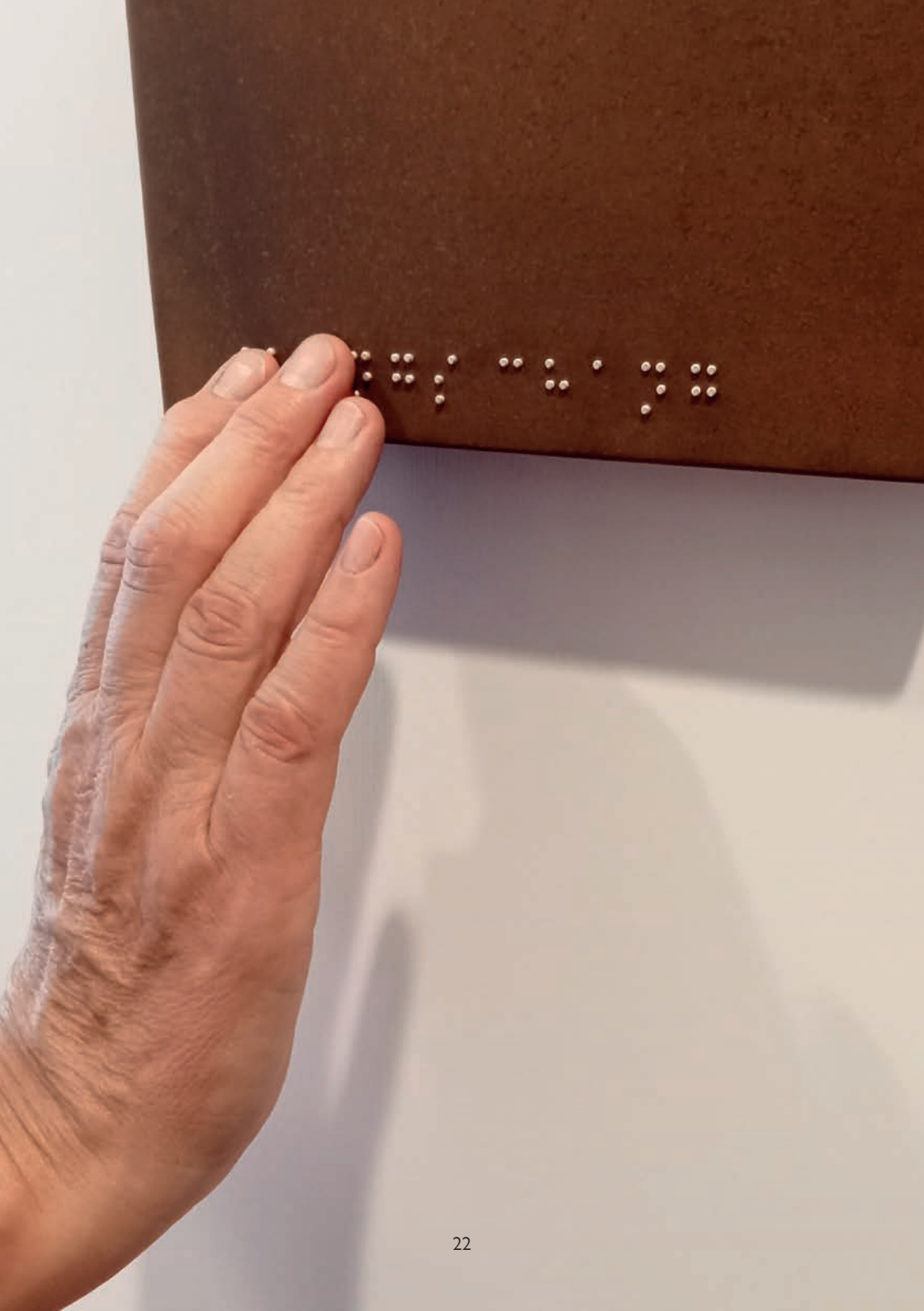
www.tenhompel.com



Artist's photographs of works in progress 2021/2022



Simone ten Hompel with the completed work in London, August 2022



Acknowledgements

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Oliver Warner, Works Facilities Manager, St John's College

Denise Cripps, Head of Communications, St John's College

All photography: © Julia Skupny (www.juliaskupny.com)

with the exception of:

p. 7 Matthew Winterbottom

p. 9 (lower image) Simone ten Hompel

p. 16 Amanda Game

p. 17 Portrait of Maria Hanson and Chris Knight with completed object:
Mark Howe (www.markhowe.co.uk)

Installation Day and portrait of Maria Hanson and Chris Knight:
Simone ten Hompel

p. 20 Simone ten Hompel

p. 22 Matt Hulse



<https://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/discover/about-college/>

<https://www.hiddenobjectsoxford.co.uk/#introduction>