

Despite years of illness that has left her paralysed from the neck down, Romilly Saumarez Smith has managed an extraordinary creative comeback with the help of maker Lucie Gledhill. Cynthia Rose examines their fascinating partnership

As a creator, Romilly Saumarez Smith has made radical choices. After 25 years in bookbinding, she 'fell in love' with metal, abandoning her first career to start one in jewellery. Between these two *métiers*, she spent two years on a third: transforming a derelict Georgian mansion into a stunning home. But her most extreme choice came out of necessity. Despite years of illness that have confined her to a wheelchair (she is now paralysed from the neck down), she has managed an astonishing creative comeback. Thanks to jeweller Lucie Gledhill 'making in my place', Saumarez Smith has produced and sold out a new collection of jewellery. Currently, she is at work on another as well as commissions that include one from the V&A.

Even more surprising, Gledhill and Saumarez Smith are now starting a business: Savage & Chong, Makers of Fine Bagatelles in Silver and Gold. A combination of Saumarez Smith's maiden name with that of Gledhill's mother, its rings, earrings and necklaces are direct products of the

working method evolved by the pair. Its story is a singular one, centred on both luck and willpower.

Gledhill is of course a maker in her own right, well regarded at home and also abroad. Her elegant work benefits from a conceptual confidence, dominant in such showpieces as her 2009 *Chain of Thought*. Although it could not look more different from Saumarez Smith's, her making is rooted in similar interests: repetition, wire working – even some binding techniques. A veteran of Middlesex, Bishopsland and the Royal College, Gledhill describes herself as 'focused on the laborious'.

The makers were introduced by weaver Mary Restieaux. After the success of a 2010 retrospective (*Structured Elegance*, at the Yale Center for British Art), Saumarez Smith desperately wanted to find a way back to making. With a Roman system known as the 'memory palace', she discovered she could develop and 'store' ideas. 'I heard the historian Tony Judt, who was also paralysed, describe it on the radio. To remember all the things you think of but can't write down, you

DOUBLE VISION



envision a palace with all its architectural details – then choose a different spot in which to place each thought or image. I worked so hard on my own house, and I know it so well, that I spent a summer using it to design new jewellery.’

When Saumarez Smith shared her dream of working again with Restieaux, the latter undertook to find the right collaborator. But, says Saumarez Smith, ‘I was just hoping to find someone who could do what I told them, because that’s what I thought was going to be needed. Never could I have predicted how it actually works.’

At first, Gledhill also saw the task as a straightforward one. ‘I’d seen Romilly’s work in *Crafts* magazine, so I knew I could engage with it. When I saw the actual pieces, in my head I even started going through the making. But... it turned out to be so much trickier! It was only unconscious processes that made it possible.’

Impelled by something she could not even articulate, Gledhill secretly embarked on a series of rituals. She unpacked everything in Saumarez Smith’s

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former workshop, documenting all the items, tools and scraps with a flatbed scanner. She also scrutinised things the maker had discarded. ‘It was important for me to know what she saw as mistakes, I had to understand it all at an intuitive level. To discover how I could really work as Romilly, I had to learn how to empty myself out completely.’

Saumarez Smith, who always prized creating in utter privacy, suddenly found herself beset by troubling doubts. ‘I needed to totally open up what I was like. Which, in my situation, felt incredibly vulnerable. So often words just can’t describe what you want to explain, plus I have no movement in my hands.’ To break the ice, the pair started looking

at different images, as well as talking through their thoughts about artists and books. Each was startled by the way their sensibilities meshed – and even more surprised to find they had started evolving ‘a language’. Carefully, they went on to build a visual library of specific forms and shapes they could refer to in making work.

Saumarez Smith was still worried that ‘I was just taking and taking’, a fear exacerbated by never seeing Gledhill’s own work. This, Gledhill knew from the start, had no place in their universe (‘I sensed Romilly felt left out, but I had to have that boundary’). For the younger jeweller, learning to work through description was a constant struggle against her instincts. ‘The moment I have to articulate a thing, it starts to change. My hands work before my head, whereas Romilly is the opposite. She thinks a thing out before she begins it.’

From top to bottom, however, the house Saumarez Smith created exudes her aesthetic. ‘Working here has helped me tremendously,’ says Gledhill. In a sense, only one kind of work can

Opposite page:
Gold Landscape
Earrings with Weeds,
18 ct gold, silver
with black oxidised
silver detail, 2011
Below (l-r): *Encrusted*
Mirror Pendant, silver,
18 ct gold, diamonds,
2011; *Wreath Shingle Ring*,
silver, 9 ct gold, 2011.
All from *Memory Palace*,
by Romilly Saumarez
Smith and Lucie Gledhill





come out of it. There is the size and character of the studio; that tiny scale forces its own sort of meditation. But it's so much more than that. Romilly's way of looking at things and living with them is very particular.'

Saumarez Smith's jewellery had grown out of her work in binding. There, her use of metals intersected her love for the structure of the book and for 'bringing that to the outside'. Her jewellery uses semi-traditional forms and expresses natural patterns, its first inspiration being Berlin ironwork pieces from the 18th century. Many of the shapes Saumarez Smith creates look almost improvised (Gledhill sees them as 'rather like drawings'). Others, such as her pearl necklace with its hand-worked clasp and delicate detail, are more concerned with how jewellery sits on the body.

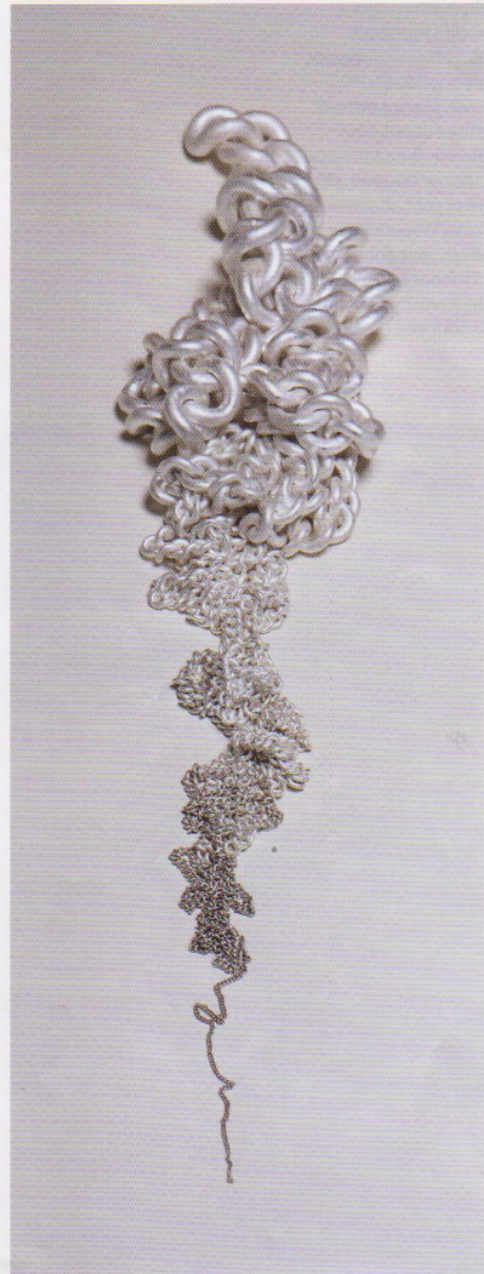
Each piece, however, requires three weeks of making – a factor that helped to generate Savage & Chong. As Gledhill and Saumarez Smith solidified a working method, they found themselves

often talking about something 'more playful'. Those discrete shapes developed as building blocks could, they realised, be used in a simpler, more affordable way.

This idea gained shape in the spring of 2011, when Kettle's Yard commissioned a piece for their fundraiser *Found*. Although just starting to formulate Savage & Chong, Saumarez Smith and Gledhill decided to make an earring – and present it against the image of an ear. Illustrator Lilia Buchanan created this for them, and for a logo, Saumarez Smith called on Sally-Mae Joseph. A close collaborator from her bookbinding years, the calligrapher gave them a typeface that is classic yet weathered. 'We wanted it all to seem a little bit macabre,' says Saumarez Smith, 'so the provenance could feel just a bit mysterious.' This first piece led to enough enquiries that it was clear Savage & Chong could work.

The makers have jokingly dubbed Savage & Chong their 'diffusion line'. Yet, like the fine jewellery that gave birth to it, this represents a

Clockwise from centre:
Large Rectangular Pink Pearl Earring, Romilly Saumarez Smith, silver, 18 ct gold, pearls, 2005;
Chain of Thought, Lucie Gledhill, silver, 3 m long, 2009; *A Wreath for Lizzie Hexham*, Romilly Saumarez Smith, silver, 2005, 18 ct gold, pearls;
Large Rectangular White Pearl Earrings, Romilly Saumarez Smith, silver, 18 ct gold, pearls, 2005



victory that defies the odds. Each maker, in her way, had to surrender the act of creating – and had to rethink her definitions of the personal. For Gledhill, learning to work ‘as’ someone else was all-consuming. ‘Part of you starts to think, “How will this even be possible?”’ But it turns out to be about the very essence of making, about what will get you going in the first place.’ She pauses. ‘Mostly, we each had and have a desire to do it. If your hand is always closed, you’ll never receive anything.’

Now, Gledhill finds Saumarez Smith’s self-taught method refreshing. ‘I had always aspired to that, I always deeply wanted it. But it’s something I never allowed myself. When I’m “being her”, I can finally have it, I don’t have to finish things in a way that’s received and taught.’ Saumarez Smith says that, while staggered by Gledhill’s generosity, she has to ‘work very hard to justify each choice. That helps me, as well as my work, to grow.’

Each remains clear about her role, but

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Saumarez Smith has never viewed Gledhill as an assistant. ‘Of course, the work that is mine is mine and that’s how Lucie sees it. Yet she’s had an enormous effect on the way it’s developed. Without her, I would have never have tried anything like Savage & Chong. She’s really been the driving force behind it.’

Two things, both agree, make their new enterprise possible. One is the internet and its direct distribution. The other is the fact they now have a functional, ongoing practice. Because they perfected a fluent means of communication, Gledhill has recovered time for her personal making. Their mutual enthusiasm for Savage & Chong, however,

is obvious. ‘I think it’s the kind of thing my friends will like,’ explains Gledhill. ‘Yet nothing is cast or made using any production process. Everything is hand-made, so each little work is unique. The pieces are silver but all of them have a touch of gold – it’s a bit like adding a pinch of salt.’

Seven years ago, Saumarez Smith and I sat down to discuss why she gave up binding. Then at the top of her game, she was starting another craft from scratch. She told me then: ‘Things happen as I go along, I don’t know what’s coming. Now I understand that more, I find it rather thrilling.’

She could never have predicted what actually happened. Yet Saumarez Smith insists she stands by her earlier statement. ‘Over the past five years, I’ve learned so much more about life! I’ve had time to explore my mind and I really value the chance to do that. It’s also wonderful to have created this house, this strange fortress which helps so much with collaboration. All of it seems to work together and, thanks to that, I’m still creating.’

Below: *Cluster Necklace*, silver, 18 ct gold
Below right: *Cluster Necklace*, silver, 18 ct gold.
Both by Savage & Chong, 2012

