

COMING INTO VIEW

By Sakurako Shimizu

Craft works are commonly blamed for encapsulating themselves in their own “craft history” and “craft tradition”, remaining disconnected from the discourses of contemporary culture, and showing lack of interest in social/political issues. In response to those critical voices, many emerging craftspeople are opening their practices to include a variety of methodologies, concepts and materials which have traditionally been more characteristic of the world of conceptual art. There is an ongoing discussion in the crafts community about how craft works can reach out to a broader audience and redefine the cultural relevance of this embattled discipline of creativity. Some artists are adopting new approaches towards the existing craft of jewelry and push their discipline into completely uncharted territories, which only loosely embrace the central concept of adornment.

The purpose of “Coming into View” is to define some of the most visible conceptual strategies employed by emerging studio jewelers. The twelve artists represented in the show deal both with ideas present in studio jewelry since the sixties as well as brand new ones which are specific to scientific and social developments of the 21st century. The common thread running through their work is an interest in opening up the field to a broader audience, building bridges between craft, daily human experience and contemporary culture.

Returning to Body

“Body” has been a popular subject of inspiration and fascination for artists. Particularly for jewelers, the body holds special importance, since the field itself originated in the context of bodily adornment.

Bioengineered living cell patches by **Marta Lwin** are fine examples of a direct artistic response to current technologies. Cultured tissues designed on a computer become a metaphor for our own biological existence inevitably drifting away from nature. It is perhaps the fact that Marta wasn’t trained as a jeweler which allowed her to opt for the most direct solution, and most factual material, which is much more effective than any standard jewelry making method.

The German artist duo **Body Politics** create perfectly hand crafted jewelry/objects out of rubber, leather and plastic. Their textured surfaces and vivid colors directly mimic internal organs of the human body, bones, joints and orifices. Through an unfamiliar yet successful move Body Politics makes us feel as if we are wearing the insides of our body “outside”. Both refreshing and humorous, their pieces reconnect the wearer with their bodies.

Metalsmith and sculptor **Lauren Kalman** combines gold leaf and the female form into powerful images which reference fashion, sexuality and the discourse of preciousness in jewelry. Highly subversive, seductive pieces comment on conventional standards of beauty communicated through the mass media and reveal the symbolic power of gold.

Deconstructing Jewelry

Decontextualizing existing cultural motives is a common postmodern practice, through which an artist re-opens the conversation about certain traditions by manipulating, restructuring and displacing certain pre-existing and recognizable elements, therefore making the audience aware of semiotic tensions and hierarchies of values previously taken for granted.

Yevgeniya Kaganovich uses the silhouette of a traditional pearl necklace, with each circle a round, laminated latex cutout. A fresh water pearl is sealed in each circle, mimicking the natural vessel of a shell. Through this juxtaposition of material, Kaganovich reveals the binary axis of traditional/contemporary, organic/synthetic, timeless/temporary.

Anya Kivarkis' white jewelry operates through complete removal of implied decorative value and replaces it with white, dripping surfaces of epoxy resin. Beautiful and ironic forms translate into surreal memories of ornamentation, content-less contours of some Victorian splendor. The minimum process, remade rings by **Ukiko Honda**, are prime examples of a postmodern collage. Mass-produced rings are cut into halves and recombined. The empty spaces of settings inevitably shift our attention to the new structures created by joining two halves, validating the formal/structural elements previously subdued by commercial reproduction. The simple conceptual act of manipulation transforms the mass produced rings into unique, intriguing jewelry pieces.

Raïssa Bump stitches colorful thread on cutout silver plate to add colors, patterns, and textures. An interesting formal hybrid, Bump's work, although using quite familiar means, manages to poetically transform the materials into a silent statement of tension.

Referencing Broader Culture

Amelia Toelke's brooches appropriate decorative banner motives characteristic of medieval manuscripts. The immediately recognizable form, devoid of content (the banners are blank), submerge the viewer into a discourse of historical text, western written tradition, feudalism symbolism and heraldry. Such quotation in the context of jewelry work translates into a statement about the capacity to communicate, convey messages, and function as a container of meaning.

Subtle, minimal and nostalgic, the works of **Monica Strasser** are made out of inherited family cutlery. Both cutlery and jewelry are types of objects which are associated with family past, history and continuity. Reminiscent of a specific historical timeframe (first half of the 20th century) and carrying a sense of dislocated functionality, these small metal objects seem strangely confident and fragile at the same time.

Jewelry as Meditative Act

Meditation is a type of focused experience leading to deep understanding of the subject, whether it be breathing pattern, prayer, movement or phenomenon. Oftentimes a piece of jewelry can help generate that kind of experience in the wearer; or more rarely the act of making a piece itself becomes a form of meditation.

Kunihiro Shibuya illustrates the scale of human disaster of the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks by joining together 2749 jump-rings, the exact number of victims. The physical experience extends to the wearer: the necklace weighs 4.5 pounds. Both artist and his audience are forced to understand the magnitude of the disaster by imposing this metaphorical exercise upon themselves.

The concept of communicating experience through weight is also present in the works of **Constanze Schreiber**. Her natural fur pieces, silhouetted after traditional jewelry forms, contain concealed lumps of lead. The surprising heaviness suggests the weight of an animal killed to produce the fur and remind us of the reality behind natural materials. Making and wearing the piece is, in a sense, empathizing with another being.

Shari Pierce meditates on the meaning of borders by creating wire outlines and metal cutouts of various states, continents and geographic regions. Her pins and necklaces are material manifestations of some of the most arbitrary yet powerful forces in our lives: divisions between peoples, cultures, races, languages and religions. Removed from their geo-political context, they become nothing but shapes, forms and lines.

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“Coming Into View” brings together emerging studio jewelers who are interested in pushing the envelope of their discipline and making an effort to communicate with a broader cultural audience. The twelve artists represented in the show use various concept-based approaches to create wearable objects. The four themes of “body”, “jewelry deconstruction”, “cultural reference” and “meditation” are simple vehicles to describe significant tendencies in a plethora of unique artistic methods. One cannot overestimate the importance of conceptual sources, which manifest themselves via deep understanding of materials, methods and traditions. It is perhaps this attachment to process and material which makes the craft of studio jewelry unique and exciting.