

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Pam Rosenblatt
Jewelry artist Bethany Ericson: doing what she loves



On a cool, pleasant Friday, May 30, 2014, Wilderness House Literary Review interviewed jewelry artist Bethany Ericson in her studio located in Somerville. Wilderness House Literary Review arts editor Pam Rosenblatt had seen her work on display during Somerville Open Studios on Saturday, May 3, 2014, picked up her business card and emailed her a few days later. Ericson replied positively to her arts interview request. A few weeks later, they corresponded by email to confirm quotes spoken in the interview. Here is the resulting arts article:

SOMERVILLE'S BETHANY ERICSON enjoys making and mending things, so becoming a jewelry artist was a natural path for her to take. She describes herself as "a very hands-on person."

"I imagine the media I have taken up over the years has likely reflected my psychological life or stories I need to tell," she said. "Whether I was piercing together broken ceramic shards into a new image while making mosaics, or attempting to transform seemingly immovable media like glass or metal or concrete into flowing channels for my ideas, I have always had the urge to make even broken or seemingly unmovable things have an emotional relationship with the world."

Ericson creates jewelry for men and women, but especially enjoys creating wedding rings for men. "I love making men's jewelry, actually. And I particularly enjoy making men's wedding rings. It's more fun. There's more space to work with," Ericson said at a Friday, May 30, 2014 interview with Wilderness House Literary Review inside her Somerville art studio.

Before pursuing jewelry as a career, Ericson was a technology writer. Then she became a travel book writer. Next, she decided to write about travel, the outdoors, and the arts because she enjoyed them. But something was missing in these pursuits. After her mother passed away, Ericson decided to use some of the money from her estate to do what she always wanted to do.

Ericson educated herself in the art of jewelry making at Metalwerx, Waltham, Massachusetts; Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine; MassArt, Boston, Massachusetts; and DeCordova Art Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

She had previously received a Master's degree in writing and publish-



PHOTO BY BETHANY ERICSON

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ing at Emerson College, a degree that is still useful to her today. Ericson finds that she often applies what she learned in writing and publishing to the art of jewelry making. "I think it took a while to find my niche. And my niche is a narrative thing." Her writing background comes into play with "things that I'm inspired by [as] I start to tell stories about to myself while I'm carving something," she said.

In the beginning, Ericson worked with a very talented and experienced jeweler who taught her the ways of jewelry making. "I mentored with a fantastic, inventive jeweler named Chris Ploof," she said. "I wasn't nearly ready to be super proficient assistant at the time he asked me to work for him. I didn't even have a place to work on my own jewelry yet."

Yet, Ericson was determined to learn from this master jewelry maker. "I love learning opportunities. For the first time in my life I negotiated the salary I was offered down. Some weeks I didn't even cash his checks. I was so frustrated with my limited abilities! I had come from being the top of my game in another career that I had channeled into freelance work.... It was a transition time for me. I am grateful that Chris was an excellent example for me of [a person with] serious drive and a commitment to high quality work," Ericson said.

Ericson and Ploof have very different work styles. While both artists are "creative problem-solvers," she acknowledged, "[Ploof] is a genius methodical, mechanical-type engineer."



Unlike her mentor, she finds herself inspired by strong emotion. "And I begin to channel it into my work while I'm carving, and the work becomes a story I am telling this way," she said.

An Ericson wedding ring has many steps to its creation process. "While I fabricate some pieces by sawing, bending, hammering, and/or piercing metal, I most often make a wedding ring by carving wax. I begin with a

thick tube of wax, and I saw off a piece of the tube that is the width of the ring I am making. I then ream the inside [of the wax tube] to be the finger size of the ring I am making. Then I start carving the wax with sharp tools made for that, some I've fabricated myself from old bike spokes, and dental tools. (My favorite tools are made by a fantastic wax carver in Maine and are labeled 'Caution: Wicked Sharp!') I most often work in a subtractive way, removing wax from my design, but wax also allows for additive work, and this helps me in particular designs as I can add on pieces as well. If there is a stone, I carve a setting for it," she explained.

Then Ericson creates a silicone or rubber mold of the wax model. The mold is partly made by Ericson herself and partly done by a jewelry

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caster. She uses an aluminum frame that has plexiglass sides stabilized by thick elastics. She makes a sprue¹, or a vertical channel in the mold where molten material is poured into, for her model made from wax. The molten material is poured in around the model, she said.

"When it hardens, it looks a bit like a cake of glycerin soap with something encased inside. I then pull off the frame and carefully cut open the mold so that it can be put back together like a sandwich, and I remove the model. The negative space, left by the sprue, is what allows a channel for pouring the casting material into the mold," she said.



PHOTO BY BETHANY ERICSON

She doesn't cast the silver or gold in her studio but sends the metals out to Boston or New York to do the process, as this requires skills and expertise that she has yet to acquire.

Next, Ericson has to saw or break off the metal sprue.

"Then I typically run my castings in a tumbler with ceramic pyramids which are at different levels of coarseness with a chemical solution that helps get rid of the little nubs and grit of the casting process. Later, I take the ring through various levels of sanding and polishing, do any patina work it requires, and then attempt to photograph it," she said.

Ericson really likes to work with the gold; but, since it is too expensive to work with regularly, she does so only on commission. So silver is the material that she usually works with.

She does a lot of customized work. "It depends on what people are looking for. In general, I think my aesthetic is kind of earthy, sometimes edgy. I'm very interested in the natural world, and I am a very texturally oriented person – I frequently shop for clothes by touch. In metal, the general lack of color makes texture and contrast extra important. I am inspired and amazed by so many textures I see in nature, as well as the contrast of nature surviving in gritty urban areas."

Why does Ericson make the weddings rings, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, etc.? "A lot of people think it's pretty cool, which is a nice feeling," she said. "And it's fun to see people wearing jewelry I made!"

And what do her clients think of her work? Obviously, they appreciate her jewelry-making talent. "I'm up for Best Jewelry in Cambridge in the *Cambridge Scout* magazine; I'll let you know how that goes," she said.



1 "sprue" def., *Encarta Dictionary*: English (North America), Microsoft Word 2010.