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*“When artists play with or subvert the idea of jewelry, they are playing with or subverting how we communicate.”—Sienna Patti*



STORY BY  
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## New Jewels: Taking Materials to Extremes

Constanze Schreiber designs collars and brooches shaped like classical fine jewelry but cut from fur and filled with lead. They sit on the chest with the weight of an animal because a mink coat, Schreiber says, takes the lives of 200 minks, which would weigh about 352 pounds. New York conceptual designer Tobias Wong makes flower brooches from bulletproof Kevlar. British artist Keren Cornelius winds 50 meters of linen thread thickly about the neck. And in London, Netherlands-born Greetje van Helmond “grows” cocktail rings in crystal-line clusters by saturating string in a liquid sugar solution.

This is jewelry?

Yes, this is jewelry.

Today’s studio jewelry is usually made in small series or as one-offs, the work of both artists and designers and still others who don’t draw any distinction. It reflects experimentation with forms and concepts, including the conventions surrounding how and why we wear it, as well as materials.



Opposite:  
**Constanze Schreiber**  
*Katharina*, 2005,  
 fur, lead, silver.

Above:  
**Karin Seufert**  
*Rings*, 2004,  
 silver, Colorit.

Right:  
**Adrienne Smelko**  
*Heavy Hearted*, 2007,  
 brass, hairnet,  
 elastic, nylon, adhesive,  
 Plasti Dip.



“While most of these jewelers have a background in traditional techniques and using precious materials, some of their most interesting work is done while using their skills to manipulate more modest materials,” says Mike Holmes, co-owner, with Elizabeth Shypertt, of the Velvet da Vinci gallery in San Francisco. A handful of U.S. institutions have been collecting jewelry for several decades, but recent developments like the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston’s recent acquisition of the dealer Helen Drutt’s collection suggest that it is on the ascent. New York’s Museum of Arts & Design also recently announced the appointment of Ursula Neuman as its first curator of contemporary jewelry—the first appointment of its kind in the country.

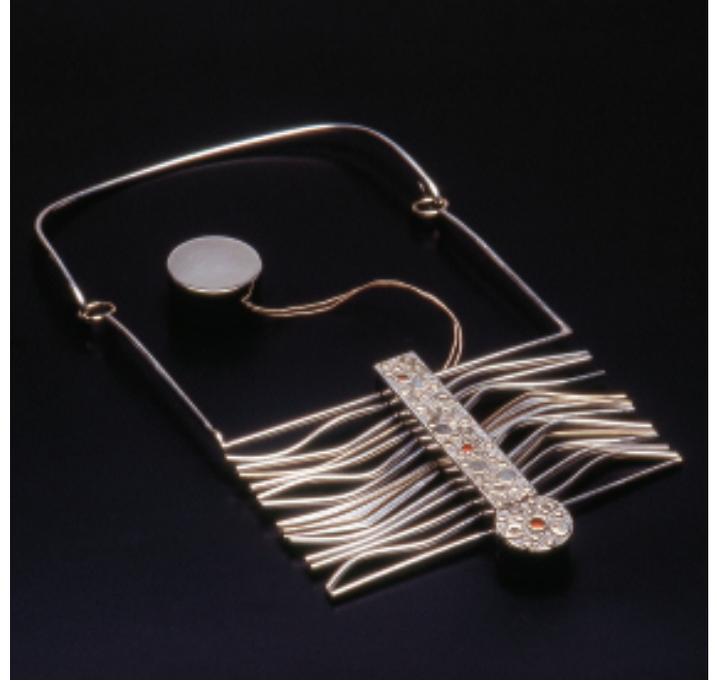
“In the U.S. this type of jewelry is being considered more and more as an art form. Initially, it was collected as a craft for its exquisite workmanship. Now it is viewed on a par with other art forms,” Neuman says. “The boundaries have been crossed.”

Neuman oversees a collection that includes pieces made from marshmallows, wrapping tissue for South African oranges and eggshell. The noted Dutch designer Ted Noten fills his acrylic handbags with revolvers, an ice pick, or a cut of beef. “Today the experimentation with materials, forms and concepts is really extreme,” says Karin Seufert, a Berlin artist. “I think this is due to all the new possibilities in techniques and materials and the vivid exchange of information over the Internet.” Seufert coats silver with a synthetic ceramic-plastic alloy called Colorit, to create a series of rings that are essentially an ongoing formal exercise. She uses the silver merely to give weight to each piece, she admits, “but I like the idea that only the wearer knows what is inside.”

Adrienne Smelko, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, did the opposite, taking something common—manufactured chain—and entangling it with Plasti Dip and hairnet, to create a weightily



Top Left:  
**Alexander Calder**  
*Necklace*, ca. 1943,  
silver wire, cord,  
ribbon.



Top Right:  
**Mary Ann Scherr**  
*Heart Monitor*, 1972,  
14k gold, sterling silver,  
fiber optics, electronics,  
light-emitting-diodes  
(LED), batteries.

Bottom:  
**Rebecca Hannon**  
*Camino*, 2006,  
cut rubber.



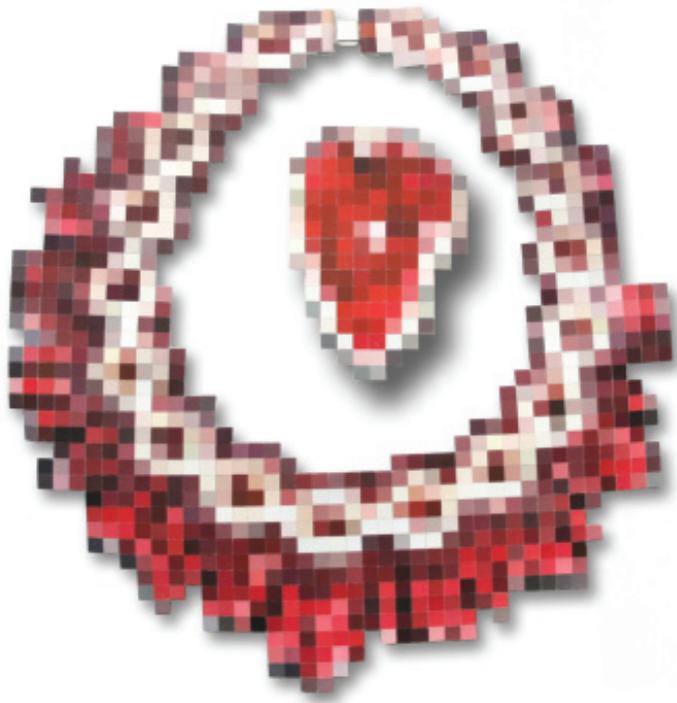
evocative necklace entitled *Heavy Hearted*. Sergey Jivetin, who shows his work at Jewelerswerk Galerie in Washington, D.C., makes featherweight necklaces using jewelers' saw blades—thread-thin lengths of thorny steel blade.

According to the North Carolina-based goldsmith and designer Mary Ann Scherr, new work is also being made with chemicals, rare space metals, Delft porcelain, bones, Pyrex and electronics. (Phillips Electronics has a concept for a shape-shifting tattoo.) Scherr herself has created functional work that also serves medical needs. Her Body Monitors are adornment capable of camouflaging tracheotomies, taking the pulse, reading air quality and monitoring the heart.

In the United States the studio jewelry movement began after World War II, following the creation of pieces by artists like Alexander Calder and Salvador Dalí (skull charm bracelet), and supported by university programs. During the 1960s,

experimentation deepened, particularly in the Netherlands, Germany and other parts of Europe. Since then, as materials science and technology have advanced, the means to play with ideas has multiplied. One might assume that art and design lovers would be drawn to the intellectual aspects and modern aesthetic of studio jewelry, but it is still struggling commercially. Why? Since so many successful products are collected as brands, suggests Stefan Freidemann, co-owner of Ornamentum Gallery in Hudson, New York, consumers don't have as much incentive to invest in a field that has not been similarly branded, instead sticking with DeBeers and Cartier. "But now that design is becoming the new status symbol," he says, "perhaps people will begin to see that jewelry can also reflect a certain enlightenment."

Underscoring jewelry's growing popularity since the 90s, industrial designers have also begun to create high-profile pieces, sometimes mass-producing them. Gijs



Top Left:  
**Mike and Maaïke**  
*Stolen Jewel*, 2007,  
printed and scored  
leather.

Top Right:  
**Kiel Mead**  
*Retainer*, 2006,  
cast silver and gold  
plated.

Bakker, co-founder of the Dutch design collective Droog, as well as a leading figure in progressive Dutch jewelry since the 1960s, excels in subverting people's ideas of what an object should be. Since 1995, he has drafted many outsiders into jewelry making through his Amsterdam-based foundation *Chi ha paura ...? (Who's Afraid of ... Contemporary Jewelry?)*. Sold at Velvet da Vinci, industrial designers Mike and Maaïke's *Stolen Jewels* series is made from low-resolution images of legendary jewelry downloaded from Google Images, blown up to a wearable scale (at which they are severely pixelated) and then printed on scored leather so that anyone (with \$600) can wear, say, Imelda Marcos's ruby necklace. The Brooklyn-based industrial designer Kiel Mead casts cast-off objects—his brother's old retainer, orphaned lights from a Christmas string—to enshrine nostalgia. Next year he will come out with a chewed-gum necklace in pink anodized aluminum. All of his pieces must be exact

casts. "The original form of these objects is exclusive and gives each its significance," explains Mead. "*Gum* and the *Retainer* are not only specific to an individual but also to precise moments. This is what endears objects to people. But the fact that I can't control what is significant to me is the ironic concept behind all of my pieces and all jewelry, in fact."

Ultimately, what distinguishes studio jewelry and its material exploits from traditional jewelry and other art forms "is its intimate relationship to people," says Sienna Patti, owner of Sienna Gallery in Lenox, Massachusetts. "We wear it—or think about wearing it—and therefore it becomes intrinsically personal in a way that few other forms of art do. When artists play with or subvert the idea of jewelry, they are really talking about playing with or subverting how we communicate," Patti says. "To think that these very large concepts are thought about and achieved through such small objects is amazing." ♦

#### **Gimme More!**

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