

BARBARA HEINRICH



A DELICATE BALANCE

David Updike

The American visionary painter Alex Grey has described art as “a point of contact between the spiritual and material realms.” This conception of the creative process sees it as a constant negotiation between these inner and outer realms, requiring equal attention to both. The artist is the “medium” through which one flows into the other.

This dynamic is evident in the work of Barbara Heinrich, where an intuitive, meditative approach to design is solidly grounded in an advanced mastery of materials and techniques. “The design process is more a receiving than a doing,” says the Rochester-based jewelry artist. “It’s almost like meditation. You kind of calm the mental activity and turn on the other side of the brain.” Once the initial inspiration has been allowed to emerge, then the analytical side can be brought back in. “But it needs to be shut down, so the creative part can be active,” says Heinrich. “A lot of pieces, I have the general idea, but I need silence in order to be able to hear what the piece says.”

Interestingly, the arc of Heinrich's training as a metalsmith has, in a sense, followed the same trajectory as the design process she describes. In three very different educational settings, she first focused on intuitive creation, then immersed herself in an intensive study of aesthetics and technique, and, finally, found the balance between the two that has allowed her to express herself in a unique and ever-evolving line of jewelry that spans three decades.

Heinrich's journey began at an early age. Her parents were winemakers, and she would collect objects around her family's vineyard in Heilbronn, Germany—seedpods, shells, pieces of glass—which she turned into jewelry. In her early teens, she made pieces from silver wire and glass beads, "selling it in the streets like all the other hippies in the sixties. I wasn't a hippie, but I was fascinated by how they had their piece of velvet cloth in the street, and I would walk by and check out their jewelry. I made things and sold them to my parents' friends and gave them as gifts and so on."

Recognizing her gift and passion for jewelrymaking, Heinrich's parents helped her enroll in a four-year apprenticeship at the Pestalozzi Kinderdorf Wahlwies, a Rudolf Steiner-inspired community on Lake Constance in southern Germany. Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian philosopher, architect, and all-around polymath

who, in addition to founding the Anthroposophical Society and pioneering Waldorf education and biodynamic agriculture (an esoteric form of organic farming), also himself designed jewelry in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In this almost monastic setting, Heinrich and five other apprentices sat together in absolute silence and "made jewelry the Rudolf Steiner way. We were supposed to listen to the jewelry and the tools, tune in and be one with the piece we were making. That has actually stayed with me. I don't like talking when I work. I enjoy the process of the work and really observing what's happening. I have an emotional response."

Following her apprenticeship, she enrolled at the Hochschule Pforzheim, a design academy in southwestern Germany and home to one of the oldest and most prestigious jewelrymaking programs in the world. In many ways, Pforzheim was the exact opposite of the Kinderdorf community. "It was all mind, mind, mind," she recalls. "We had to give reasons for absolutely everything. Why are the diamonds only on one side? And why are some higher and some lower? Why are they different sizes? And why, why, why, why. Everything had to be rationalized and defended."

This more analytical approach deepened her awareness of the aesthetics and semantics of design, and



BARBARA HEINRICH AT HER STUDIO BENCH. *Photograph courtesy of Barbara Heinrich Studio. Opposite page: ZINNIA RING of eighteen karat yellow gold and silver blister pearl, 2011. Photograph by Tim Callahan.*



LEAF COLLAR NECKLACE of eighteen karat gold with diamonds, 2009. Photograph by Hap Sakwa.

studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology’s School for American Crafts in upstate New York. “I would have gone to Australia, England, the U.S.,” she says. “I was happy that I ended up in the U.S.”

Upon her arrival in Rochester in 1983, Heinrich found herself adjusting, not just to a new culture, but also—once again—to a very different approach to making art. “When I came to RIT, my professors said, ‘Well, let’s do a self-portrait. Let’s do a piece that says who you are.’ Or, ‘Let’s do

also extended her range of technical skills, but it left less room for bursts of creative inspiration. “What’s not asked for is things that are more from your gut, like something more emotional, or more putting yourself into the piece,” says Heinrich. “When you look at the German jewelry magazines, it’s very homogenous. The work is very clean, geometric usually, very well proportioned, well thought out, well designed, but it doesn’t have that ‘Ah! This is really exciting!’ because that was never valued.”

After graduating with honors from Pforzheim, Heinrich set her sights on furthering her education overseas. She applied for several scholarships and ended up receiving one from the Rotary Club. “I wanted to live abroad and I needed the support. My family had already supported me for all of these years to go to school, and they said, ‘You’re on your own now.’ The director of our design academy in Pforzheim, he was a Rotarian, and he said, ‘Why don’t you apply to that? I think you have a good chance.’” In exchange for giving presentations at Rotary Clubs “about my country and my culture,” she received a sponsorship to continue her

an homage to an artist.’ So I did one to Joseph Beuys.” The response she received was very different from what she had come to expect from her professors at Pforzheim. “OK, this is nice work,” they told her, “but it looks like all the other German work. Where are you? You’re not in the piece. We need you here! It didn’t have to be justified.”

The looser, more individualistic approach to jewelrymaking at RIT freed Heinrich to pursue a more expressive direction in her pieces. At the same time, however, she acknowledges that the rigorous training she received in her native country nurtured skills, techniques and critical faculties that gave her an advantage over some of her peers as she set out to create a body of work that was truly her own.

After completing her MFA at Rochester in 1985, Heinrich’s primary ambition was to find work at one of New York City’s high-end design houses. “My very clear idea was to become a designer for Tiffany’s, or Cartier, or a top name,” she recalls. “The second person who interviewed me said, ‘If you design for us, it’s going to take you years before you’re actually allowed to design.

MEDITERRANEAN DECAY NECKLACE of coral and eighteen karat yellow gold oval bead, 2009. Photograph by Hap Sakwa.



RIBBON MULTIWRAPPED CUFF of eighteen karat white gold with diamonds, 2014. Photograph by Tim Callahan.



“I always say we’re part of the ‘slow movement.’ You need to earn your place in the slow movement, because you have to have something that stands out where people are willing to pay for all those hours, and that is called design and innovation.”



BROOCH of free form Biwa pearl, diamonds and eighteen karat gold, 2010. *Photograph by Ralph Gabriner.*

You need to work your way up. Why don’t you just do your work? You’ve got it all together. Just do it.’ So I came back and set up my studio, and honestly, it worked from the beginning. I did my first craft show in 1986, the ACC show in Baltimore, and I sold out—I had maybe twenty pieces.”

The Barbara Heinrich Studio was born that same year. And while her network of galleries, museums and other customers continues to evolve and expand, some of the connections she made at that very first American Craft Council show remain relevant thirty years later. When I met her in early November, she was in town to do the annual Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show—a regular venue for her—but had come down a few days early to mount a trunk show at the Gravers Lane Gallery in Chestnut Hill run by Bruce Hoffman, an early champion of her work whom she first met in Baltimore. “Through that ACC venue I built my whole business. I met the galleries there, they bought some work and gave me shows, and it slowly grew from there to the size where I felt I didn’t want to grow anymore,” says Heinrich.

Her first “coherent body of work,” launched at around this time, was the Milky Way series. True to their name, these pieces feature celestial shapes—stars, planets, comets, galaxies—that are pierced and embossed into gold with handcut brass templates to create elegant cuffs, bracelets and earrings. To this array of icons she added constellations of tiny diamonds, each one a bright, shimmering star against a background of matte-finished gold, often set off with burnished edges for contrast. For her, this astral imagery “was also the personal theme connecting me with my home country—we all see the same night sky.”

Heinrich decided to remain in Rochester and set up shop there. She had met and married Gregory Krapf, a chiropractor, in 1986, and from the beginning the studio has been extension of the couple’s home, an arrangement that has made it easier to balance work and family life. She has found herself in good company in this city of roughly two hundred thousand, as Rochester has a long association with arts and crafts. In addition to RIT and the Eastman School of Music, the city is also home to such renowned figures

GOLD LEAF CUFF with diamonds, 2008. *Photograph by Hap Sakwa.*



TRIPLE SHELL RING of eighteen karat gold, 2008. *Photograph by Hap Sakwa.*





LAPIS EARRINGS AND BROOCH of eighteen karat yellow gold and diamonds, 2014. Photograph by Tim Callahan.

as metalsmith and sculptor Albert Paley and furniture-maker Wendell Castle.

“There are a good number of studios like mine of RIT graduates,” says Heinrich. And while she appreciates having access to a larger artistic community, she also safeguards her privacy and the space it affords her to pursue her craft. “To me it’s like there’s this invisibility cloak over my studio; it’s an island of creativity,” she says. This does not mean that her work is a solitary pursuit. She has been more than happy to share this island with others. In addition to employing two full-time and three part-time studio assistants, over the years she has hosted some fifteen to twenty international students—from Germany, Korea, Taiwan, India, Canada, and other countries—who have come to further develop their metalsmithing skills, as well to learn essential things that are not taught in art schools, such as how a busy jewelry studio operates in the real world.

“I had this opportunity to live and work in a foreign country, and I wanted to extend that to others, because I thought it was tremendous,” she says. “I say to the people who come through, there are no strings

attached. You learn what you can during that time. You can see how we pull an exhibition together, how we price things, how we make things. You’ll learn a lot. In my studio, whoever works there does a piece from beginning to end. It doesn’t get passed on, like in normal jewelry manufacturing.”

While this method of manufacture ends up being slower than a more specialized assembly-line approach might be, it is an extension of her early education in the field. “It’s my Rudolf Steiner training,” she explains. “I always thought that you did the whole thing.” In fact, Heinrich has strived to keep production in her studio at a scale and pace that allow her to maintain the creative conditions in which her work initially flourished.

Right now, says Heinrich, “the size is really perfect. It’s six or seven people on any given day, and that’s about as much as I want to manage. I have kids, I have a husband. I want to enjoy life, too.” She smiles and adds, “I’m at my sweet spot.” Heinrich uses this phrase several times during the course of our conversation to describe the balance she has very consciously struck to keep inspiration and satisfaction alive amid the many competing demands of running a successful studio.

In addition to limiting the size of the studio itself, Heinrich also schedules exhibitions in a way that opens up quiet periods at regular intervals. “I do a cluster of shows and then nothing for a month or two, and then a cluster and then nothing. I never do any shows or galleries between June and September,” she says. “If things are a little slow, I always say ‘Time for creativity! We don’t have orders. It’s wonderful! Let’s say it’s two months. We’re going to use two months and reinvent ourselves and redesign. This is our best time at the studio. Often I lay things out on the center table and say, ‘What do you guys see? What can we do



OPEN FRAME POD CUFF of eighteen karat gold, 2009. Photograph by Hap Sakwa.

LOTUS LEAF EARRINGS of eighteen karat gold, diamond briolette drops and diamonds, 2008. Photograph by Tim Callahan.

with this? If we were to make a cuff, how would that look? If we do a necklace, what does that look like? Let's do a series. How are we evolving?' ”

Sometimes changes in the market can also be a catalyst for creativity. When the price of gold spiked in 2008, for example, she and her team explored ways of opening up their designs to make beautifully ethereal pieces that used less of the precious metal. The result has been two of her most popular series, *Blades of Grass* and *Ribbons*, both of which utilize super-light, super-thin fabricated strands of gold that are coiled, wrapped, swirled, or knotted to create cuffs, rings and necklaces. The delicate beauty of these works is enhanced by the interplay between burnished and matte finishes—a defining feature of much of Heinrich's jewelry—as well as the artful addition of stones.

A spectacular offshoot of this series is a 2011 *Zinnia Ring*, in which slender gold ribbons are wrapped and twisted into a profusion of flower petals, anchored at the center by a lustrous gray pearl. Another, more recent example at the Philadelphia gallery was a large pair of Lotus Leaf earrings with a scattering of dewdrop diamonds across their delicate, veined surfaces. These pieces are so light that it is quite easy to imagine them floating atop a body of water, glinting in the sun. In fact, this is exactly where her inspiration came from: “I was looking at some lotus leaves floating in a pond at a garden that I visited, and I noticed that there were waterdrops on the leaves, and I thought it would be really fun to hang these little diamonds in there.”

Such pieces are more labor-intensive, but for Heinrich it makes sense both aesthetically and economically to take the extra time in making them.



“When gold is at two thousand dollars an ounce, say, it's cheaper to spend two or three extra hours and use less gold to achieve the same result. And it keeps us all busy, which is what we want.

“I always say we're part of the 'slow movement.' You need to earn your place in the slow movement, because you have to have something that stands out where people are willing to pay for all those hours, and that is called design and innovation. I see everything as a design opportunity. And we need to use our opportunities, not give them away. If we give them away and do something ordinary, it's done.”

SUGGESTED READING

Barry, Sue. “Masters and Apprentices: The European Tradition and Contemporary Jewelry in an American Context.” Exhibition text for SOFA 2010, available online at <http://www.sofaexpo.com/chicago/essays/2010/masters-and-apprentices-the-european-tradition-and-contemporary-jewelry-in-an-american-context>.

Cummins, Susan. “Barbara Heinrich: Ribbons of Gold.” *Art Jewelry Forum*: April 19, 2013, available online at <https://artjewelryforum.org/barbara-heinrich-ribbons-of-gold-0>.

Graci, Nina. “Classical Proportions: The Jewelry of Barbara Heinrich.” *Lapidary Journal Jewelry Artist*: August 2003, available online at <https://www.ganoksin.com/article/jewelry-barbara-heinrich>.

BLACK TOURMALINE NECKLACE of eighteen karat gold and diamonds, 2011. Photograph by Hap Sakwa.

