

metalsmith

ART DESIGN JEWELRY METAL



Fresh:
JURIED
EXHIBITION
IN PRINT 2011

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Jurors' Panel

Talking Fresh

Lola Brooks and Cindi Strauss get real
with *Metalsmith* editor Suzanne Ramljak

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Lola Brooks is an artist, metalsmith, clotheshorse, and sometimes writer living in New York City. She studied fashion at Pratt Institute and received her BFA in metals from SUNY New Paltz. Brooks has taught at Rhode Island School of Design, University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and SUNY New Paltz, as well as the 92nd St Y in NYC, Haystack, and Penland School of Crafts. Her work is in the collections of The Museum of Art and Design, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Cindi Strauss is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Decorative Arts and Design and Assistant Director, Programming, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Her curatorial responsibilities include the acquisition and exhibition of post-1900 metalwork and jewelry. She was the exhibition curator and author of the accompanying catalogue, *Ornament as Art: Contemporary Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection (2007)*, and has since written and lectured widely on jewelry.

MEZANNE RAMLJAK: The call for entries for this *Exhibition in Print* generated quite a large response, with nearly 450 artists submitting work. Nonetheless, you only chose to feature 33 artists from this pool. While there was quantity, it seems that you did not find the quality or freshness you were looking for.

CINDI STRAUSS: Lola and I discussed that there wasn't a clear definition of "fresh" put forth in the call for entries; perhaps that ambiguity led to the large number of submissions. But the difficulty for us as jurors was that we were using specific criteria when we looked at the pool, while the entrants themselves had used their own definitions, and the two were not always in sync. So it was really a question of whether the entered works lived up to our own expectations of "freshness."

LOLA BROOKS: I was very excited about this juror opportunity because I had this idea that I was going to discover something that I hadn't

even known existed in the field. We ended up viewing four images from each of the 400-plus applicants, which is an overwhelming number of objects to consider. Ultimately it was disheartening, because when it came down to it, much of what was submitted was very traditional and in some cases was completely derivative of other, familiar work. I was disappointed that there weren't even examples of *traditional* work that were cutting edge. I would have loved to include an engagement ring that really blew my mind, or some killer production jewelry that challenged the idea of what production could be. Overall I would say that the pool lacked freshness.

CS: As jurors, Lola and I together represented a very broad perspective. Lola is a successful artist and educator, and I am a curator responsible for a global collection of jewelry that stretches back to the 1960s. As we were considering our final choices, we consistently asked ourselves: Have we seen this before? Where have we seen it? How is it "fresh"?

I had imagined that the majority of submissions were going to be from student types, whether recent graduates from undergraduate or graduate programs, or even artists who were still in school. But in reality there were a significant number of established artists, even those who had been working in the field for 30 or 40 years, who submitted work. That shows you the breadth of the individual definitions of "fresh."

LB: I suppose one could say that the traditions of metalworking are alive and well. There was a lot of metal represented, and even if it wasn't particularly interesting, some of it was very well crafted. As an educator, I do find this somewhat heartening, as I am definitely invested in perpetuating the traditions of metalsmithing. At the same time I found it a bit shocking, given that almost all of my students entering graduate school state a pointed interest in ditching metals and exploring alternative materials.

CS: I want to follow up on this predominance of metal. I was struck

It's like peeling an onion: looking at the many layers of how a work is made, what its concept is, its aesthetics—seeing what makes it worthy of being included.



ARTHUR HASH
Moss Ring, 2006
polyurethane, fake moss

by the fact that even though metal is really expensive right now, so many applicants are not only honoring and exploring metalworking traditions, but also taking risks with materials that are so frighteningly costly.

SR: Let's address the important question of criteria that was alluded to earlier. You said you brought a certain set of expectations to the table and that the majority of the submissions didn't meet them. Can you elaborate?

LB: I went into the jurying process with the attitude, "I'll know it when I see it." To some extent I don't think I really tried to define "fresh" for myself in advance. I was hoping that the pool of submissions would define it for me. I found it interesting that various candidates kept continually shifting how I had to think about the concept. As we winnowed down the selection, our standards changed; it became a relative process. So I started out thinking that I didn't know what "fresh" was and I was about to discover it. That is not exactly what happened.

There are also certain things I am especially interested in. With the idea of fresh, we are talking about the future of the metalsmithing field in some way. And one of the things I always look for is a respect for the traditions of the field. Another aspect that was critically important to me was that there be a level of mystery, that I was seduced by an object's craft. That craftsmanship could be in any material, but it had to show a certain respect for how things are put together.

CS: Apart from seeking something that I had not experienced before, I was looking for quality and how well designed or made an object was (as best as could be discerned from the images). Also, as Lola said, I felt I would know "fresh" when I saw it. Something strikes you and then you work toward articulating what that quality is. For example, we were both just really taken by Suzanne Beautyman's work, and we even ended up choosing to feature two of her pieces. Jennifer Trask's *Acanthus* piece also bowled us over,

as did Anja Eichler's *Naughty Rabbit* and *Mare*, both made from gloves. Some works just struck us both with a rather indefinable quality that you feel in your gut; it excites you and makes your heart race. The work is visually captivating and it is something you want to hold and touch and learn more about. It is never just one aspect of a piece that I find incredibly appealing; it is usually a complete package, from which I work backwards to assess the individual qualities that drew me to it to begin with. It's like peeling an onion: looking at the many layers of how a work is made, what its concept is, its aesthetics—seeing what makes it worthy of being included.

SR: Whenever you have a call for submissions, you are obviously limited in your selection by those who apply. Stepping outside of the submitted entries, which other artists in the field embody a sense of freshness for you?

LB: I have to say I was pretty disappointed not to find many of my colleagues' work among the

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submissions. Märta Mattsson is someone whose work embodies my ideas about what is fresh. Her work is playful and irreverent and her love for materials is obvious. Mattsson's jewelry is at once bitter and sweet. Arthur Hash is another person I think fits the bill. He is incredibly prolific, and uses technology as a means to a million different ends, rather than any kind of end in itself. He remains committed to exploring the points at which the metals studio and digital technology collide, and he is determined to make jewelry that people want to wear.

CS: There are numerous artists whom I would describe as creating "fresh" work today, and it is hard to single out one or two—but here goes. I love the poignant use of taxidermy birds in The Idiots' jewelry, as well as their newer, purely conceptual and experiential projects. Their work makes me think and makes me smile. They keep me wanting to see what comes next. Likewise for emiko oye. I can't get her neckpieces out of my mind. They are fun and whimsical

but at the same time deeply rooted in jewelry history. She is definitely one to watch. And I continue to be fascinated by what is being created with CAD by artists such as Arthur Hash. I believe that we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of combining concepts and aesthetics with this newer technology.

SR: Did you notice any recurring tendencies or predominant themes throughout the entries? Were you able to get a read on any larger trends in the field?

CS: I am not sure I saw much recurrence of specific motifs, but I certainly noticed two related ideas. First, there seems to be a strong resurgence of narrative work, with elements of figuration or storytelling. There was also definitely more representational work as opposed to that which is purely abstract or conceptual. I also saw a lot of historicism: artists looking at Victoriana or earlier eras and integrating aspects of design or customs within their new pieces.

MARTA MATSSON
Atlas Beetle (brooch), 2010
copper electrofumed
Atlas beetle, cubic zirconias,
laquer, silver
4 3/8 x 2 x 1 1/4"



LB: I feel that we selected a lot of works that incorporated enameling and color, which are always exciting to see. As for trends in the entire pool of submissions, I saw a lot of really traditional metalwork. And I agree with Cindi about the narrative work being predominant.

CS: It's important to stress that during our consideration we looked just at the art and were not concerned with resumes, artist's statements, etcetera. There were of course certain artists whom we recognized because of our professional experiences. In these cases we were careful not let our judgment of an applicant be colored by our familiarity. And there were many instances in which we recused ourselves from considering work by people that we knew or, in my case, who were already in the MFA Houston's collection.

LB: When I did finally look at some of the supporting materials of the artists we picked, I counted that something like 23 of them have MFAS and 4 have a BFA; only a couple do not have



THE IDIOTS
Industrial Evolution III:
Skull Bird, 2009
 forged iron, taxidermy bird,
 textile embroidery
 14 1/8 x 14 1/8 x 17 1/4"

Clearly it is not a prerequisite for doing great work, but the number of MFA grads in this issue does speak to the value of having an opportunity to develop one's work within an academic setting.



traditional degrees. And 17 of them had gotten their MFA degree in the last 3 years. This kind of makes sense, given that we were searching for fresh work and emerging ideas and this would very likely come from younger artists or students. But I was rather appalled to find that we had chosen such a large percentage of grads from SUNY New Paltz, Cranbrook, and RISD. I guess I'm not totally surprised, but it makes metalwork seem like a really small and incestuous field.

R: What does this yield of artists reflect about the field's educational institutions, and the role of academic training or background?

S: I don't work within the academic system, but I am still very curious about it. I think the statistics that [the editor] gave about the final selection are really interesting and do make a statement about the education system today in jewelry and metalsmithing. There is something to be said for having time in an academic setting when you can experiment, research, and think in an unfettered way.

And these programs are usually led by dynamic artists, most of whom maintain their own studio practice and can act as mentors, not only in terms of craft and skills but also in terms of navigating the field. Yet on the other hand we chose a few artists who don't have a traditional degree.

SR: It may seem like a stretch to quote the animated film *Ratatouille* in this context, but it contains a line that says: "A great cook can come from anywhere, but not everyone can be a great cook." So sometimes a great artist can emerge from an academic environment, but one can also emerge from other places or backgrounds. It is this age-old question of, where do the finest artists come from and what are the conditions in which they can best develop?

LB: I realize that not everyone who comes into my class has the raw material to be a great artist. It's one of the challenges of being an educator. I try to help lead students into becoming the best artist that they can be, but that does not always mean that they will become a *great* artist. That is

the conundrum of higher education. I can teach people to think critically, and all of my students progress to a tremendous degree, but that doesn't necessarily make them into true artists. I don't have an MFA, which for years gave me a bit of an inferiority complex. It is interesting to be at this point in the field where an MFA is a necessity in some ways; it has become the status quo. Clearly it is not a prerequisite for doing great work, but the number of MFA grads in this issue does speak to the value of having an opportunity to develop one's work within an academic setting. So I don't think it is a coincidence that over two-thirds of the artists here have a graduate degree.

CS: There is clearly something luxurious, in the best possible way, about having those years in school as an undergraduate or graduate student. One is able to try out different things, to learn new skill sets, and to step out of one's own comfort zone. And you don't realize how much of a luxury it is until you leave that academic environment.

SR: Within art school departments are increasing and areas of concentration are emerging to form new areas of material study, practice of metalsmithing, where do you draw the line between metals not metals and jewelry not jewelry?

CS: In my personal experience the MFA there are no clear definitions of what is and is not. We don't have respect to how we should do the work. We look at collections as a whole is healthy. And I like a range of works, those that break the traditions and those that respect any commonly held within the field.

LB: This is a really interesting question. In some way I think, in that I'm not just putting up some kind of wall to contain the practice, what I think the field is also concerned with his



EMIKO OYE
Blue Steel, 2009
 From series "My First Royal
 Jewels Jewellery Collection"
 repurposed LEGO® and
 elastic, sterling silver
 14 ½ x 14 ½ x 2"
 (inspired by necklace of
 blue-tinted steel, diamonds,
 zircons and pearls by
 Maison Boucheron, 1890)

SR: Within art schools today, departments are increasingly closing and areas of concentration are merging to form new more inclusive areas of material study. Regarding the practice of metalsmithing and jewelry, where do you draw the line? When is metals not metals anymore, and when is jewelry not jewelry?

CS: In my personal experience at the MFAH there are no hard and fast definitions of what jewelry is and is not. We don't have limits in respect to how we show or interpret the work. We look at the museum collections as a whole, which I think is healthy. And I like seeing a wide range of works, those that uphold the traditions and those that may upset any commonly held definitions within the field.

LB: This is a really interesting question. In some ways I agree with Cindi, in that I'm not interested in putting up some kind of stone wall to contain the parameters of what I think the field is. But I am also concerned with history and

tradition, and I think a lot about the regard for making. I don't mean that the artist necessarily has to make the work himself, but there should still be a concern for what the process is that can differentiate between a piece of sculpture and a piece that fits well within the confines of metals. With regard to jewelry, it is more open. I think an installation could be jewelry. One of the questions I constantly put out to my students, who keep tripping over this traditional notion of jewelry's scale, is: How do you know when a brooch is too big to be a brooch anymore—unless you make a brooch that is too big to be a brooch? Sometimes it is self-selecting: if you think you are part of the field, then maybe you are. It is a way of thinking about objects and an ideology of that history and a regard for making and process.

SR: Are there any trends in the field that you wish would go away? If you could play art police and put a ban on certain tendencies and practices, what would those be?

LB: I would like people to stop talking about their emotions as if they are a justification for the work. I have a very open mind about what I hope can happen in this field. I don't need work to be highly conceptual, but the way that people talk and write about their work is significant. The artist's statement has become an increasingly important criterion and should solidify one's position on their work. But ultimately I want the work to stand on its own. I do not want to privilege the words over the work, or to even *have* to read an artist's statement.

CS: I agree with Lola. I am particularly sensitive about the way artists present their work, especially when I am seeing it for the first time. Artists should concentrate on explaining their concept and pieces clearly and not worry so much about crafting a dense and overly academic or emotional artist statement. Statements can hurt as much as help the presentation and understanding of the art.

Suzanne Ramljak is editor of *Metalsmith*.

ANJA EICHLER

My goal is to work into the
material in order to alienate it.



ANJA EICHLER
Naughty Rabbit (brooch), 2010
work glove, steel
2 x 4 x 4 1/2"
PHOTO: FEDERICO CAVICCHIOLI



ANJA EICHLER
Mare (brooch), 2010
work glove, silk thread, steel
Size 7 1/2 x 9"
PHOTO: FEDERICO CAVICCHIOLI