

Earrings, titanium and silver with etched design



Silver oxidised bangle, wristpiece with gold

Barbara Heath's solid technical training as a production jeweller, coupled with her fascination and absorption of "street fashion" and other influences, enables her to create jewellery which, paradoxically, is both a shock to the senses and elegantly wearable.
Text by Roz MacAllan. Photography by Stuart Collins.

ART OF ADORNMENT



Silver ring
with opal

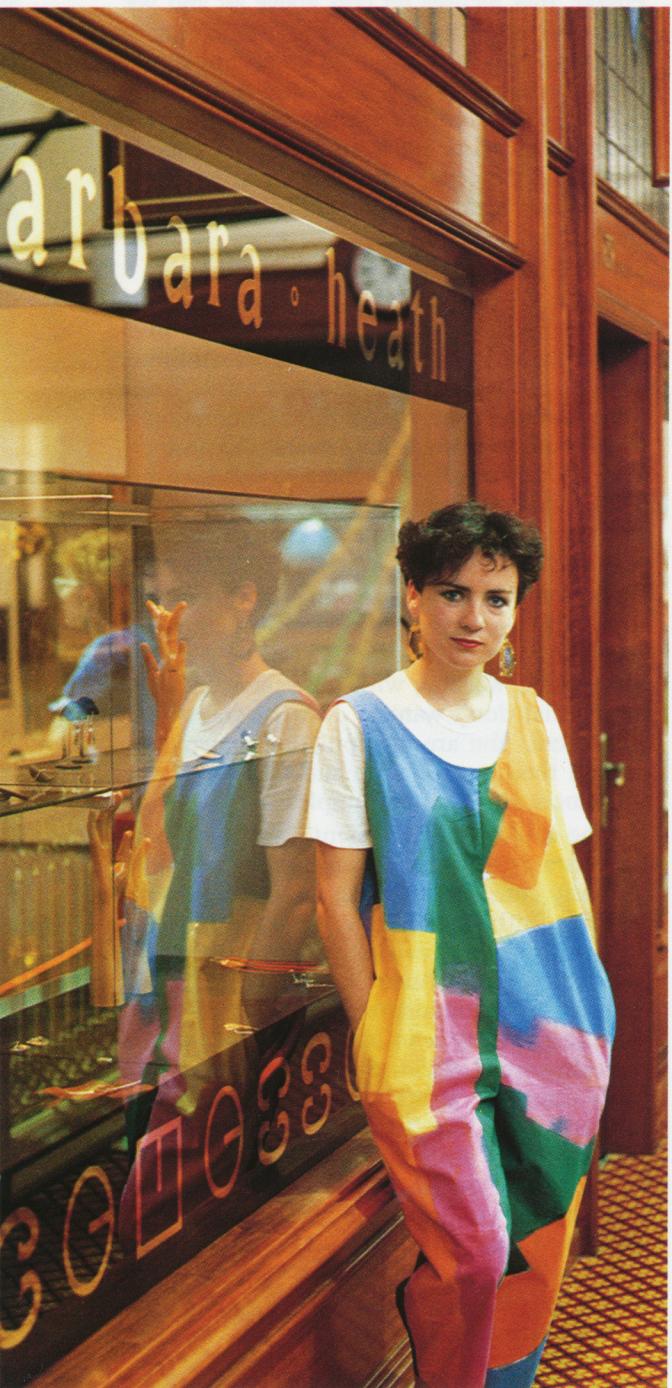
AN American metalsmith, Oppi Untracht, divides jewellers into a family who work on many levels and in many directions. Central in the family of jewellers is the artist jeweller, surrounded by ethnic jewellers, rebel jewellers, traditional jewellers and various technical specialists.¹ It doesn't take a jewellery diploma to decide which position Barbara Heath occupies in the jewellery clan. A very modest person, she still insists that her work is in very exploratory stages after more than 10 years making jewel-

lery. Her work has gradually evolved over those years from mostly figurative to abstract jewellery. She is more acutely aware of the impact that social trends and changing fashions have on the jewellery scene. The bold and aggressive punk fashions introduced mundane objects as adornment, leading jewellers to question their use of precious materials. Heath's solid technical background, coupled with the fascination and absorption of "street fashions" and other influences, enables her to make jewellery which, paradoxically, is both a shock

to the senses and elegant.

Her designs often stem directly from the materials. One technique she frequently employs is to spend hours grouping and regrouping materials like an artist assembles collages. Often a drawing is only rendered as a record of the project. She admits to an inexplicable love affair with her materials, whether they are precious gems and gold or prosaic materials like plastic and wood.

The style of her work is distinctive and most easily recognised through the combinations of unexpected materials, such as ebony and titanium, copper and opal, diamonds and plastic. Her preference for jewellery that is not immediately obvious is reflected in the use of concealed images and little surprises. She voices a strong dislike for claw settings which are, in her opinion, too stark, preferring bezel settings for stones. Some of her favourite stones are considered old-fashioned today:



Above: Titanium and silver arm piece with etched design

Right: Earrings in silver, ebony and titanium

Left: Barbara Heath at her gallery, The Brisbane Arcade, Queensland

Below: Gold woven ring with freshwater pearls





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1. Pair of gold earrings, silver oxidised mesh, imprinted design
2. Ring set, oxidised silver and gold
3. Silver and titanium earrings, mesh imprinted design
4. Gold and titanium earrings, mesh imprinted design
5. Earrings, pearl shell and gold

amethysts, garnets, tourmalines, zircon, jasper and haematite. Even though Heath uses many non-precious materials, she prefers the real gems to synthetic ones, remarking that 'the real gems have "inclusions"; a term in the trade to describe flaws or marks.'

Heath is a bowerbird and hoards a mélange of found objects which she will eventually metamorphise into previous objects. An intriguing series of rings she made recently combined diverse techniques and materials. The rings were ingeniously designed to be worn on one finger as a group ring or separately, and there was also the possibility of rearranging the ring set to achieve a myriad of puzzle images. A material she admires and uses frequently is ebony; its dense nature makes it excellent for carving and its rich brown colour is a perfect foil for gold and silver inlay work.

Barbara Heath was born in Sydney but went to England when she was six, spending the

major part of her childhood growing up in Surrey. Her family returned to Australia when she was 13 and after finishing school she enrolled in the Gold and Silversmithing course at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Shortly afterwards, she was offered an apprenticeship by jeweller Laszlo Puszár.

Heath reflected, 'This was a wonderful opportunity to be able to work and study concurrently. At the workshop there were always between eight and 12 highly skilled jewellers, each with diverse talents.' At the workshop she gleaned the necessary business approach to jewellery production and at the college she was allowed time for experimentation, and of course there was the invaluable stimulation gained from exposure to other art forms.

Over a 10-year period she had her own jewellery workshop and outlet in Bondi Junction, Paddington, Kings Cross and Double Bay in Sydney's eastern suburbs. Her most successful period financially was in Bondi Junction, but there were dual constraints of being situated in a good position, the very high rent and the constant trail of people coming in off the street requesting work that was not her style. It was a trying combination that involved very

long working hours and she began to think about quitting. Barbara Heath and her partner in the jewellery workshop, artist Johannes Watermann, decided to build a yacht which would eventually enable them to live a quieter life at sea. They built a 17-metre sailing boat and left the business in April 1982.

Their travels took them as far north as Port Douglas in Queensland. Heath's creative outlet was photography during this period, a medium more suited to life on a boat. It was whilst staying in Cairns for six months that she decided to make a couple of pieces of jewellery for herself. To her surprise she spent many enjoyable hours on them. This positive experience rekindled her interest in making innovative one-off pieces. Ever since then she has been careful not to be seduced back into the more profitable, less interesting jewellery in order to maintain her interest.

It was a challenge for Barbara Heath to try to find a balance, after her training with Laszlo Puszár, that focuses on cost above all and yet retain her original designs. The Bondi Junction experience taught her not to compromise. Now she has evolved a bread-and-butter line that does not compromise her creative process. She makes traditional handmade gold chains which she wholesales to commercial jewellers, wisely keeping the proportion of this work low enough not to bore her.

She still lives on the yacht, situated on the Brisbane River, and has a well-equipped workshop and gallery in the Brisbane Arcade in the centre of the city. Commissions continue to form an important part of her work. Unlike some jewellers, she enjoys the collaboration which commissions bring, mainly because most of the people who come to her have been filtered and like her style. She still has long-standing clients in other states who come back year after year for new work.

Living on a yacht and making jewellery could sound like a charmed life. Heath quickly dispels this romantic notion. 'It can be a dirty occupation, working with unresilient materials, metals that don't want to do what you want with them. You are manipulating materials beyond their natural state and many of the substances are toxic and unpleasant.'

On the subject of investment, Heath says there is a growing tendency now for people to seriously consider investing in contemporary jewellery, although there is always a preference for gold. She is philosophical about the art jewellery scene in Australia. She spares a thought for the students coming out of technical colleges today who have no contact with the commercial world. She feels that they are easily destroyed by its restrictions. Heath further mused that 'the people who do a full apprenticeship are incredibly skilled but have no concept of design. I try to bridge that gap, above all it is important to me to make jewellery I like.'

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¹ Oppi Untracht, *The Jewel and the Jeweller*.

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