

KRISTIN BEELER

Kristin Beeler's practice includes contemporary jewelry that focuses on stories told by the skin. Her ongoing work Archive of Rag and Bone is a collection that begins with the boundary of skin as a basic human commonality. It is iterative, multimedia portraiture drawn from the repair marks of traumatic scarring. Since 2002, she has been Coordinator of Jewelry and Metalwork at Long Beach City College. She received a BFA from Berea College in Crafts and Applied Design (1989), an MFA in Jewelry from the University of Arizona (1994) followed later by postgraduate studies at Alchemia Jewellery School in Florence, Italy (2011) Atelier Rudee, Bangkok, Thailand (2013).

Solo exhibitions include Integumentum at Baltimore Jewelry Center and Beauty and Other Monsters at Velvet da Vinci Gallery, San Francisco. Recent group exhibitions include: 2020 - Body Control, Museum Arnhem, Netherlands, Site Effects, Bavarian Society of Applied Arts, Munich; Art Alliance, Philadelphia, Baltimore Jewelry Center, Baltimore, Broken Beauty: Alliages Gallery Lilles, France, Munich Jewellery Week, Melting Point Valencia Spain, Athens Jewellery Week; 2019 - Charmed, Sienna Patti Contemporary, Uneasy Beauty at the Fuller Museum; 2018 - La Frontera at the Museum of Art and Design NY.

She was a 2017 and 2021 Finalist for the Susan Beech Mid-Career Grant and has received two Professional Artist Fellowship from the Arts Council of Long Beach. From 2016-2018 she was Research Associate at the University of Technology Sydney in the Faculty of Engineering and IT working with the Materialising Memories research programme.

Her work is included in the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Appalachian Center for Craft, Tennessee; and Berea College, Berea, Kentucky; and in the private collections of Ursula Ilsa- Newman, former Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, NY; Jo Lauria, former Curator at Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles.



A SCOURING WIND

SASHA NIXON

Life scours us. We stand in the midst of a swirling desert storm trying to find our way. When sand propelled by wind in such a storm strikes a surface each grain makes an invisible change that together can erode stone into new unexpected forms. Like grains of wind blown sand, every event we live through leaves a mark. If most of these changes happen so gradually they occur unnoticed, some moments have more in common with a meteor than a grain of sand. Striking suddenly, they transform us indelibly in an instant.

In her ongoing series "Archive of Rag and Bone" Kristin Beeler collects and uses narrated memories of these singularly life altering events as a material, composing a vision out of the maelstrom of shock and forgetting. After intimate interviews she creates a dedicated artwork for each individual: a triptych composed of a tyvek garment, a vellum folio, and a piece of jewelry.

The tyvek garment records the physical trauma to the body, the vellum folios map where that body was in relation to the natural world at the time of the event, and the jewelry pieces bring the internal navigation of the event to the fore, giving each individual a wayfinding tool. Beeler selects and treats her materials for each of these parts as sensitively as she collects the stories of the individuals she interviews. Beeler considers her work to be much like memory, where materials and iconography combine to emphasize the complex and transient nature of remembered moments through the use of layers, each contributing to complete the picture of a transformative event. In the spirit of memory, however, the resulting image is indistinct and open to interpretation, and pieces become clearer or more obscure depending on the angle of viewing.

JEWELRY AS ART

Beeler's work is part of an art practice in the tradition of contemporary art jewelry. A critical design concept and approach is what differentiates contemporary art jewelry from more universally familiar jewelry practices that use similar materials, techniques, and forms. Each piece intricately weaves together a variety of different contexts: including but not limited





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to the intention, process, and conditions of creation, the cultural and economic significance of iconography and materials, and the social status these combined factors conferred on the wearer. Contemporary jewelry artists manipulate these resonances to question accepted norms and explore their world.

Historically, jewelry has been an expression of social identity—and an anonymous craft. Excellence in this craft was determined by technical virtuosity. The GI Bill, introduced in the United States after World War II, sparked an expansion of craft programs, and art schools incorporated jewelry making into their curriculum.¹ It was in this 1940's post-war environment that contemporary art jewelry emerged, the first international intellectual community to use the medium of jewelry for self-expression.² By the 1960s, the framework for what is considered contemporary art jewelry had been established. These early artists expanded the meanings and challenged the interpretations of jewelry and its relationship to the body as well as what constitutes traditional materials, placement, and form.³ Due to these early developments, jewelry was reimagined as a medium for artistic expression. The jewelers who work in this tradition are now called "contemporary art jewelers," among other monikers.⁴ Their work has also gone by many names, among them "new jewelry," "narrative jewelry," "conceptual jewelry," and "contemporary art jewelry." This type of jewelry is characterized by a shared intention to

1 This trend first appeared in Europe, with the United States joining in after World War II. For more information see Strauss and Houston Museum of Fine Arts, "A Brief History of Contemporary Jewelry, 1960-2006," 16; Drutt, Williams, and Dormer, *Jewelry of our Time: Art, Ornament, and Obsession*; Drutt, *Jewelry International: Contemporary Trends*.

2 Licka, "The 1977 Metalsmith Exhibit: A Historical Critique of Metalsmithing Developments," 2-3.

3 Wallace, Dearden, and Fisher, "The Significant Other: The Value of Jewellery in the Conception, Design and Experience of Body Focused Digital Devices," 53-62.

4 For further insight into the changing landscape of craft and contemporary jewelry see Skinner, *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective*; Unger, *Jewellery Matters*; Cooke Jr., "Modern Craft and the American Experience," 2-9.



stimulate a response as well as by being created primarily to realize a concept; ultimately, it is about content rather than commodity.

Beeler uses jewelry's intimate connection to the body to speak to the physical experience of moving through life. When jewelry is worn, the wearer adopts the story or identity that it projects. This has been true throughout history. A collar of pearls communicates one thing, dog tags another, but both tell observers about the wearer without the need to say a single word. Usually, what jewelry communicates is dictated by cultural and social norms. In contemporary art jewelry, it is determined by the artist.

With "Archive of Rag and Bone" Beeler at once grants others a voice and creates a space in which to express compassion and preserve memory. In wearing the garments and jewelry of each piece you physically adopt the experiences of another. For a moment you transform yourself, figuratively walking in someone else's shoes. You don a tyvek garment and the stitching that traces the scars makes it easy to imagine the tracks on your own skin. The physical weight of the jewelry compels one to imagine the burden of carrying around such an experience by transmuting emotional weight to physical presence. While so transformed



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you can immerse yourself more completely by leafing through the folio, absorbing a visual record of the story in the form of a kind of artist book.

LISTENING

Each piece begins with a single transfigural moment. Beeler speaks to an individual and listens to their experience of these moments. Afterwards each recorded narration of irrevocable bodily change and how that rendering spiraled out becomes the lodestone of an artwork. This first part of the creative process manifests only in altered photographic portraits of the interviewee. The portraits record the moment of interview in a sensitive visual interaction that distills and parallels the expression of each oral history. The interviews and ensuing portraits serve as the humanization of a context and central locus for the complex life junctures that Beeler explores through the rest of the series.

In Western society today, visible injuries are generally glossed over or actively avoided by everyone but professionals, as if looking away and pretending the injury never happened will make pain disappear. The generally accepted consensus

seems to be that scars only serve as an unwelcome reminder of trauma and that drawing attention to these visual markers is inconsiderate.

The truth however is that crucibles transform rather than destroy and that scars are simply stories engraved on our bodies. Often, however, it is difficult to know how to navigate the memories embedded in those scars. Experiences that leave lasting physical marks are an important part of being human. To confront them, however, one must also brave forming an intimate connection with another. Beeler's artistic works, distilled from her interviews, force people to acknowledge vulnerability and are the result of a larger practice of attempting to deepen compassionate understanding of the shared human experience.

Towards this end, through "Archive of Rag and Bone," Beeler creates a growing archive of loss and replacement, of living, of change, and of memory. This pursuit raises some questions for the artist: how do you document memory, a thing that is ephemeral, a concept named but that in itself never existed? The answer could be to start with the nature of memory itself. Though everyone certainly experiences crises differently, often small details of the event can cement themselves into the mind, while other larger aspects might fade like mist. In such an environment the importance of selected materials goes far beyond the aesthetic.

GARMENTS

Tyvek—the material used as a protective layer for purposes as varied as house insulation and artwork storage—carries with it an intrinsic apotropaic quality and its waterproof barrier provides protection from the elements but allows air to move through. Beeler's garments, one made for each individual she interviews, form a topographical surrogate for the body. They enable the wearer to literally spend a moment inside someone else's skin and therefore experience a physical connection.

Tyvek is white and when run through the fingers it is hard to decide whether it feels like paper or like fabric. This liminal material allows these garments to occupy an artistic space rather than a purely fashionable one, but they are constructed to a couture standard and this care is indicative of the garment's importance to the artwork. Once the garments are completed, Beeler





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uses them to map the tracks of transformation on the body. She carefully hand embroiders scars in thread, recreating their shape and place, emphasizing them and elevating them to decoration while simultaneously hiding the actual scarred skin of the person she interviews. The act of piercing the tyvek with needle and thread mimics stitches, and the raised mass of embroidery in the finished garment evokes scar tissue.

FOLIOS

For her folios Beeler finds the wind map of the time and place where the event occurred. She embossed these wind patterns in vellum to memorialize the moment when each person's life changed direction by contextualizing it within its geographical place. These maps are interwoven with sketches, images, and other ephemera from all stages of the development process in the creation of each artwork. Vellum is fine translucent parchment made of calfskin. As a material, vellum has a long tradition of use for important record keeping, illuminated books, and folios and therefore carries with it connotations of preciousness, transcription, and remembrance. Its translucency allows light and images to be visible through it but only in part, as if through a dense fog. Partially discernible images float to the surface when layers of vellum are compressed, only to submerge again into hazy obscurity as the sheets drift apart, evoking the cloudy nature of memory.

The sound of the vellum pages moving over each other is distinctive and distinct from the paper more commonly used today made from wood pulp. With a texture closer to plastic the folio pages slide over each other easily and smoothly as each is turned creating a distinctive haptic memory. The buttery feel of the vellum encourages handling, the smoothness of the surfaces contrasting with the sharpness of the edges as you run a thumb over them.

By looking at the wind patterns present during an important event in someone's life, Beeler can start to understand what they were hearing, smelling, or seeing, as wind affects all of those things. It can rustle leaves, bring on storms, and carry scents. These other senses can help an observer submerge themselves in another's experience.

ARCHIVE OF RAG AND BONE

Intergovernmental
Folder 2
Portrait of a Woman



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Like memory, wind is invisible, and infinitely changeable. Humans have used it to find their way and predict the future of their environment for thousands of years. In this context the wind map provides a transformative window through which the tyvek garment represents the earth, and scars the human alteration of it. This calls attention to our tendency to disassociate both from nature and our bodies, drawing parallels between our relationship with nature and ourselves.

JEWELRY

The jewelry pieces bring the internal navigation of experience to the fore and give each individual a wayfinding tool. These aids are a manifestation of a powerful human desire to understand one's place, relationship, and interconnectedness both to each other and our world.

Traditional wayfinding, like wave navigation techniques native to many of the Polynesian Islands, require a deep attunement to environmental and bodily cues.⁵ One of the most well known of these, in part because it utilized a physical chart that could be collected, originated in the Marshall Islands.⁶ These charts, made of sticks and shells, were used as memory aids to track wave patterns and currents. Using these, seafarers were able to navigate their everyday lives on the sea and find their way home. The charts were not intended for use on the boats, instead these aids were physical representations of experience, and much like Beeler's work, they serve as devices through which we can navigate the invisible. It makes perfect sense then that Beeler's line structures, which form the base of her jewelry pieces, draw inspiration from Marshall Islands navigation charts.

Blackened silver and mother of pearl are layered on top of these navigation aids as the jewelry comes together, shaped to reflect local flora. As the layers build, each contributes to the weight, scale, and

5 For more information on Polynesian wave navigation see Huth, *Lost Art of Finding Our Way*, 291-317.; Brunt, *Oceania*.

6 For more information on Marshall Islands navigation charts see Davenport, "Marshall Islands Navigational Charts," 19-26.; Harper, *Maps and the 20th Century: Drawing the Line*, 19.; Brunt, *Art in Oceania: A New History*, 56-57.; Lewis, *We, the Navigators*, 201.





textural experience of holding and wearing the piece. Light plays across each of these materials in turn shimmering and falling across and through layers, each material contributing its own magic.

Blackened silver shimmers subtly like oil. The shadowed glimmer pulls your eye along the lines, sparking off the edges. Silver is a material traditionally used in jewelry and evokes that history, conveying preciousness, longevity, structure, and weight.

Mother of pearl's iridescent surface adds a feeling of preciousness and depth, but Beeler did not choose it purely for its aesthetic value, but rather as another way to track time and place. Mother of pearl records its location, absorbing bits of its environment in its built layers, including salinity and water temperature. Slick to the touch light slides off of it, reflecting off of all of the rippling surfaces in a shimmering play.

In sharp contrast to the sparkling display of mother of pearl, and the more subdued midnight glow of blackened silver, charcoal pulls light in, grabbing it and wrapping it in darkest velvet. Charcoal represents the flash carbonization of life. Wood is used to create many household objects. Beeler hand carves domestic objects like spoons and bowls then reduces them to charcoal, seeing them as purified shadow objects. With all of the impurities burned



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away the pure carbon is almost weightless, a ghost in the hand. Through their transformation by fire they are an artifact of a single moment. Like the furniture found in Herculaneum, these carbonized objects have been preserved.⁷ Changed forever by a moment of cataclysm, these objects now serve a new purpose: intimate monuments to transfiguration.

Through this intensive multilayered process, Beeler transforms a scar into a complex and visually breathtaking story, one that begins at the individual level and then spirals out to encompass the Earth. The resulting necklaces and brooches that combine these materials come together with the vellum folios and the garments, creating an archive of personal moments. Beeler's body of work maps complex connections between the body, memory, nature, and compassion. Through a navigation of these connections, the human experience resonates on a deeper level and you internalize the stories of others and your own with new reverence and understanding. ■

⁷ For more information on the wooden furniture from Herculaneum see Moles, "Carbonization, Excavation and Preservation," 19-20.; Guzzo, Pompeii: Tales from an Eruption: Pompeii Herculaneum Oplontis, 2007.

AUTHOR BIO

Sasha Nixon is the Exhibitions Designer for the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), a critic for the Metals + Jewelry department at the Rhode Island School of Design, instructor at Brooklyn Metal Works, and regular contributor to Metalsmith magazine. She was awarded the 2017 Society of North American Goldsmith's Emerging Curator's Grant for her solo-curatorial debut show at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery, *A View from the Jeweler's Bench: Ancient Treasures, Contemporary Statements*. After receiving her MA from Bard Graduate Center in 2018, she was awarded the Center for Craft's Windgate curatorial internship at MAD. Since then she has designed, curated, and mounted artwork for exhibitions, as well as given lectures, contributed as a panelist, and written for some of New York City's leading institutions (including MAD, the Fashion Institute of Technology, Bard Graduate Center, and Pratt Institute).

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IN CONVERSATION:

KRISTIN BEELER

What do you read, watch, listen to, research in order to inform your work?

My approach to making includes placing my subject matter in a full context. I want to understand the history, chemistry, and implications of my materials and how they relate to the work I'm doing. This requires significant research and a constantly updated library. My collection of books on the studies of memory and navigation has had the most recent growth. It takes longer but I feel like I have more authority over what I'm doing and I've learned to accept a slower process for a richer outcome.

Like me, contemporary art jewelry is a transplant to Southern California. In 2018, LACMA hosted its first and only exhibition of contemporary jewelry *Beyond Bling: Jewelry from the Lois Boardman Collection*. In Blake Gopnik's essay "Crown Jewels for a Philosopher King" for the exhibition catalog, he proposes that acceptance of contemporary jewelry moves forward slowly because jewelry is "too intimate, too close to us, and too difficult to radicalize." Jewelry is radical and

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I suggest that memory is a key to understanding this. We don't have the language to articulate that radicality because, as Gopnik suggests, it's too familiar. Jewelry is often used as a symbolic reminder but its potency is much deeper. Jewelry is an emotionally charged, code-conscious, densely layered meaning bundle that is carried on, with, or through the body, often daily, often for years on end. Jewelry is a physical presence that we choose to weigh ourselves down with. We must carry it with us. Sitting on a shelf, it differs from a jewelry-shaped sculpture because, intrinsically, jewelry only has two positions: either on the body or waiting to be on the body. The pedestal isn't jewelry's natural habitat. If we observe the jewel, we are reminded. But when we wear it, it weights us physically. It becomes a prosthesis for something not present. Through willful act, we must literally bear the memory object with its origins and its associations. We, personally, must bear the gaze that it draws. We yoke ourselves to that memory object and all that it represents. We carry it over borders, sew it into our hems, pass it to the next generation.

Tying jewelry to memory provides a unique entry point and allows audiences to create more complex, layered relationships to a jewelry object. I'm interested in playing between stored associations (memories) of what's "beautiful" and "jewelry" and seeing how far the connections can be stretched before they break.

We live in a time when our memories are becoming one of our most precious natural resources. "New" occurs at an unprecedented rate. We are always actively searching for ways to stabilize and contextualize the new. Knowing how to map, navigate, retrieve, guard, and interpret memory is a counterpoint to a world fearful of personal and cultural dementia. Jewelry, with its implicit memory associations, is radical in exactly this way.

How do you begin a piece or a body of work?

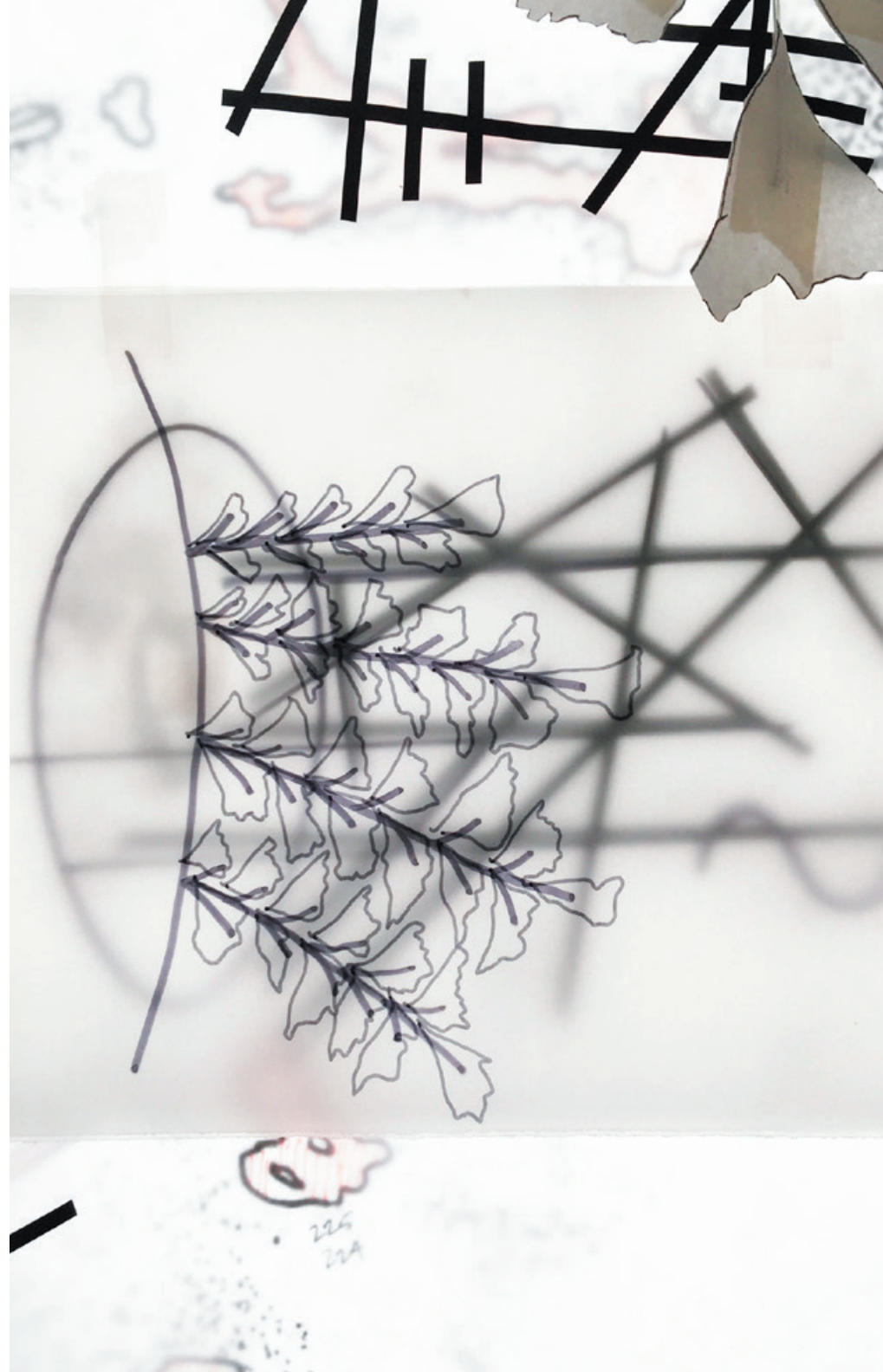
All pieces begin in curiosity, asking "What happens when I do this..?" and trusting the uncertainty. Much of my work has a long slow incline. I don't know that pieces 'begin' as much as they evolve through different states of unfinishedness. Pieces of things grow, collect, move around a lot before they find their final place. I spend less time thinking about 'begin' and 'end' than I do 'middle'. The space of uncer-



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tainty and un-resolution can be curious, beautiful, and awkward. Technical ideas must be tested and retested. Arrangements have to be wrong before they become right. I have a library of technical samples that wait until the moment comes when they mean something to me beyond the technical ego snack of success. Ideas show up as collisions, when one thing collides into another and throws a spark. Sometimes I don't even recognize it as an idea. It's more like finding a clue.

Metalwork is not an intuitive medium, meaning it requires significant strategizing for work to appear intuitive. The logical process of metal is pretty unforgiving and mistakes can be expensive or at least extremely time consuming. And lots of mistakes must be made. A piece that may have 100 hours in it can be destroyed in seconds. Because of this two things happen: 1. Significant thought goes into the engineering of a piece. Elements may work visually without working mechanically. So you must be nimble as the plan changes. 2. You learn to re-evaluate the meaning of a mistake. Parts that are rejected from one piece often evolve into the next. The beginning of one piece blends into the completion of something else. It's often more challenging to adore the uncertain space of the middle and know where a piece ends.



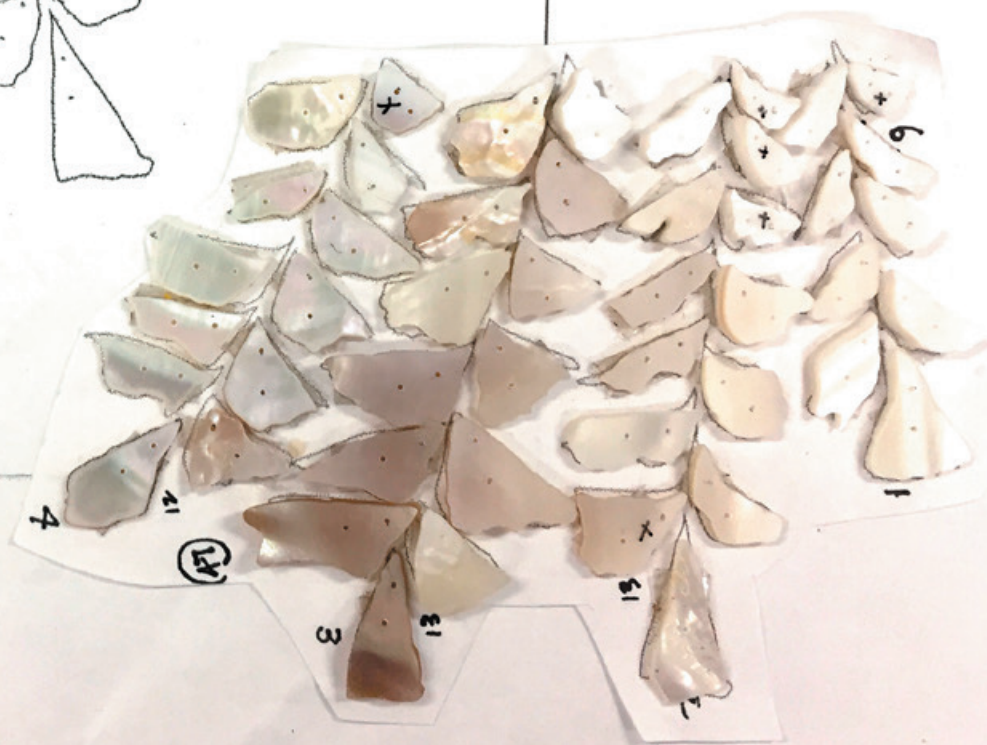
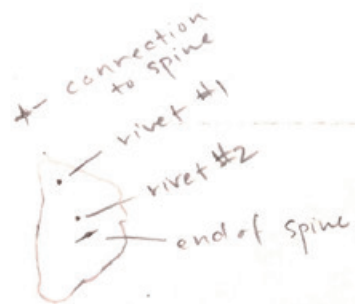


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Describe a typical day in your studio.

A good day begins with a short studio meditation and then sweeping the studio. These two rituals are really important to help me focus my mind and leave everything else outside the door. Because of the physical demands of the work, I often have to start with hand and eye exercises, especially as I get older.

Like most artists, depending on the day I am the: Manager, Fabricator, Investor, Employee, Quality Control, Marketing Agent, Purchasing Manager, Customer Service, Product Designer, Graphic Designer, Web Designer, Photographer, Publicist, Packing and Shipping Department, Accountant, Health and Safety Officer, Studio Maintenance Tech and Dog Walker.

Tell us about your educational history and how it has informed your work as an artist and teacher.

I am an Appalachian native, a transplant here. My education in making began as a child in the doorway of the local blacksmith watching him repair farm tools for neighbors. I played under quilting frames while groups of women worked overhead. The people I knew made baskets, chairs, food, clothing, toys to meet their



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needs. They repaired objects made decades before using common skills passed through families for hundreds of years. That background informs much of the work I do.

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Jewelry was fairly uncommon and extremely precious. Proper skills to make it or repair it locally didn't exist. It always originated outside the tiny community and was a marker of another world existing parallel to my own. From that perspective, I could not have chosen a more exotic profession if I'd trained to be an astronaut.

My undergraduate training was at Berea College, a small, private liberal arts work college with a remarkable legacy of historical craftwork, a strong ethic of labor and service and commitment to social justice. Founded by abolitionists in 1855, it was the first college in the Southern United States to be coeducational and racially integrated and has always been dedicated to the high-level education of young Appalachians with high-potential and low income. As a second generation graduate, the ethics of inclusion and opportunity for all was embedded into my family culture.

I studied nearly equal parts ceramics, textiles, and philosophy while I apprenticed to Pam Rockwell, a local jeweler who was a recent Resident at Penland



School of Crafts. The Art Program was connected to the Student Craft Program which employs students in various on-campus industries producing craft work for the school. Both the Art Department and the Craft Program at the time were guided by heavy design influences from Cranbrook Academy of Art as well as traditional models of craft-work.

Afterwards, I chose the University of Arizona for my graduate degree because of a love for the local landscape and desire to be close to family. My graduate advisor, Michael Croft, was a gifted, low-key educator who taught me the value of being respected by one's peers and understanding the supportive net of the jewelry community. The program was heavily influenced by the regular presence of Eleanor Moty, then at the University of WI, Madison and a significant leader in the field.

Since then, I've been fortunate to spend time working with Katja Prins, Iris Eichenberg, and many others who have invested in the continued development of my thoughts and skills.

There are many similarities between being a jeweler and being an educator. Both occupations require a certain kind of curious patience, a willingness to slowly unpick a problem, and a desire to draw others in and show them something.



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How do you help your students take the next steps in their artistic development beyond LBCC?

I have a specific approach with students: Find out about their goals, get a clear picture of what success looks like to them, help them become fully aware of all their options, help them to make sense of what they see, encourage them to get comfortable with mistakes and connect them with the resources they need.

This approach takes different forms. I keep a small teaching collection of student and professional work. Jewelry is intimate and its physical properties and potential need to be in the hand to be understood. Looking at work in photographs can help but nothing compares to the physicality of actual pieces on the body.

Recently, the students and I have developed Straw Factory, a collaborative student endeavor that gives them a platform for entering the art marketplace as a group. This idea started during the pandemic but had its seed in the Student Craft program at Berea where students learned object making in collaborative studios as well as how studios are run. The

Straw Factory website is an ongoing teaching tool that students can learn in and through. It extends the runway as they are launching their careers.

Describe an experience in which you worked closely with a student outside of the classroom setting (collaborations, apprenticeships, assistantships, etc.)

Students have been involved in my studio practice in several ways including as portrait subjects for my ongoing body of work Archive of Rag and Bone. There is a reciprocal relationship in teaching and making. If I am considering a subject, I can present the students with an assignment that relates to it so I can study it more closely from multiple perspectives. In this case, a student responded to the assignment in a way that inspired me in a new direction. She became incorporated into my project and we have both shifted perspective by working through the subject matter together.

Also, student assistants in my personal studio are normal and sometimes essential if there's an important deadline approaching. Students learn to use new tools and techniques and sometimes find themselves doing



"Nothing tells memories from ordinary moments.
It is only later that they claim remembrance, on account of their scars."
Chris Marker, *La Jetée*: ciné-roman





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odd, labor intensive chores like ironing oak leaves or breaking down and bundling palm inflorescence. When possible I have as many as three students working together on a task. Craft is full of instances of group work in this way and it can be a relief to solitary studio work. The company lessens the monotony and builds community, like quilting bees in my childhood.

Student mentoring is one of the most enjoyable parts of teaching. It has been so satisfying to watch former students like Rachel Shimpock, Jose Loza, Charmaine Vegas and Jurate Brown become teachers and artists in their own right.

Sometimes reaching that place has meant working on scholarship and grant writing together. This can be a daunting task alone, so in Spring as many as 6-8 students can fit around my dining table collaborating on writing scholarship applications to schools, draining pots of tea and sharing wifi, answering questions together, helping each other frame resumes and look for missed opportunities. I work with each one individually but together we create strong responses because they begin embedded in a shared experience with their own jewelry community. ■