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BARBARA HEATH

JEWELLER TO THE LOST.

words

AMELIA GUNDELACH

Barbara Heath
T 07 3856 2269
barby@co-opones.to

**Barbara Heath:
Jeweller to the Lost**
Queensland Art Gallery
Melbourne Street
South Bank, Brisbane
Queensland 4101
15 October 2005 – 26 March 2006
T 07 3840 7303
F 07 3840 8865
W www.qag.qld.gov.au

Whether it's jewellery, a major public artwork, or a custom-designed architectural embellishment, the work of Queensland jeweller Barbara Heath is recognized for its distinctive use of iconography and symbols, unusual gem combinations and forms imbued with personal narratives.

As an artist who has practised for more than 30 years, Heath sees her task as helping others locate and possess specific jewels. Since 1990, while maintaining a balance between the creative and the commercial aspects of her work, Heath has assumed the title 'Jeweller to the Lost' and assisted a vast array of individuals on the journey to find their own special jewel.

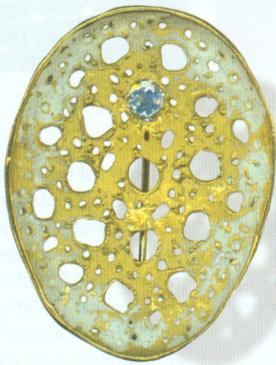
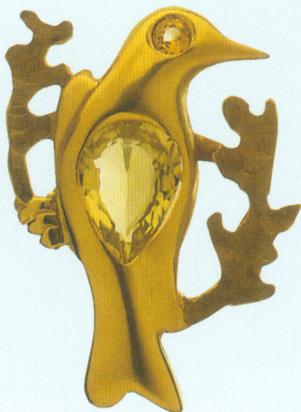
The power of jewellery to communicate messages is a central concern in Heath's work. According to Heath, it's the nonverbal language of jewellery that can assist an individual in projecting, positioning and defining their sense of self. Jewellery has the power to stimulate interactions and convey meaning. It can form a

relationship – a dialogue between maker, wearer and observer – most clearly revealed through the commissioning process. For Heath, jewels are loaded communicators with the capacity to project outward and inward. The maker has the first intimate connection with a jewel which has already embarked on its voyage – the wearer and the observer will soon be drawn in on the journey.

These philosophies underpin a vocation that began in earnest in the 1970s when Heath trained in gold and silver smithing at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (now RMIT University) and assisted in the studio of Melbourne-based jeweller Laszlo Puzsar. After establishing a jewellery practice in Brisbane in the early 1980s and a brief sojourn studying at Parsons School of Design, New York, Heath opened an atelier in the gallery level of the Brisbane Arcade. Since the early 1990s Heath has quietly continued to develop her creative business from a studio on Brisbane's north side, balancing production, commissions and exhibition work.



PHOTOGRAPH: ANDREA HIGGINS



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1 / BARBARA HEATH, 2005.

2 / WHITE ENAMEL FUSION BROOCH, 2004. 18 CT YELLOW GOLD, ENAMEL. COLLECTION: THE ARTIST.

3 / WHITE ENAMEL FUSION SPHERE, 2004. 18 CT YELLOW GOLD, ENAMEL. COLLECTION: THE ARTIST.

4 / PIPET, 1999. 18 CT YELLOW GOLD, BERYL, YELLOW SAPPHIRE. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

5 / WHITE ENAMEL FUSION BROOCH, 2004. 18 CT YELLOW GOLD, ANTIQUE ROSE CUT DIAMOND. COLLECTION: THE ARTIST.

6 / REDWING, 1999. 18 CT GOLD, RUBY, SPINELS. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

7 / LOVE TOKEN, 1987. 925 SILVER, PEARLS, EBONY, BRONZE, STAINLESS STEEL. COLLECTION: THE ARTIST.

8 / FOX RING, 1992. 18 CT GOLD, BRILLIANT-CUT DIAMONDS, VICTORIAN ENAMEL ON SILVER BUTTON. COLLECTION: THE ARTIST.

9 / SNAKE FOR ARTEMIS (FROM THE "COMMUNICATION DEVICE" SERIES) 1987. PATINATED BRASS, STERLING SILVER, NICKEL SILVER, COPPER, 9 CT GOLD, STAINLESS STEEL, PERSPEX STAND. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

10 / A TREE, A ROCK, A CLOUD 1999. GOLD, TITANIUM, STAINLESS STEEL. CENTRAL PLAZA 2, BRISBANE.



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SOPHIA HITCH ARABIAN

WILLOW CROWN STONE

HOLLYWOOD MOON HORN

MOTEL LUGG JEWELS SALT

TETRA SPOT

SHAGGY MUGG CHAOS STATE

CHARTER DOOD HOLLOW TEE

FESTIVAL DAY MOTION

HOLLYWOOD HIRE FOB

SHAGGY MUGG JEWELS

MOTEL LUGG STONE

WILLOW CROWN STONE

HOLLYWOOD MOON HORN

TETRA SPOT

SHAGGY MUGG CHAOS STATE

CHARTER DOOD HOLLOW TEE

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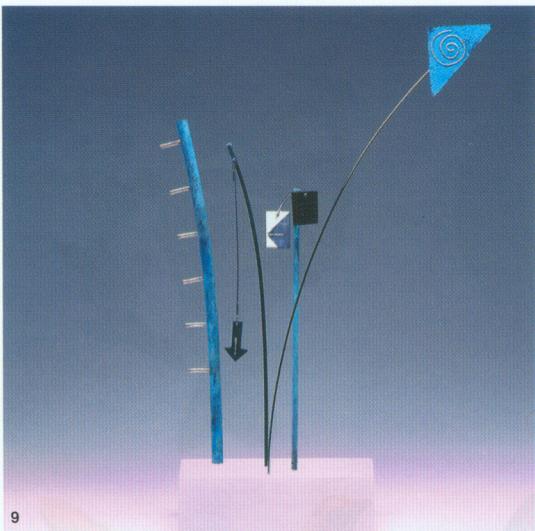
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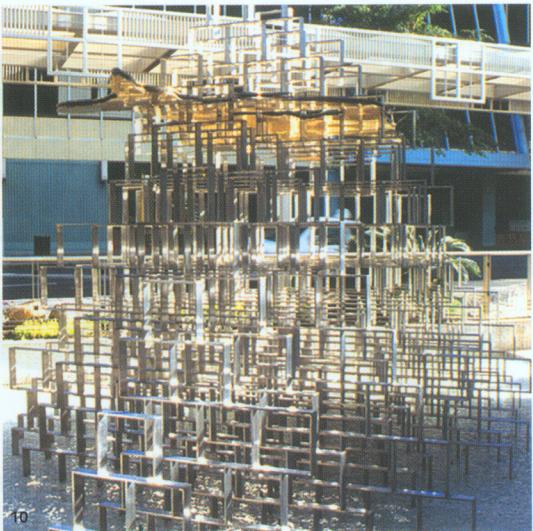
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In the mid 1980s Heath's exploration of the expressive possibilities of iconography and symbolism intensified. A deeply personal language developed which included babies, dogs, eyes and a range of other motifs which manifested in production jewellery as well as pieces for exhibitions. The miniature plastic baby, cast in bronze and plated in precious metal, was a recurring icon in Heath's range of wearables. It featured in signature multi-link bracelets and was the focus of the limited edition *Baby in the Bath* commemorative birth marker, produced for Remo Guiffré's concept store, Remo, in 1989.

Arrows, spirals, ladders, waves and windows were other encoded elements that became significant devices for communication. These are evident in *Aphrodite's Ladder* (1987), *Hecates Wand* (1987) and *Snare for Artemis* (1987), a series of small sculptural objects produced for the *New Icons* exhibition at Roz MacAllan Gallery (Brisbane, 1987) – and later shown at Studio Noko, Sydney, in 1988. These pieces – made from patinated brass, sterling silver and copper – function as contemporary symbols or markers. Each references an ancient goddess and explores the varied roles of contemporary women. For example, Artemis, the goddess of the moon and the hunt, is presented in *Snare for Artemis*, a form representing the woman's role as virgin, sister, feminist and competitor. *Aphrodite's Ladder*, which references the goddess of love and beauty, explores the dynamic of the woman as both lover and creative force.

In the late 1980s, a number of new motifs began to emerge in Heath's practice. The motif of the skull – the emblem of hermits and the supreme memento mori – is evident in anodized aluminium and sterling silver mirror brooches produced in 1988–1989 and figures strongly in the curious, voodoo-like series *Love Tokens* (1987–1991), created from silver, pearls, ebony, bone, hair, bronze and gold. Birds, particularly the stylized forms derived from folk art, also feature in Heath's lexicon. An installation of custom-designed bird boxes featuring 18 ct gold and sterling silver skylarks, wrynecks and redwings, with delicate diamond briolettes, sapphires and seed pearls, was the focus of *A Little Birdy Told Me*, Heath's solo exhibition at Craft Queensland in late 1999. This important body of work explored the symbolic power of birds and their links with augury and forecasting.

The iconographic potential of another creature – a cunning fox – is captured in an impressive ring Heath created in 1991. A chunky pavé setting of round



brilliant-cut diamonds surrounds the curious fox, which is finely handpainted in enamel on a silver Georgian button. From a nineteenth-century master of hounds waistcoat, the re-contextualized button, sourced by Heath's partner in India in 1971, reflects Heath's inventiveness and ability to harness an existing symbol as a vehicle for personal expression. A kind of badge, a jeweller's jewel, a signet and a collector's treasure, this ring is worn on Barbara's hand of action (her right) and she describes the piece as a "wedding ring to self" or a "jeweller's billboard".

Heath and her partner are avid collectors of objects. Heath's work and living spaces contain cabinets filled with all manner of organic and artificial curiosities, which are arranged, sorted and categorized. Sea anemones, South Sea Islander body adornment, magic and good luck charms, antique glass buttons and other objects coexist here, stimulating her work. Amongst these exotic treasures is a vast collection of precious gems, and an extensive library, that extends floor to ceiling.

The exploration of containment, veiling and revelation has occurred in small and intimately scaled works, to be worn on the body, as well as in dramatic, sculptural objects for private and public spaces. The seven metre high stainless steel sculpture, *Net* (1998), suspended from the Neville Bonner Building in William Street, Brisbane, is a monumental, corniculate architectural veil. Similarly, *A Tree A Rock A Cloud* (1999), a shimmering matrix of gold, titanium and stainless steel created for the forecourt of Central Plaza 2, Brisbane, could be read as a scaled up version of one of Heath's signature lattice brooches.

Most recently, whilst developing a large-scale screen for Brisbane's Roma Street Parklands, Heath developed *White Enamel Fusion*, a series of 18 ct yellow gold wearables. These perforated lace forms, which echo organic aspects of the natural world and interior spaces of the body, are softer variations of the veil, the web and the net. Coated in white enamel, these brooches and rings feature fresh combinations of antique, flat-cut and rose-cut diamonds, with combinations of white coral, moonstone and gold pearl.

In 2005, Barbara Heath continues to explore the capabilities of jewellery as a vehicle for human interaction, both on the body and translated into larger forms for the public realm. Her commitment to inventively redefining the role of the contemporary jeweller continues unabated.