

Twenty-First Century Heirlooms



The notion of an heirloom often relates to objects (or plants) “passed down” to family and friends. It suggests an intimate connection or, at a minimum, a relationship between something past and something present (and, hopefully, something future). **Twenty-First Century Heirlooms** uses the work of contemporary artists to investigate heirlooms as ideas—as links between generations and communities, as concepts to modify or embellish, as techniques to master or modify, and as items to treasure or refuse.

Beth Lipman
Still Life with Plate of Cheese and Stein, 2011
Type C Print on Plexiglas
25 1/2 x 38 1/4 inches
Courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

(below right)
Susan Myers
Golden Pagoda, 2010
Silver-plated found metal and silver
6 1/4 x 7 1/4 x 5 1/4 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Photo: Carson Zullinger

Featuring artists at various phases in their careers and works crafted from a variety of different media, this large-scale exhibition offers a context for exploring what we value today and why. From brooches that use famous Western paintings as reference points to pieces made from recycled American pressed glass, and fast food containers made of silver, the work included in this show expands and challenges how we define heirlooms in the twenty-first century.

Artists whose works are featured include: **Chris Antemann, Lucrezia Bieler, Melanie Bilenker, Ashley Buchanan, Linda Cordell, Amber Cowan, Kim Cridler, Venetia Dale, Jack Earl, Michelle Erickson, Diane Falkenhagen, Susan Taylor Glasgow, Yevgeniya Kaganovich, Joanne Kliejunas (Heirloom Couture), Beth Lipman, Maggie Meister, Myra Mimplitsch-Gray, Susan Myers, emiko oye, Donna Sharrett, Christina Smith, Mary Smull, Kimberlie Tatalick, Jennifer Trask, Jonathan Wahl, and Stacey Lee Webber.**

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In recent years, the value of objects has been illuminated in a very public way. Popular culture television programs such as *Antiques Road Show*, *American Pickers*, *Storage Wars*, and more than one examination of the concept of hoarding underscore how objects—and our connections to objects—structure our lives.

These discussions (entertainments, in some cases) are part of a web of inquiry that also explores material and cultural value, the affirmation of labor (and its perceived value), the role of the handmade and the machine made, and how all this has looked in the past and may look in the future. Exhibitions and articles address this with artists that employ various strategies and materials in ways that bring these topics to the forefront.

All of this connects to heirlooms, as they are explored in this exhibition, as they relate to how we value the things that surround us, how we understand those articles, and what we do with them—or the idea of them—as time passes. In addition, the concept of heirlooms is associated with tradition and heritage—not limited to defining objects, keepsakes can be understood as ideas and models. A builder of custom cars who gathered skills and interests from being in a garage with their father when they were younger can look at that sharing of knowledge—as well as the time spent together—as a heirloom of sorts. The circumstances offer emotional connections as well as tangible ones.

Heirlooms could be many things—a piece of jewelry, photographs, a car, a collection, an article of clothing, or a traditional mode of working. What distinguishes them from others in our possession is that they also represent links between people, sentiment, and shared history. Any time we discuss the “handing down” of an item or idea, we are also addressing aspects that exist beyond the thing itself.

Several factors impact how an object or idea is understood in a broader cultural context. These influences include who made the item or who originated an idea, who is passing it along and to whom, how much the current social structure has need of or interest in it, and whether its value is reverential, sentimental, practical or monetary. Significantly, meaning can shift. For example, a woman’s engagement ring can hold meaning for her daughter or son, but it would not be the same for the children as it is for the mother.

The works included in ***Twenty-First Century Heirlooms*** represent artists thinking about how any kind of object or idea carries meaning and value, and how those aspects change over time. They draw on the past and look at history through a contemporary lens—offering comparisons and contrasts between the past and present, as well as new models for understanding how history imbues ideas and things with meaning and how that significance is carried forward.

The concept of heirlooms here is both inclusive and exclusive—many of these artists draw on art historical and historical constructs or significant objects and images but refashion them. **Chris Antemann**, **Linda Cordell**, **Jack Earl**, and **Michelle Erickson** all take



on the subject of historical ceramics, favoring the decorative and functional pieces made in Western Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. These artists tend



(above right)
Ashley Buchanan
Brooch with Gemstone Button, 2009
Brass, powder coat, sterling silver, mylar, paper, and aluminum
2 1/2 x 3 x 7/8 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Photo: Joshua Dudley Greer

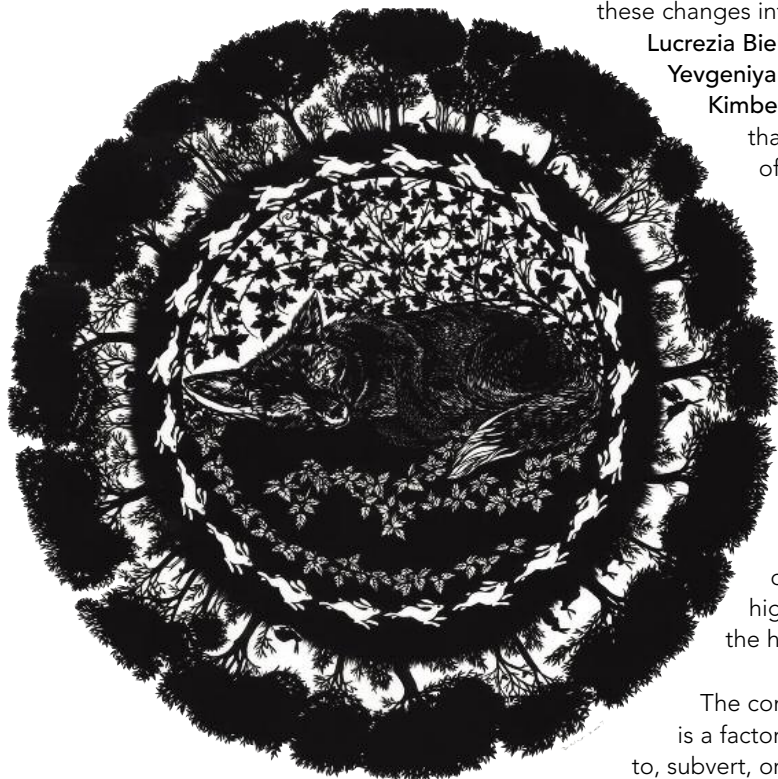
(left)
Donna Sharrett
Just Breathe (detail), 2012
Clothing, found needlework, jewelry, roses, guitar strings, dirt, beads, and thread
36 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the Artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York
Photo: Margaret Fox

to subvert what is often-regarded as a kitschy figurine or mundane teapot by emphasizing erotic, humorous, or political themes while still maintaining the earlier referents in form and tone.

Through mixed-media jewelry, photography, beaded jewelry, and charcoal drawings, **Diane Falkenhagen**, **Beth Lipman**, **Maggie Meister**, and **Jonathan Wahl** directly represent historical examples. Their manipulations may translate an earlier form (in the case of Wahl—jet mourning jewelry) into a very different state (Wahl’s large-scale charcoal drawings of that jewelry). If there is knowledge of the historical pieces, this “transference” can be simultaneously shocking and compelling. An aura of familiar permeates the work, even if the history is not known.

When traditional modes of making or certain kinds of objects are reconfigured, we are encouraged to consider how and why these changes influence our understanding of both the old and new.

Lucrezia Bieler, **Melanie Bilenker**, **Ashley Buchanan**, **Kim Cridler**, **Yevgeniya Kaganovich**, **Myra Mimplitsch-Gray**, **Susan Myers**, and **Kimberlie Tatalick** are all influenced by techniques and types that have been connected to the whims and discretions of larger cultural influence.



Weaving in and around these conversations is the relationship between the handmade and the mass-produced. In terms of treasured keepsakes, how something is made can be both important and not important. This is a prickly point—as creators of artworks and images, many of these artists are steeped in techniques and traditions that have a distinctive lineage. To them, the question of handmade vs. mass-produced could be vital. **Venetia Dale**, **Joanne Kliejunas (Heirloom Couture)**, **Myra Mimplitsch-Gray**, **Mary Smull**, and **Stacey Lee Webber** create works that investigate the value of the handmade, highlighting the uniqueness and particularities brought by the human touch.

The complexity of memory—whether collective or individual—is a factor when discussing lineage. Personal associations can add to, subvert, or otherwise modify the meaning afforded an heirloom.

Amber Cowan, **emiko oye**, **Donna Sharrett**, and **Jennifer Trask**

utilize media charged with meaning. Respectively, Cowan recycles American pressed glass, oye creates jewelry with LEGOs, Sharrett incorporates family treasures from a deceased relative, and Trask uses antler and bone. While they do not use recycled materials in the same way, **Susan Taylor Glasgow** and **Christina Smith** explore the connection between memory and intimacy, creating works that touch on personal stories.

With all of the objects and images available in the history of the known world, why do the artists choose to reference specific things or shared ideas? This is where the cultural and social construct of the heirloom “collides” with the artistic—it is about a personal response. These kinds of inquiries tend to lead to more questions than answers. Why do we value some traditions over others? How do we measure value that is not based on materials? How do we reconcile the idea that things that are important to us may not be important in the future? With the disposable nature of many technological devices, is the perception of physical objects themselves changing? When does the idea become more valuable than the item, or does it?

(above left)
Lucrezia Bieler
Evil Bunnies are Tempting Me with their Fluffy Fur, 2007
Paper
29 x 29 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

(right)
Mary Smull
Willow, 2011
Found needlepoint and yarn
10 1/2 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Photo: Aaron Iglor for Greenhouse Media LLC





Below is more information about the individual artists whose works are depicted in this guide. For further details about all those featured in **Twenty-First Century Heirlooms**, please see the additional artist information sheet or visit ramart.org.

Lucrezia Bieler's papercuts combine a centuries old papercutting tradition with the artist's interest in the natural world. Using a single sheet of paper and a small pair of scissors, while relegating herself to a traditional monotone composition, Bieler explores the contemporary, personal, and the historical through compelling and complex roundel scenes of animals.

Ashley Buchanan's jewels—part silhouette, part image, part object—encourage viewers to think about how we attach value to both materials and their representations. In an exaggerated context, they play with the notion that a depiction of something—here, a photograph of a gemstone or the silhouette of an iconic necklace—could be just as important as that thing. They are the twenty-first century's rendition of costume jewelry.

Joanne Kliejunas (Heirloom Couture) refashions antique textiles into modern wearables. Only repurposing items—or portions of items—that can no longer be used in their original state, Kliejunas extends the life of a quilt or linen, and in doing so, her work preserves segments of history and hand labor. Long a lover of textiles (she took her first sewing class at the age of 9), Kliejunas has also been an avid collector and, now, the creator, of garments.

Trained as a glass blower, **Beth Lipman** creates still lifes that both echo and upend a long tradition combining objects and imagery. Lipman's glass tableaux allude to a past that used still lifes as metaphors for social and cultural events as well as for aesthetic

purpose and personal posturing. Her C-print photographs—which capture still lifes that no longer exist—pose questions about representations, artifice, and the meaning of objects. Since Lipman destroys and recycles the pieces that she uses for the photos, the life-size C-print—as ghostly as it is—is the only existing record of the items depicted.

Susan Myers uses recycled silver-plated serving trays to create works based on Chinese take-out containers, stamping them with patterns pulled from decorative and functional pieces from times past. Works from Myers' **Disposable Series** challenge contemporary concepts of value. Referencing what many regard as throw-aways in silver slyly challenges viewers to consider "what we consume, how we consume it, what we discard and disregard."

Motivated by the gift of a number of LEGOs many years ago, **emiko oye** began to make jewelry—primarily neckpieces—based on historical royal examples. The irony of recreating luxurious examples in a democratic, commonplace material is humorous, yet also poignant, and suits the artist's exploration of how and why we value certain items.

Donna Sharrett's mixed-media collages are full of memory and meaning. Representing rituals in the form of mandalas and mementos, her works incorporate found objects (such as guitar-strings that serve as dedications to her now-deceased brother) and stitching techniques learned from her family. Each piece is a combination of the personal and cultural, a memorial to connections among human beings past and present.

Through her Society for the Prevention of Unfinished Needlepoint (or SPUN), **Mary Smull** "rescues" unwanted and incomplete needlepoint projects from auction sites, thrift stores, and rummage sales. Her efforts to finish these pieces—but only in white thread so that the original stitches are distinguished from her additions—question the value of labor and the meaning of objects created through handwork.

(above left)
emiko oye

La Cérémonie de la Mémoire from the Series *Les Voyageurs de Temps*, 2013
LEGO®, argentium, and sterling silver
21 1/4 x 9 1/8 x 2 1/8 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

(right)

Joanne Kliejunas
Lace Redux (detail), 2009
Wool, vintage Irish lace tablecloth, vintage buttons, and polyester
33 x 39 x 17 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

Photo: Robert Frost Photography, Talent, OR

