



**Collect, Connect,
Protect, Display:
Framing the
Art of Jewelry**

By Ellen Lupton

How can the subject of jewelry be framed? Is jewelry itself, at bottom, a kind of frame, a viewfinder onto the world of the beautiful, the precious, the sensual, and the human? Reflecting my background as a graphic designer and a design curator, I am often drawn to objects with a strong pictorial presence. Some of the pieces collected here contain imagery, whether drawn, painted, scratched, found, hidden, exposed, framed, or repurposed. Many have flat decorated surfaces. Other works build a rich rapport—even antagonism—between graphic and sculptural form. It is not only the lure of the image, however, that connects jewelry with the art of the page. The functions of adornment, presentation, and display produce a deep structural bond between jewelry and graphic design. The craft of the graphic designer hinges on presenting content: framing and cropping an image, setting the margins of a page, spacing and connecting letterforms into fields of text and chains of discourse. The work of graphic design takes place, literally, in the margins, in the spaces around and between the primary content of a book, catalogue, magazine, or exhibition.

Graphic designers share this avid marginality with jewelers. Although jewelers today are striving to stake their claim at the center of the arts, the Western tradition has cast design and ornament in supporting roles. Ornament is the frame but not the picture. It is the vessel, the container, the border, the hors d'oeuvre, but not the main event. Necklaces, bracelets, rings, earrings: these objects are frames. They encircle parts of the body, bringing color, light, and even sound to the human figure. Jewelry decorates us not just through the materials and workmanship of each piece, but through the structural gesture of bracketing and underscoring the body.

In addition to putting the wearer on display, jewelry sets forth precious or curious things: jewels, mementos, locks of hair, magical substances. The jeweler acts as a collector and a curator, assembling strange or beautiful objects and transforming them through juxtaposition and physical presentation. Jewelry artists must also consider how their work is stored and displayed. Pieces live both on and off the body—in the vitrines, tables, and cases of the gallery, retail shop, or private home. Presentation is crucial to the cycle of sales and promotion. Many artists create elaborate boxes that provide settings for

their pieces, enhancing their value to collectors by protecting them or putting them on view when not in use.

The status of frames and ornament vis à vis works of art was explored by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1987 book *The Truth in Painting*. Derrida, who founded the technique of thinking and criticism known as deconstruction, argued that in the Western tradition, certain forms of artistic expression are considered marginal, serving as secondary supports to a primary work of art. Such supplemental forms include the frame around a picture, the pedestal that supports a statue, and the spacing of letters on a page. Derrida argued that while we may consider such marginal arts secondary and subservient, they are, in fact, necessary to the process of perceiving and understanding the primary work.

By setting off the precious object—a painting, a stone, a woman's face—from the world of ordinary things, the frame confers status and value. Through its design, the frame shapes our perception and understanding of the thing it encloses. Describing this modest yet powerful task, Derrida wrote that the frame "disappears, buries itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy. The frame is in no way a background...but neither is its thickness as margin a figure. Or at least it is a figure which comes away of its own accord." In a curious oscillation between figure and ground, form and content, the margin disappears from view as it performs its crucial task of foregrounding—of making present and visible—the framed object. Furthermore, insofar as the work of art depends upon the frame to maintain its separation from the everyday world, the frame reveals a kind of emptiness and dependency at the core of the precious thing. Without its edges, the center cannot hold.

Derrida's theory of the frame informs the choice of objects and themes explored in this project. The jeweler assembles strange or beautiful objects and transforms them through juxtaposition, presentation, and physical transformation. The design of jewelry requires exacting attention to modes of connection and manners of framing and display. When do those details overtake the work to create new manners of ornament, or to comment on fetishes of the precious?



B.

A.
David and Roberta Williamson
Oh What Lovely Birds, 2006
sterling silver, quartz crystal,
antique prints, paper
20 x 1 x .25
photo: James Beards

B.
Alexander Blank
What Comes Around
Goes Around: Brooch, 2005
found plastic objects,
resin, ash sand, silver
dimensions variable

Consider the work of Alexander Blank. His series *What Goes Around Comes Around* gathers together found plastic objects and conceals them inside a dark blanket of resin and ash sand. Does the treasure hidden inside consist of abandoned machine parts (gears, screws, levers) or tawdry bits of ornament (buttons, buckles, flowers)? Such humble artifacts acquire importance not because they have been made visible, but because they are cloaked, obscured, hidden away. They are valuable because unknown, set off from the world inside their gritty coats. These burnt offerings presumably bore no relation to one another in life, but now they are united by a common shroud of blackness.

Found objects and reclaimed materials appear in numerous guises across the field of contemporary jewelry. Are not all gems and minerals found objects at the start? Alexander Blank has chosen to bury his lowly treasures. More commonly, the jeweler celebrates the beauty, specificity, and nostalgic charm of lost-and-found objects. Lisa Walker confirms the ordinariness of the ordinary thing, rejecting ideas of transformation and mystery, refusing to confer value on the commercial junk she assembles into modern objects of adornment. She also eschews traditional standards of craftsmanship in favor of one of the basest methods of connection: glue. In a necklace of visceral simplicity, freshwater pearls swim in a transparent puddle of glue. The glue is a means of connection and, literally, a medium, a shiny substance through which to view the semiprecious orbs suspended within. The pearls are bubbles of solid matter that animate their liquid setting.

Helen Britton refashions glass ornaments, mostly from postwar European costume jewelry, into elaborately assembled semi-industrial landscapes. Tiny icons salvaged from the storehouse of kitsch come alive in settings that are both raw and luxurious. In each piece a nostalgic image—vivid yet frail—stands against a richly rugged, almost grandiose scene. The curves of the pin-up girl are no match for the corpulent mounds of pearls and coral that proliferate around her. These lavish mineral fruits of the living sea are like candy or caviar.

The charm bracelet, which is experiencing a revival in popular design, is a collection of three-dimensional icons assembled over time by the individual wearer. This popular archetype is finding

its way into contemporary jewelry, as numerous artists create pieces that use sequences of objects to suggest real or invented histories. Each piece functions as a miniature museum assembled on a string, where the sum is greater than the parts. The objects can be natural or artificial, abstract or representational. The miniature museums of Bruce Metcalf juxtapose nature and artifice, abstraction and depiction, found objects and handcrafted fabrications. A Star Wars action figure helmet shares pride of place with a glass eye, a seedpod, a machine part, and elements carved from wood. Each one occupies its own space, asserting its individual presence.

In Silke Spitzer's *Ringinarig*, one ring encloses another. The inner ring pushes from the inside out, forming (and deforming) the outer shape. Her Bumpy rings consist of two raw diamonds hidden between layers of silver and gold. The diamonds reveal themselves only by pushing against the exterior surface. Constanze Schreiber avoids precious materials altogether in *Deadheads*, a series of rings that play with the production process to create a new relationship between setting and gem, image and frame. The copper setting is a vessel for the colored plastic that overflows its borders. Traditionally, the frame is a form of control, a means of containment, but here it becomes open and incomplete.

Deganit Stern Schocken looks at the transformation of materials from solid to liquid and back. Her project *How Many is One*, exhibited at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 2003, is a detailed study of the industrial production of jewelry. Schocken engages the readymade from yet another direction, employing molds intended for the mass production of jewelry components to create one-of-a-kind pieces. Rather than use the molds to construct perfectly uniform objects, Schocken invites error and accident into her process.

A mold is a special kind of frame or vessel. It is the perfect outside for the manufactured thing, an inverted double that imposes its interior void on the form it reproduces. Yet in addition to giving the object its desirable features, the mold by necessity leaves behind artifacts of making that the craftsperson works to erase, from the seams that show where the two sides of the mold had come together to the duct through which molten material had once been poured.



C.



D.



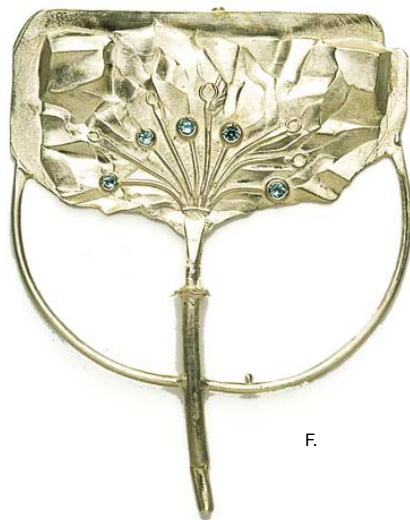
C.
 Lisa Walker
 Necklace, 2006
 freshwater pearls, wool, glue
 15.75 x 8

D.
 Helen Britton
 Beautiful brooch, 2005
 silver, broome pearls,
 glass, coral
 2.25 x 2 x 1.5

E.
 Bruce Metcalf
 Rhyme and Pun
 Necklace 4, 2005
 carved, gold-leafed, or painted
 wood, 24k gold plated brass,
 copper electroform, iron wire,
 stainless steel cable, weed-
 whacker string, Star Wars
 action figure helmet, foam
 ball, cork, glass eye, resin,
 ho-scale rowboat, sweetgum
 seedpod, pepper-grinder
 mechanism, bass lure
 13 x 12

E.

F.
Deganit Stern Schocken
How Many Is One: Anomalies
silver, stones
2 x 2
photo: Uri Gershuni
and David Adika



F.

G.
Melanie Bilenker
A Day for a Bath brooch
gold, piano key ivory, resin
1.25 x 1 x .5
photo: Kevin Sprague



G.

H.
Constanze Schreiber
Deadheads rings, 2004
plastic, copper
2.5 x 2.5 x .5
photo: Edo Kuipers



H.

This duct, called the anguss, is like an umbilical cord that feeds the void with casting material. In the lost wax process, which Schocken employs, a model is made as wax flows through the anguss to fill a rubber mold. (This wax object is later melted away in the final casting process.) If the two sides of the mold are not connected tightly enough, the wax escapes, leaving a margin around the cast figure. Schocken's pieces preserve that margin as well as keep intact the umbilical form left by the anguss. Further embellished with paint and stones, the resulting objects have the ancient character of fossils or archaeological fragments.

Jewelry is sculpture scaled to the human body. It is also a mode of painting whose tradition encompasses the locket, the cameo, and other spectacular acts of miniaturism. The Victorians preserved strands of hair inside hinged lockets and painted portraits with pigment made from a loved one's ground hair. Melanie Bilenker crafts tiny images that depict mundane, ordinary moments. Her *Arms* brooch mirrors the body's symmetry with twin frames chained together. *A Day for a Bath* encloses a strangely empty drawing of the corner of a room inside a simple gold frame. The frame unscrews to allow a second, more intimate drawing to slide out. The mechanical features of Bilenker's pieces (chains, sliding planes) recall the gadgetry of the classic Victorian locket. The simple line drawings, made from strands of hair laid into resin over an ivory ground, replace vivid detail with the schematic armature of a memory.

Jewelers are object-makers, and those artifacts live on the human body. Artists create environments for their pieces that become works of art in their own right. The cabinets of curiosity assembled by collectors beginning in the Renaissance were odd assortments of art works, natural history specimens, and mechanical novelties. Joseph Cornell and other artists referenced that tradition in the twentieth century by assembling found and constructed objects into fantastic miniature tableaux. Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box* and other works also embedded themes of storage and miniaturization in the modernist discourse.

The thematic of the boxed museum has endless repercussions in the jewelry world. David and Roberta Williamson insert works of wearable jewelry into environments reminiscent of Cornell's

legendary boxes. Such settings respond to the obvious practical need to effectively store small, valuable art objects while enhancing the artistic significance and physical presence of the pieces.

Jewelry has moved from the body to the box to the larger space of the museum or gallery. As jewelry makers establish an identity within the art world, they seek to explore the medium as a continuum of ideas expanding beyond personal adornment. How can one begin to define the art of jewelry, if it is not limited to making objects that frame and flatter the human form? First, the discourse of jewelry addresses an infinite range of materials, from precious stones and metals to found objects, but jewelry always points, if indirectly or through deliberate rejection, to notions of the beautiful and the valuable. Jewelry is always, in some respect, a commentary on materials. Second, jewelry confronts relationships between bodies and things. Whether or not a jewelry artist's practice yields objects that can be worn, this practice figures the body in some way, even if by omission.

A leading figure in the idea of jewelry and installation is Ruudt Peters, who trained as a jeweler and then worked as a sculptor before returning to jewelry. In the early 1990s this Dutch artist began creating installations around his jewelry; at his exhibition *Interno* (1990), he displayed his brooches by pinning them to the lapels of men in black suits, who stood in the gallery for the opening. (The jackets were later hung on the wall.)

Much of Peters's work revolves around alchemical lore. A generation of jewelers in the Netherlands had rejected gold and silver in the early 1970s; the mystical science of alchemy gave Peters a way back into gold from a philosophical and spiritual point of view. The brooches on view in his exhibition, *Azoth*, consist of hollow prisms of oxidized silver that have been wrapped in layers of polyester and then sliced in half. These fabricated geological finds enact the alchemist's dream of forging pure and precious substances out of diverse materials. The sliced orbs are suspended over bowls of water that reflect the objects as well as building on the concept of *azoth*, the water of life, an elusive elixir of eternal life sought out by medieval alchemists. Peters continues to work as a sculptor, creating pieces that are integrated into architecture. "I am a jewelry maker," he says. "I have no desire to make autonomous images. I search for a relationship

with the architecture; my sculptures are present, but serviceable—just like my jewelry."

One way to frame the vast and varied art of jewelry is to view it through the paradigm of the frame. This special exhibition has looked at framing from various scales of reference, from the construction of individual pieces to how they are displayed, sold, and worn. To *frame* is to set forth a precious rock or a found object, or to edge the face or limb with loops or bands of ornament, or to box up objects in cases, cabinets, and rooms for protection and display. In delving into the vast territory of contemporary jewelry, I was seduced by works that overflow with embellished surfaces and lush, painterly references as well as by pieces that are stark, conceptual, even raw. What ties them together is the fundamental act of transforming materials and images by setting them apart from the realm of the ordinary.

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