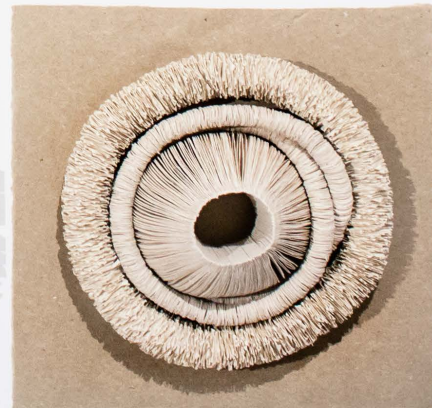
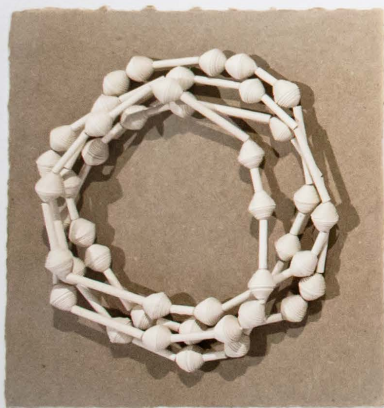
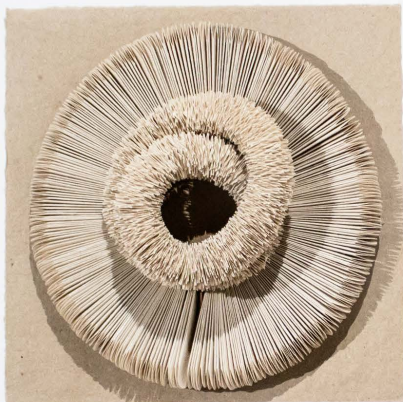
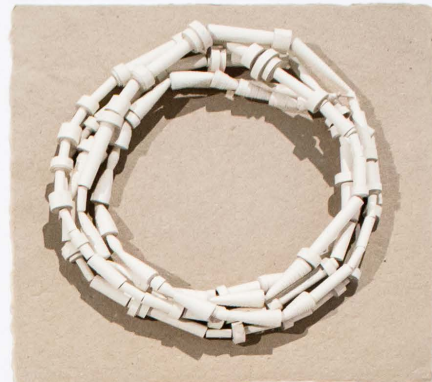
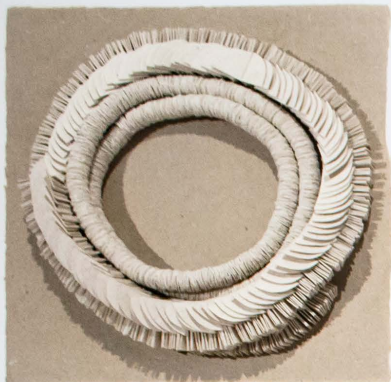


KIFF SLEMMONS



TOOLS FOR THOUGHT: JEWELRY

BAM Director Les Christensen talks with Kiff Slemmons about her methodology and approach to art-making
Autumn 2016

LC: You are well-known for incorporating the use of found objects in your metal work. You have referred to these materials as “ideas.” Can you expand on that?



KS: It seems that my work is often characterized by the use of found objects though that is by no means all that I do. (*Insectopedia*, an alphabet of 26 insects as pins for instance, is metal alone.) The found material that I choose to use is often relevant to ideas I'm exploring through a series of pieces. I'm using the associations, the histories, that these pieces still hold. It's their metaphoric possibilities that set off sparks for me and such sparks may connect with other viewers, countering their assumptions about the material itself or causing wonder at what may be contained in a piece of jewelry. I also like the power of the fragment, the shard to make us imagine further than what's immediately there, making use of the familiar to enter the unfamiliar. Now after working so many years with found material I can stretch even the concept of “found,” up the ante, so to speak, as in the tool pieces with Neolithic stone points.

LC: The items that you do incorporate into your work are handled with almost a reverence, as if you are collaborating with the maker of the found object. You have literally collaborated with other artists - in your series *Re:Pair and Imperfection* and certainly with your delicate paper works created in Oaxaca. Is collaboration an important aspect of your work and is it something you pursue?

KS: Strangely, I would say that I don't actively pursue collaboration, but I suppose in some way there is a sense of collaboration in both how I live and work, how I go about things. More than collaboration, I would say a spirit of reciprocity, give and take. *Re: Pair and Imperfection* was not really a collaboration since I was on my own to complete the pieces given by others, others who I assume had a respect or trust in the legitimacy and integrity of my inquiry into imperfection. I certainly had the utmost respect for the work of the contributing artists, and I suppose I could say that is similar to the respect for many of the found objects, a respect for what they stand for, where they came from, their abandoned beauty. I would say there was a kind of reverence for the Neolithic stone points, their ancient history, their refined hand craftsmanship, elegant evidence of our ancestors.

In regard to the work in paper, it didn't begin as collaboration though it has ended up as one, albeit complicated and often shifting in the usual notions of collaboration. I was invited to work in the paper studio, to design jewelry out of handmade paper, jewelry that the artisans could reproduce and sell. I was a teacher or guide and ended up donating many designs, in part as return for all that travel to Mexico had given me. What I thought was a one-time project extended to 15 years and ongoing, evolving in sometimes complicated forms of collaboration. As an artist and advocate for contemporary jewelry, I have produced a set of books and a number of exhibitions that celebrate paper as an unexpected material



for jewelry. The tradition of making paper by hand in Mexico has deep roots and that history counters many assumptions about this richly layered culture.

LC: Your pieces are exquisite, tiny sculptures but are also wearable works of art. What was your inspiration to create jewelry?

KS: I'm what might be called an accidental jeweler since I never imagined making jewelry at the time when we ordinarily think about what to do with our lives. Literature, books, reading, language in all forms took hold quite distinctly early on. And when I think about it now, it was listening over and over to Peter and the Wolf as a little kid of five that had impact. It was the experience of rapt attention and sometimes excruciating anticipation that moved me. The tension of something beautiful and sad, when you can feel for both sides of a complicated argument. I don't know how to clearly explain this except that I have always wanted to make or do something to provide a connection with others, what all the layers of Peter and the Wolf did. At the same time, the small scale of things can be powerful, often contrary to prevailing assumptions and the potency of unexpected

discoveries. Though I have no formal education in jewelry, I chose nearly 50 years ago to make earrings out of Peking glass beads from a broken curtain scattered across the floor of an abandoned farmhouse. Here was the rescue part from the very beginning and the possibility of making 150 pairs, all different, to finance a trip to Mexico, to Oaxaca, where I first saw the jewelry of Tomb 7 from the ancient Zapotec site of Monte Alban. Perhaps this was the beginning in my understanding of the possibilities of visual language, of what visual language is. It took many years of working before I realized that jewelry could be a venue, a carrier of ideas. I was never interested in the single, perfect piece, the masterpiece idea, but rather in developing a language, a conversation about scale, about preciousness and value, and in countering assumptions about jewelry through many pieces. Often I was asked why not make sculpture, a more secure proof of art activity, but it is the unexpectedness of jewelry as art that kept me on that course. I have found that it is the exhibition context that works for my intentions as an artist. In my layered approach, I try for a layered response.



Front: *Nine Rounds Grid*, 2013
handmade paper from Arte Papel Oaxaca
30 x 30 inches

Interior left page: *Argilos*, 2006
porcelain and synthetic resin fragment from Thomas Gentille
from *Re:Pair and Imperfection*
3 x 2.25 x .5 inches

Interior right page: *Pulseras [bracelets]*, 2012 - 2013
handmade paper from Arte Papel Oaxaca
3.5 x 2 inches each

Back left: *Joseph Cornell*, 1992
silver, brass and shells, from *Hands of the Heroes*
3 x 2.5 x .25 inches

Back right: *Marie Curie*, 1992
silver, aluminum, acrylic and gold leaf, from *Hands of the Heroes*
3 x 2.5 x .25 inches

photographs by Rod Slemmons

BRADBURY ART MUSEUM
OCTOBER 20 - DECEMBER 09, 2016

BradburyArtMuseum.org

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Saturday: noon to 5pm
Sunday: 2 to 5pm

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