

Dorothy Erickson, Kinetic jewellery - interacting with light and land, interview

Kathryn Wells 19 April 2011

Abstract: Innovative multi-use or multi-placement jewellery that reacts to body movement is the hallmark of Dorothy Erickson, the first Western Australian (WA) born and trained craft jeweller to make it onto the international stage. From 1977-87, Erickson had thirteen solo exhibitions in Australia and Europe. As part of promoting the WA school of jewellery, Erickson formed the WA Jewellers Group and curated a series of national exhibitions. Craft Australia interviews Erickson about her influences, styles and techniques as well as the challenges in sustaining a contemporary independent jewellery practice in 2011.

Interview with Dorothy Erickson, Craft jeweller and designer

Background

Dorothy Erickson's jewellery is found in major collections such as the Schmuckmuseum in Pforzheim, Germany, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) and Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) as well as in private collections round the world.

Erickson, is the first Western Australian born and trained artist-jeweller to make it onto the international stage. Her unique work, described in 1987 as 'visually dramatic yet stunningly elegant'¹ is the result of a long and irregular training in art. An enthusiast for broad based development in the arts, Erickson came to jewellery making as a second career and has also contributed via writing, curatorship, research and teaching.²

Erickson's series of body piece works, described as multi-use or multi-placement jewellery, combining gold and stainless steel cable, won awards in 1986, were presented as part of the ABC, *Body* series in 1990 and shown in Japan in 1993. The pieces *Peacock II* and *Golden Birds of Paradise* were shown at the Galerie in the Palais, Vienna in 1990 and were used in the poster for an early CINAPE, Chicago International New Art Forms Exposition, in 1992.

Fred Stewart commented on this work

Employing this linear material with immense creativity and finesse, Dorothy exploited its essential characteristic of flexibility with imagination by gathering the gracefully looping cables and holding them in place with gold accentuated clasps... sensuous curving jewellery-forms with stunning and dramatic kinetic energy.³

The *Seashore Collection* created in the 1990s through to 2000 forsook the pared back elegance of the former work and focused instead on minutely detailed shells. The pieces used 18 carat gold paired with semi-precious and precious stones albeit attached to tensile stainless steel cable. This collection was

described as having an articulation and expressiveness that made them "enticing, ebullient and imaginatively evoking breaking waves, ripples".

Margaret Moore described her work thus:

Erickson's jewellery is an amalgamation of technical adventurousness with the development of an artistic vocabulary derived from personal observations and research, as well as experience in working in both two and three dimensions. Her pursuit of jewellery that operates in unison with the body endures and gives her work an articulation and expressiveness that belies the inert nature of the material object.⁴

Erickson is currently organising book launch tour and exhibition of some of the contemporary jewellers featured in *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia, A History*, to be shown as the exhibition *Cinderella's Stories*, in Canberra, Sydney and London, as part of London Design Festival in September 2011.

Craft Australia interviewed Dorothy Erickson from her studio in Perth, Western Australia, about her influences, styles and techniques as well as the challenges in sustaining a contemporary independent jewellery practice in 2011.

CA: What were your early influences and circumstances which led you to a craft practice jewellery?

Dorothy Erickson:

I was a country girl, daughter of artist and author, the naturalist and historian Rica Erickson. After boarding school I became a botanical researcher and teacher. I am an inveterate researcher. In 1962 I went to live and work in the United Kingdom and Europe where I was able to continue researching and see the established Design Centres.

When I returned; I enrolled in an Art Associateship course at the newly established Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) in 1969. I trained at night at WAIT while teaching in the day time. I studied jewellery under Francis Gill and various trade jewellers in Perth. It was a four year Associateship course with painting, printmaking, drawing, design and design history. I graduated with a major in jewellery silver smithing. It was a very busy time. I would on occasion nip out from school teaching at lunch time to give a lecture at WAIT, then it was straight back to WAIT classes after school and, after that, preparing the lessons for my next day as a teacher.

I undertook postgraduate work in 1975 with David Walker who had trained in Manchester in silver smithing and ceramics. He had undertaken post graduate work before coming to Australia in 1964 where he worked as a graphic designer and design lecturer. Then he headed up a new Craft Major course at WAIT in 1974 and was an art critic and craft writer.

I was offered me a post graduate scholarship which enabled me to resign from the Education Department in 1976. I became the first Resident Craftsman at WAIT in the 3D Design/ jewellery and silver smithing department as well as writing and lecturing. In 1980 when David Walker was overseas I ran the course. The WAIT students included Gillian Rainer (née Cock), Brenda Ridgewell, Jacquie Sprogoe, Carlier Makigawa, Diana Anderson and Felicity Peters as well as others who are no longer primarily jewellers: Ingrid Kellenbach (now an arts administrator), and twins Jeanette and Cheryl Kettle. By 1980, I had set up my own studio at home and had had three solo exhibitions, with two scheduled for that year.

CA: You started exhibiting widely in the late 1970s, including overseas in the 1980s and 1990s. What led to such a rapid succession of exhibitions?

Dorothy Erickson:

The late 1970s was an intensely creative period. My first solo exhibition was in 1976. I showed 142 pieces at the Fine Art Gallery in Adelaide Terrace. This was attended by James Mollison, the director of the then Australian National Gallery (later the NGA) who invited me to make a body of work for the national collection. There was a focus and a great interest in contemporary crafts at this time. About seven hundred people attended the opening.

My second solo exhibition was at the newly opened Maker's Mark Gallery in Melbourne in 1977. I was invited to be the first artist-in-residence at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and went on to exhibit at Greenhill and Bonython in Adelaide and Robin Gibson in Sydney.

The exhibitions were helped by having articles about my work published in the Craft Council of Australia magazine *Craft Australia*. Subsequently the Craft Council developed a slide kit - using the wonderful professional photographs by Roger Garwood I had commissioned for the first exhibition. The kit was hired out to schools and colleges all round Australia giving me credibility.

It wasn't all beer and skittles however. In 1977, the potter Bernard Sahm was asked to select for a national craft exhibition. Sahm didn't bother to come to WA as he stated that there was nothing to see. This made Western Australian craftspeople angry.

In response to this exclusion from a national exhibition, in 1978, I organized the touring exhibition *From the West* showcasing the work of eleven WA jewellers. On the basis of a \$500 grant I obtained, a small catalogue was printed. This show travelled everywhere: Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Darwin, Brisbane, Tasmania and Launceston. The whole show went in a plastic Qantas briefcase and each gallery agreed to post it to the next one. It toured for eighteen months in 1979-80.

In 1979 I had the opportunity of attending a sculpture workshop in Noojee Victoria, led by the German sculptor/ jeweller Claus Bury at which the film *Sculptures in the Landscape* was made. Subsequent to the Noojee workshops, I was the artist-in-residence at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). It was there I worked on the models of many of the pieces which are now in public galleries. However, I could not do any final work as there was no micro-weld " my usual sophisticated soldering equipment which allows one to concentrate on soldering fine sections without annealing them.

I developed the final "Strings" and "Noojee" works at home with the "Sunrise", and "Sunset" series. An Australia Council grant in 1982 resulted in the *Pilbara* collection. These three series attracted attention from critics who focused on my "experimental utilization of unusual materials" such as Western Australian coloured rocks: mookaite, tiger iron and chrysoprase.

In 1980 I attended the conference of jewelers at Mittagong where it was decided to form a national body known as the Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia (JMGA). I was co-opted to the national secretariat for four years and the WA Jewellers Group which I had formed in 1978 became the WA Chapter of the JMGA. . The previous year I had become President of the Crafts Council of Western Australia, organizing many traveling exhibitions to promote local craftspeople and acquiring new premises.

CA: What of your main influences at this time?

Dorothy Erickson:

I was very much influenced by the example of Wendy Ramshaw and other international jewellers I met during regular travels to Europe as well as the constant interaction with international visitors. The visits were supported by various bodies such as the Australia Council, Craft Council of Australia, Goethe Foundation and WAIT.

The visitors gave me the opportunity to come into contact with the inspirational jewelers: Claus Bury, Herman Junger and Rex Keogh. Claus Bury, as mentioned, led the Noojee workshops. Hermann Junger exerted a strong influence on the development of contemporary jewelry. Keogh was an art teacher, jeweller and sculptor, who was at the Melbourne State College, making refined jewellery about Australian place in an iconic fashion.

Because our population is so small, Western Australians have always had to have a global outlook and it seemed natural to expect to be part of the world stage. Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins came out to WAIT in 1978 for six months at my invitation. Both Ramshaw and Watkins are iconic jewellers and they had a profound influence on the students. Wendy has been my role model.

People such as Wendy Ramshaw, Erika Leitner and Rex Keogh have opened doors for me. Through Erika Leitner I was the first Australian to have an exhibition at the famous Viennese Galerie am Graben in 1983. The Galerie am Graben only held six exhibitions each year. Wendy and David had exhibited there in 1980. Overseas galleries began to be interested in Australian jewellers.

Because of this help, I like to open doors for other people and organize exhibitions such as *From the West, Jewellery from the West and Australian Jewellery to Europe*, as well as the current exhibition I am developing, *Cinderella's Stories: Contemporary Jewellery from Western Australia*.

CA: Can you describe your approach to the styles that you developed in the 1970s and 1980s?

Dorothy Erickson:

These early pieces were based on colour and form / landscape and geometry and were possible because of a micro-weld brought out from England by Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins in 1978. There were only two micro-welds in Australia at the time – and the other was in a commercial jeweller's workshop in Sydney. I also had a Myford lathe like Wendy and David's.

The subjects which I used to develop into various themes were mainly derived from the views seen from the terrace of my home. I lived in a beautiful location tucked into the edge of Kings Park looking over the city and across Perth Water. I could see the city landscape one way and down the Canning River another. Golden sunrises over the Darling Escarpment could be seen through the branches of gum trees beyond my bathroom window. Coming home from WAIT I saw gloriously coloured sunsets through the pines and across the river as I drove.

I was exploring various techniques with married metals, (the pieces held at QAG, AGSA and AGWA), stone carving and binding with enamelled copper wires, (those pieces are held at the AGWA and NGA). I was teaching so I was trying everything as well as wanting to do something different technically. I explored polishing slivers of local rock, mostly mookaite and set them in frames using rivets (held at the NGA, Schmuckmuseum and the V&A).

I was also making multi-part works: neckpieces with brooches which could be attached to person or to the neck ring. They hung off the wearer and could swing. These works engaged the owner in multi-placement and used the body as moving canvas as the two pieces interacted with movement. The person became part of the artwork.

I must not forget Australia Council grants, which allowed me to explore the rugged north west of Western Australia. This trip provided the impetus for the Pilbara collection which I exhibited in Vienna in 1983. A later grant led to the *Australian Littoral* and *Sea Shore* collections exploring kinetic movement that were also exhibited internationally. Time to just research and concentrate on new work is very important in the development of new collections but often difficult for a self-employed person to schedule.

CA: Your series of body piece works, combining gold and stainless steel cable, are viewed as classic undated pieces by many critics. Can you tell us about the inspiration for this series of body piece works and how you developed the techniques you adopted?

Dorothy Erickson:

At the World Craft Council conference in 1980 in Vienna I saw the material, steel cable, for the first time. It had been used in a piece on display by Wilhelm Mattar. So I eventually went to Cologne, Germany to see him and obtain supplies. He directed me to a shop, a fishing shop, where I could get the steel cable, which was fishing line. I bought rolls of this.

This gave me new material to work with which I developed as multi-purpose works. I like multipurpose works. *Into Orbit* in the Launceston gallery was part of that series, mixing inlaid metal brooches with looped wire as detachable catches.

Sadly it was also the time of the breakup of my marriage. Moving to a new home in Cottesloe with my cats I met the resident Willy Wagtails in the garden. They intrigued me and I tried to catch their jaunty movement in the pieces as well as making pieces to bell the cat. "Pussy Cat Pussy Cat"™ was sold to a young Japanese person. The large wire pieces sold very well in Japan where they were used for party wear - not everyday wear.

Humour was returning to my life. I like kinetic jewellery. This formed the basis of "The Birds"™ series that included the *Birds of Paradise* and *Peacock*. The latter piece was used in the poster for an early CINAPE, Chicago International New Art Forms Exposition, in 1992.

That morphed into the *Kimberly* collection with the *The Brolgas* - two part brooches which could be positioned many ways on the chest. When a woman wears high heels, the pieces move in a bouncy fashion over the body and when she wears low heels there is a slower more sensuous movement. When I wear one, passers-by stop me all the time to say how much they enjoy it.

CA: The *Seashore Collection* created in the 1990s through to 2000 focused on minutely detailed shells, albeit attached to tensile stainless steel cable. The pieces used 18 carat gold paired with semi-precious and precious stones, something which is somewhat unusual in contemporary crafted jewellery. What led you to develop the *Seashore Collection*?

Dorothy Erickson:

The *Kimberley* series morphed into the *Seashore* series of the 1990s. I tried to capture the movement of anemones under water in an aquarium in a local seaside restaurant. I was searching for a way to get texture into the pieces. I wanted to introduce a trembling motion to evoke the movement of underwater life.

This coincided with a series of health complaints, all of which were somewhat incapacitating. At that point in my work I felt I needed more colour and possibly more saleable items. There are only a few people in Australia inclined to purchase the sparer work. Also I needed some work that photographed well stationary, rather than my more usual kinetic work as I wanted to apply for a new work grant from the Australia Council. The *Klimt* collection was the result.

The sudden availability of small square-cut multi-coloured sapphires led to my *Homage to Klimt* collection. I was seduced by the rainbow of colours and the light which emanated from them. The fact that the new work sold very well also encouraged me to make more.

I have found that financial support to just explore is not only beneficial but essential. The Australia Council grant enabled me to do more of the *Seashore* series and develop the *Klimt* work and exhibit these internationally. I am still exploring these themes.

CA: What are some of the main challenges that you have faced in maintaining an independent contemporary jewellery studio practice since 1980?

Dorothy Erickson:

The main challenges are:

- fluctuating economic cycles - jewellery is a luxury item and the first thing that goes out of people's expenditure.
- the lack of either a promotional agent or galleries which run stables. This is common practice for visual artists but less so for crafts people
- personal challenges such as illness, which has meant I missed out on being in some of the major exhibitions in the late 1980s and 90s as I was unable to do any work.

I have had time out from the studio in recent years working on my house, completing my Doctorate, and attending to the affairs of my late mother as well as the publishing my book, *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History* after 15 years with the publisher!

The ABC TV series *The Makers* challenged me and so I thought I would try again to work. I found I could do quite a lot even if my fine skills were not what they had been.

It has become necessary to have my ex-lecturer Trevor Merhtens make many of the more delicate pieces while I concentrate on the more experimental works. We work collaboratively. I still do the final texturing or on occasion stone setting and burnishing, as is possible at the time.

CA: How would you define sustainability for jewellery practice?

Dorothy Erickson:

In summary, you could say there are a number of aspects to sustaining a jewellery practice: exhibition practice, and possibly, production; publicity and promotion; and finally, presentation.

In regard to practice, in addition to exhibition work, it is necessary to be adaptable and have several strings to your bow:

- Most people use a production line or make cheaper works. I have tried this with my *Pilbara* collection in

the 1980s. The stones were cut in Germany but, at minimum 50 lots to purchase of each design at a time and with fluctuating exchange rates, I gave that up.

Many of the major names in Australia jewellery have had their jeweler practice sustained by a teaching salary but I have not had this since leaving WAIT in 1980. Since then, I have used alternative occupations for when there has been a down turn in the economy:

- a design practice which on occasion I resurrect to design gardens or interiors
- a heritage consultancy which does conservation plans and historical research
- writing about Western Australian crafts but, that is not lucrative and in fact in recent years, the heritage and jewellery have subsidized the writing.

Publicity and promotion are essential. Unfortunately in Australia we have very few agent galleries who promote jewellery artists. This is different to the visual arts.

I have learnt that presentation is important. For *Jewellery from the West*, Rex Keogh had a film made of the models wearing the jewellery which was then shown in the gallery when the jewellery was in the showcases. Music was composed for *Jewellery from Western Australia in 1980*. I also made a continuous loop powerpoint presentation for my solo in the National Fine Arts Museum in Malta in 2005 and make myself available for radio and TV interviews

One of the reasons work sold well in Japan was how they were presented. Some Japanese shows were promoted by Austrade as part of their promotion of Australian trade and craft jewellers. I showed in the *Japanese Jewellery Biennial* in 1993 and *Artistic Australia* in Japan 1997-2000. *Artistic Australia* had thirty or forty exhibitions. It was exciting. The promoter who dressed the stars for television shows used big runways with models wearing the jewellery which was sold to people in the audience.

I have made more of these kinetic pieces but as they don't look good displayed flat, I have made Perspex stands so that the pieces can be draped gracefully - becoming small sculptures.

CA: What is on the horizon for Dorothy Erickson in 2011?

Dorothy Erickson:

With my major income disappearing in the global financial crisis when luxury items were the first to go and with Maker's Mark galleries in Sydney and Melbourne going to the wall, Katherine Kalaf in Perth closing as well as a number of overseas outlets; I have been concentrating on searching for new galleries in Australia and overseas to sell my works.

I have had time out from the studio in recent years working on my house and attending to the affairs of my late mother as well as the publishing of my book, *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History - 15 years with the publisher!* I have a second book ready for publication, *Design in Western Australia 1839 -1970* which needs a publisher.

I have organized a book launch tour with exhibitions and lectures featuring some of the jewellers in the last chapter of my book, to shown as the exhibition *Cinderella's Stories*, in Canberra, Sydney and in London, where it is part of Design Week in September 2011.

I plan on attending *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor* at Gallery Artisan in Brisbane which runs from September to

November 2011 . The exhibition will showcase one hundred of Australia's women jewellers responding to one hundred stories of Australian women in commemoration of the centenary of International Women's Day. For this I selected the women to be honoured and am currently finishing the catalogue essay.

In terms of my practice, creating pieces for exhibition work, I am starting to experiment with new work based on linkages for solo exhibitions in Brisbane, Vienna and hopefully Ljubljana in 2012. I am exploring the linkages between my gold miner grandfather (paternal), my botanist mother and her grandmother, a midwife on the goldfields and even perhaps her mother, an hotelier on the Victorian goldfields. I am not sure how it will develop yet.

Physical linkages are the current conundrum. I am still designing and experimenting when I get time. I would like to come up with some really interesting new work which could earn me a grant or a fellowship. I am starting again to create some of these pieces.

Funding support will allow me to undertake more serious exploration of what technology is available to assist in production. Rather than the cable and Milanese mesh that I currently use, I would like to use this time to experiment with fine steel mesh, and laser-cut sheet steel as well as with the gold and the precious stones.

Kathryn Wells, Communications Manager, Craft Australia, April 2011

Related Links

Jewellers

- [Claus Bury](#), jeweller and architect
- Claus Bury, [Brooch, 1972](#), 18 karat yellow gold, colored acrylic glass
- Rex Keogh, [Pendant](#), Exhibition - Australian Jewellers 1976
- [Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins](#)

- [Hermann Junger - The Jeweled Meadow](#) by Ursula Ilse Neuman [Metalsmith Magazine - Winter 2002]
- [Wilhelm Matta](#)
- Graham Hughes, David Watkins Wendy Ramshaw: A Life's Partnership, [a review](#) by Judith Bumpus

Galleries

- [Art Gallery of Western Australia](#)
- [Art Gallery of South Australia](#)
- [National Gallery of Australia](#)
- [Queensland Art Gallery](#)
- [Schmuckmuseum](#) in Pforzheim, Germany
- [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) , London

References

- Fred Stewart, Dorothy Erickson the many faceted Australian Jeweller, *Craftwest* 1992/2 pp. 20-24
- Lockwood, Ken. "Four Goldsmiths", *Craft Arts* 10 (1987), p. 103.
- Margaret Moore in "A Lightness of Touch", *Craft Arts International* no 45, (1999) pp. 42-46.

- Anderson, Patricia. *Contemporary Jewellery: The Australian Experience 1977-1987*, p. 37.
- Dorothy Erickson jetset jeweller", *Artlink* vol 18 no 4 (1998) pp. 62-63.

Footnotes

1. Ken Lockwood, 'Four Goldsmiths', *Craft Arts* 10 (1987), p. 103. 2. Margaret Moore in 'A Lightness of Touch' *Craft Arts International* no 45, (1999) pp. 42-46. 3. Fred Stewart, "Dorothy Erickson - the many faceted Western Australian jeweller" in *Craft West* 1999/2 4. Margaret Moore in 'A Lightness of Touch', *Craft Arts International* no 45, (1999) pp. 42-46.

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