

Kobi Bosshard - Goldsmith

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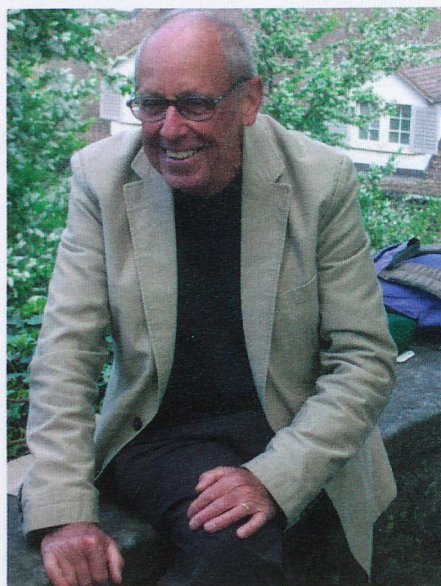
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Kobi Bosshard – Goldsmith

Goldsmith Kobi Bosshard and his daughter, filmmaker Andrea Bosshard, interviewed by Mary Hebbard



In August 2017, a new film by Andrea Bosshard and Shane Loader premiered at the Wellington International Film Festival. Called *Kobi*, the film tells the story of Andrea's father, renowned Swiss jeweller Kobi Bosshard. A third-generation goldsmith from Uster, Kobi left school aged 16, and did his apprenticeship at the Burch-Korrodi workshop in Zurich. In 1961, Kobi worked briefly for a fellow Swiss jeweller in Wellington, before taking a job as a mountaineering guide on Mt Cook. There he met Patricia, a New Zealander, and the two were later married. What was intended to be a short-term stay in the country, became a long-term one.

These days, the two have left the mountains to live in Otago, not far from the town of Middelmarsh.

What were your impressions of the jewellery trade in New Zealand, Kobi? Did it seem very different to what you'd known in Switzerland?

KOBI: Yes it was, very different. I think it was very conventional – it was all about diamond rings, and I considered it old-fashioned. There were comparatively few manufacturing jewellers who would work at the small-scale, and did a good job. There were some. [Laughs.] But that was not where I was working. So it was very different. It was very disappointing too in that respect.

And your wife, Patricia – when did you meet?

KOBI: We met in Mt Cook. So I spent a holiday in Mt Cook, for two or three months, in the summer of '61 – and then I was determined I wanted to go get a job down there. Which I did later that year. And Patricia, she came to the South Island from Auckland, and then she discovered the mountains, and she wanted to be there and work there.

And after you were married, you moved to the Akaroa. Your friend Trixie said in the film that you two brought something a bit new to Akaroa.

KOBI: That was all incidental. We were trying to buy a house in Christchurch and they were expensive. And then we had a drive past Akaroa and we thought it was beautiful and we saw that houses were much cheaper. And we decided to go live there. We didn't go there to introduce any culture or anything. We just met people and we were accepted very much, because I think we were, you know, just ordinary people – we did our thing, and people liked us.

ANDREA: Was there a sense though that you both might have been a bit culturally under-stimulated there?

KOBI: I think that was so in the long



run. Patricia took the initiative when the old powerhouse became available. It was emptied out, and she applied to get it and then she started the gallery. And that brought culture to Akaroa. We had theatre, we had exhibitions, we had concerts. We had a film society. It was fantastic.

Were you quite involved with the gallery?

KOBI: We both were. First we had to do the place up. That was a big job. It was only open on the weekend and we took it in turns looking after it. We put up shows together, and we organised things together. But she was really in charge.

And after that you moved to Dunedin, is that right?

KOBI: Yup. We needed more stimulation, and Patricia wanted to go run a gallery in a bigger place. So she was pushing for us to shift. I would have stayed there forever and gone to sleep – and I was insisting we stayed for a long time. But we went, and it turned out for the best.

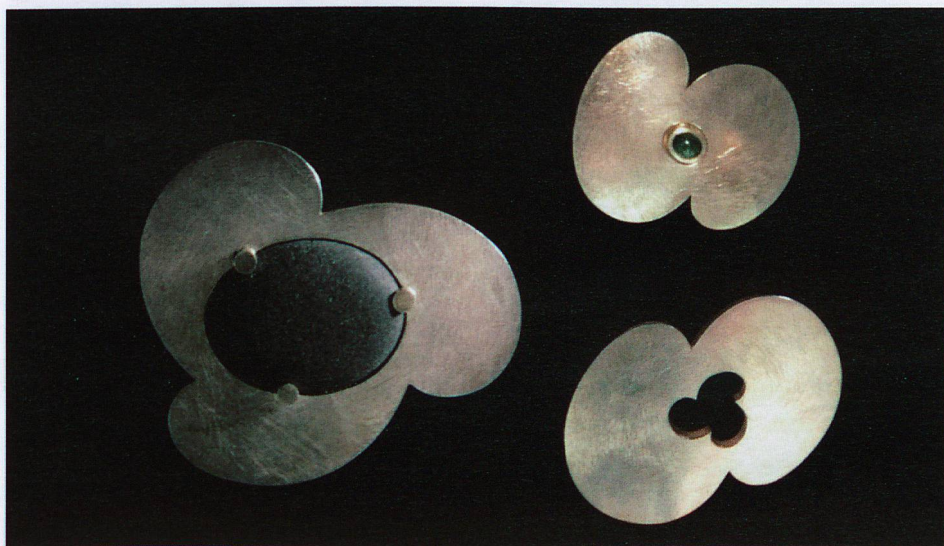
And you also left jewellery for a while to do sculpture, is that right?

KOBI: That was, I think, around the time when we came to Dunedin. Then everybody wanted to be artists and I so wanted to be one too, and so I thought I have to make big things. And so I made some sculptures. And then, I thought, alright – that actually there's nothing wrong with making jewellery. That just making bigger things doesn't make them art.

ANDREA: I remember a conversation not so long ago, Kobi, and we were talking about this very thing, and you were saying that when you arrived in Dunedin and you saw all these people like, I suppose, Rolf Hotere, Marilyn Webb and Robin White. And they were all doing their things. And you said you actually felt inadequate.

KOBI: Well, I did. Because they were artists.

ANDREA: Yeah. I was quite shocked about that.



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KOBI: I think it was just that artists had more status you know, and I wanted status too.

You say in the film that your work would have been quite different if you'd stayed in Switzerland.

KOBI: I think it would have. I think in Switzerland I most likely would have been working in my father's workshop, and eventually taken it over. There was a customer base there. It was in a relatively small town. There were the expectations of the public of what that workshop produced. And then there were my colleagues. People who I learned with. There would have been a lot of pressure around to conform – to some extent quite unconsciously conform – to what was around me. No one would have stopped me doing anything, but it wouldn't have entered my head to do anything radically different.

ANDREA: And also I think being in a situation in New Zealand where no one had any expectations of you – or no one knew your past – gave you a lot of freedom.

KOBI: I had absolute freedom, yeah, definitely.

And Patricia's feedback – that's also been quite important, hasn't it? There's a bit in the film where she talks about an orange ring – one that she picked up out of your cast offs.

KOBI: The first thing is, we both chose being in the mountains. And then – with going to Europe, living a life there, and going to Akaroa, and then the gallery – I think we grew up with all that. We grew up very parallel I think. And she was probably sharper in her judgement. I think when you make things, then you get all excited about what you do at the time. And your judgement is quite

insecure. And somebody from the outside – she was very quick. With that ring – she was really quick.

You said in the film that you did your best work in the late '70s and in the '80s. You said that '79 was a bit of a turning point.

KOBI: The end of the '80s, yes – I think the most exciting work came from that time. And later on it consolidated – it became refined – but the good ideas came from around then.

ANDREA: Was that partly, you think, after you got over the whole artist issue and were able to 100% fully embrace jewellery?

KOBI: I think so. When Francis Pound was teaching art history, he used to come round to the workshop, and he talked a lot to me, and he looked at what I was doing. And I did the sculptures – and he said as soon as you make something bigger, you have to scan it with your eyes, you can't see it in one eyeful. And when you make jewellery, you see the whole thing in one go. And there's nothing more concentrated than jewellery. It's actually quite a unique sort of an art.

ANDREA: So in a way you didn't feel defensive about it any more?

KOBI: No, no, not at all, no.

The way that you make jewellery – you have tried to keep, haven't you, the processes that you learnt in your apprenticeship? It seems it's been important to you, not to take shortcuts.

KOBI: It is. And I think what I'm realising more and more – all innovations like tools and machinery – it's always to make the thing quicker. And what I realised over the years, actually doing the menial work – actually being with the job, just doing some filing for a couple of hours – I think that contributes a lot to it.

And you don't consciously think about it, but unconsciously you think about it all the time.

Andrea, where did your interest in film come from? Was that there quite early on?

ANDREA: I think it was with the film society that Patricia and Kobi set up in Akaroa. They were the first films that I ever saw – they weren't the Disney things – they were things like Battleship Potemkin and Nanook of the North.

KOBI: Yeah, yeah.

ANDREA: And so I think I had a sense very early on that film was a medium for social change – that it had the potential to be a medium for social change.

So that was your real point of interest that you began with – the political side of things?

ANDREA: In a way, yes. Although actually – the animation was what I wanted to do, at the very beginning – I just imagined it would be me myself, in the room – it wasn't very [pauses] – big or ambitious.

Whose idea was it to make the documentary?

ANDREA: How did that evolve, Kobi? I can't even remember fully.

KOBI: Ah, it came after the show I think [a touring retrospective from 2013, Kobi Bosshard: An Exhibition]. Or before the show, it was talked about. I think you said you would like to make a film.

ANDREA: Yeah, and there was also that Super 8 film that I had made when I was about 20 or 21 on Kobi – a very simple film. In a funny sort of way, the seeds for this big film were planted then.

In the film, Andrea, you use several extracts from Kobi's letters to his parents, and to you. They were obviously quite a wonderful resource. Was that something you planned to use from the beginning?

ANDREA: No, because I can't remember when the letters turned up.

KOBI: They were sent to me after my mother died.

ANDREA: The letters – once we read them – then we knew we were going to use them. And we knew they were a good way to be able to cover that early period of Kobi's life in New Zealand.

You said in one of those letters, Kobi, that Kiwis were – you made a comparison with –

KOBI: The tidy Swiss. [Laughs.] And I think that's fantastic to be in the film because – it was the first time really that

I had left home, and things were different. And I think it's great. When anybody goes somewhere we do compare with where we come from, and how it stands up to it. And the film uses it very well. And lets me off too. It has me smiling.

Andrea, how did the film come together? Was there much planning involved beforehand?

ANDREA: Well, in a way it was a bit like the way Kobi makes his jewellery – there's some things you do plan but there's other things that evolve, and in a way the film was like that too – it evolved. We went in and we gathered all the raw material together, and we didn't know whether we would use it or not. There were whole paths that we never went down even though the footage is actually there. It was in the editing that we had to ask, well, what is this film about? And that's when it became about bigger things – about family, about death, about mortality, about old friendships, about immigration. All of those things.

And Kobi, where are you at now with your work? Are you making new things in the workshop? Or revising old ones?

KOBI: I don't consciously try and make new designs or have new ideas. I think if something happens, that's great. I get asked quite a bit about work that I've done before and would I do it again. And for me, it is only if I am still interested in it. Initially I was brought up to clean up everything and polish everything and to remove marks of the making. And over the years I've gone more and more away from that. That brooch that I made 30 years ago and polished – I make that again now with less tools, less cleaning up. It makes a different thing. So they develop, but it is not new. I don't call them new. I just do them in the way I do them now.

ANDREA: So it's a much more organic approach.

KOBI: Much more organic. And it often happens that there's some little bumps on there, you know, that annoys you. And it took me a long time to think, Oh just leave it. I don't improve it, I just leave it as it is. And those are the best pieces I think.

Feature documentary *Kobi* will be screening nationwide starting March 8, 2018. **Not to be missed !**

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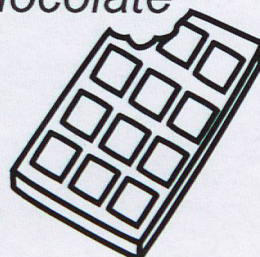


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