



New Acquisitions: Contemporary Art Jewelry

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Jewelry has the ability to convey complex meaning unlike almost any other kind of object. It is and has been: handmade, mass-produced; a possession, a gift, a symbol; a means to reflect social and cultural status, a means to reflect something personal. Its power applies to commercial, mass-produced jewelry (especially when it is given as a gift) yet is even greater when jewelry itself is considered as subject—who made it and why, who wears it and how.

Contemporary art jewelry often investigates cultural, social, personal, and environmental topics. Distinguished by a vocabulary of diverse media from precious metals to recycled objects, it also reflects artist's interests in material exploration and notions of wearability. RAM's holdings in art jewelry—with examples from artists across the globe and at varying stages in their career—are growing rapidly.

What is contemporary art jewelry exactly? Categorization is tricky and the answer to this question has been the subject of many conversations, essays, and articles. What makes it "art" jewelry rather than some other kind of jewelry? While responses to this would be varied, it is relatively safe to say that an artistic self-consciousness often drives those that make work that is considered "art jewelry." Issues, materials, and themes are explored—sometimes the work is not even wearable. Precious and non-precious media are used and a knowledge of the history of jewelry is brought to bear. The contemporary jewelry landscape also includes work that is very experimental with sculptural, video, and performance elements incorporated into more conceptual projects. There is a push and pull between skill-based training that emphasizes technique and programs that encourage theoretical exploration. Implicit in these investigations is a respect for the history of jewelry and metalsmithing—even when contemporary approaches are modified or expanded.

Contemporary jewelers also have to decide if they are going to make work to sell, work to exhibit, or both. While this distinction may not seem all that critical, it can be—as it directs major decisions in their approach and practice. Jewelry is, by its nature, connected to the human form and shape.

For some, the work is not fully completed until it is worn. Since it cannot be worn when it is on display in a museum, sales of work with the assumption that the buyer would incorporate the jewelry into their wardrobe, would be important.

While some art jewelers have a production line—namely work that is meant to be sold and that is often created in multiple—not all do. The contemporary jeweler interested in exploring ideas through their work may also focus on jewelry as

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objects of contemplation—meant to be studied and considered in a static sense as well as, perhaps, as objects that are worn. Museum collections provide opportunities for contemplation by other generations. When many contemporary private collectors give jewelry (and other types of adornment), they are often presenting items they may wear. Their willingness to share items to which they have been physically close adds a layer of meaning to their gifts.

In addition to having an international focus, RAM's art jewelry collection contains works by established artists as well as those who are emerging. This variety ensures lively juxtapositions as the generations of jewelers carry interests that both intersect and diverge. Artists represented in RAM's collection offer a context for understanding the complexity and dynamism of the field—the variety of topics explored is as diverse as the artists. Some issues raised include: questions of beauty and value; the relationship between the wearable and the un-wearable; personal concerns; formal investigations of materials, patterns, and design; the natural world and the built environment; topics of social and cultural importance, such as material use and recycling; explorations of gender and identity; and the relationship between the past and present.

For example, using a variety of approaches, **Yael Herman**, **Ted Noten**, **Robin Quigley**, and **Rachelle Thiewes** explore the physical relationship of jewelry to the body as they use geometric shape and form. With work described as “painterly,” enamelist **Rebekah Laskin** creates brooches and earrings with layers of color and texture. **Sharon Church**, who uses metals and naturally-based materials such as glass, bone, and wood, and **Kathleen Dustin**, who utilizes many media, including polymer, respond to the natural world in form and content.

Inspired by natural topography as well as man-made architecture, **Jee Hye Kwon** uses gold and silver wire to create skeletal “see through spaces” and **Giovanni Corvaja** knits together tiny filaments of gold that reflect his interest in the details of nature.

Jessica Calderwood, who creates enamel brooches, wall works, and sculpture, and **Carrie Garrott**, who constructs elaborate neckpieces using real flower petals in glass vials, investigate questions of femininity. The glass bead neckpieces of **Joyce Scott**, silver brooches and neckpieces of **Christina Smith**, and recycled tin brooches of **Esther Knobel** feature figurative and object imagery that establishes a narrative framework. These artists weave personal and social memories that hint at even larger stories. Portions of found objects are factored into **Thomas Mann's** brooches, **Boris Bally's** neckpieces, brooches, and furniture, and **James Mandella's** accessories. These artists reinvigorate discarded or marginalized materials and establish links among the unexpected.

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Using their own words, others underscore the interests that guide their approach to contemporary jewelry:

Melanie Bilenker

The Victorians kept locketts of hair and miniature portraits painted with ground hair and pigment to secure the memory of a lost love. In much the same way, I secure my memories through photographic images rendered in lines of my own hair, the physical remnants. I do not reproduce events, but quiet minutes, the mundane, the domestic, the ordinary moments.¹

Caroline Broadhead

My work has evolved in a journey outwards from the body. Starting with the most intimate of design objects, jewelry, I made pieces to be worn next to the body, to be handled and changed by the handling. This led to using clothing forms, objects that followed or deviated from the human form, and which acted as metaphor for a person.²

Irena Brynner

In contemporary jewelry, there is a greater element of sculpture than ever before. I use all my training as a sculptor in evolving my jewelry forms. I work out the forms spatially keeping in mind that they must have their base on the human body. This relationship of jewelry to the body is all-important. Jewelry must be wearable and must function with and on the body—it must at all times enhance the person.³

William Harper

*I essentially get my ideas from anything and everything around me—especially music and color, myths and the history of art, cyclical changes and odors. I have a tendency to work in series, so as one piece progresses within a theme, the next ones suggest themselves. Sometimes other artists have inspired me to do homages to their work—**Jasper Johns** or **Cy Twombly** or **Fabergé**, recently, or the choreographic movement of **Twyla Tharp**! My work is becoming increasingly autobiographical.⁴*

Eleanor Moty

*Of her jewelry which includes semi-precious imperfect stones and responds to the color and topography of natural landscapes, the artist says: *It's not narrative, it's not conceptual, it's just purely visual: putting materials together in a very spare sense...but I always look at the land no matter where I am and appreciate something about it.*⁵*

Harold O'Connor

I enjoy working with diverse materials for their aesthetic value, NOT their intrinsic value. My work over the years has focused upon using traditional techniques of metalwork in a contemporary way...I create small objects which happen to be wearable. Other influences in my art come from my travels to exotic lands, interaction with nature, and reaction to facets of society.⁶

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RAM is interested in documenting artist's work-in-depth, especially with examples that span the range of a career. A non-exhaustive list of artists significant in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century jewelry and represented by numerous examples in RAM's collection includes: **Robert Ebendorf, Arline Fisch, Ford and Forlano, Terri Gelenian-Wood, Ken Loeber, Eleanor Moty, Harold O'Connor,** and **Elise Winters.**

Lena Vigna
Curator of Exhibitions

Endnotes

1. <http://www.melaniebilenker.com/creation.shtml>
(accessed 3 Dec. 2014).
2. <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/faculty-of-arts-brighton/alumni-and-associates/associates-and-alumni/fashion-and-textiles/broadhead,-caroline> (accessed 3 Dec. 2014).
3. As quoted in Rose Slivka, "Irena Brynner,"
Craft Horizons, March 1959.
4. <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/whc/whc-noframe.html?/exhibitions/online/whc/harper.html>
5. <http://craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/eleanor-moty-essential-elements>
6. <http://klimt02.net/jewellers/harold-oconnor>