Fragments become fashion

ALL AFLUTTER: Barbara Heath with some of her work at Handmark Gallery.

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Jeweller Barbara Heath often finds pieces of old china in the soil outside her 1850s Tunbridge property. Using the skills she's honed working on precious gems, she then transforms these fragments into contemporary works.

The catalyst for the latest collection, *Midlands Lepidoptera*, came after she made a pet tag for her neighbour Joy's dog. But when Heath handed it over, Joy said, "I'll look after that", and whisked it away for herself.

The humble pet tag marked the start of Heath's new collection, which includes bracelets, brooches, pendants and wall-hanging designs made from broken porcelain.

Heath is based in Brisbane, but also spends part of the year in Tasmania restoring her late Georgian Tunbridge property, which is where she sources the recycled materials.

The fragments come from old basins and china plates, which were once shipped with household items to the property, which was originally a general store.

"I just love picturing this fluttering confetti of bits of china that had been transported across the globe and landed here," she says.

"There's always so much story to these pieces and you don't quite know what the story is."

A wall-hanging piece titled *Argus* features fragments cast in bronze to hold each piece together in the shape of a butterfly. Heath's neighbour, a former owner of the Tunbridge homestead, recognised the piece's long centre shard from the property.

"She said, 'That's the handle of a gozunder – you know, the pot that gozunder the bed'. So it's probably an old potty handle," Heath says. "Once it's in a different context, it's got a different life."

Heath has worked in jewellery design for more than four decades, during which time she studied the craft in New York and Melbourne's RMIT University and hosted solo exhibitions across the country.

Most pieces for her current exhibition take the form of butterflies. "I call them butterflies because of the idea of metamorphosis – they're changing their form and they're coming back to life again as a piece of jewellery," she says.

Heath says the names of most of the pieces in the collection – including Tunbridge Blue, Woodbury Skipper, Argus, Small White and Antill Ponds Swallowtail – were inspired by a combination of the names of original settlements in the Southern Midlands, as well as butterfly species.

"I love the unexpected delicacy of the patterns," Heath says.

"When they're broken, you can only imagine the story of the rest of the design.

"So it's intriguing to get glimpses of a scene and then to collage them together into a butterfly."

The name of the collection also refers to the study of moths and butterflies, and the designer says the shards she finds often fall naturally into the shape of a wing.

They're wildly different from the usual gemstone jewellery she makes under her Barbara Heath label, though her signature bracelet does make an appearance in a new form.

"I make a bracelet that has five big shapes, contrasting and counterbalanced, with a toggle clasp – a bar and a ring. I'm using the porcelain like gems in the metal," she says.

Heath makes the actual pieces in her Brisbane studio after transporting a selection of fragments from Tunbridge so, like they did originally, the pieces travel long distances once more – this time to serve a new purpose.

"I've collected them for years and have decided to dip into the whole collection," Heath says.

"I'm never going to get through it all."

See Barbara Heath's Midlands Lepidoptera collection at the Handmark Gallery, Salamanca Place, until July 20