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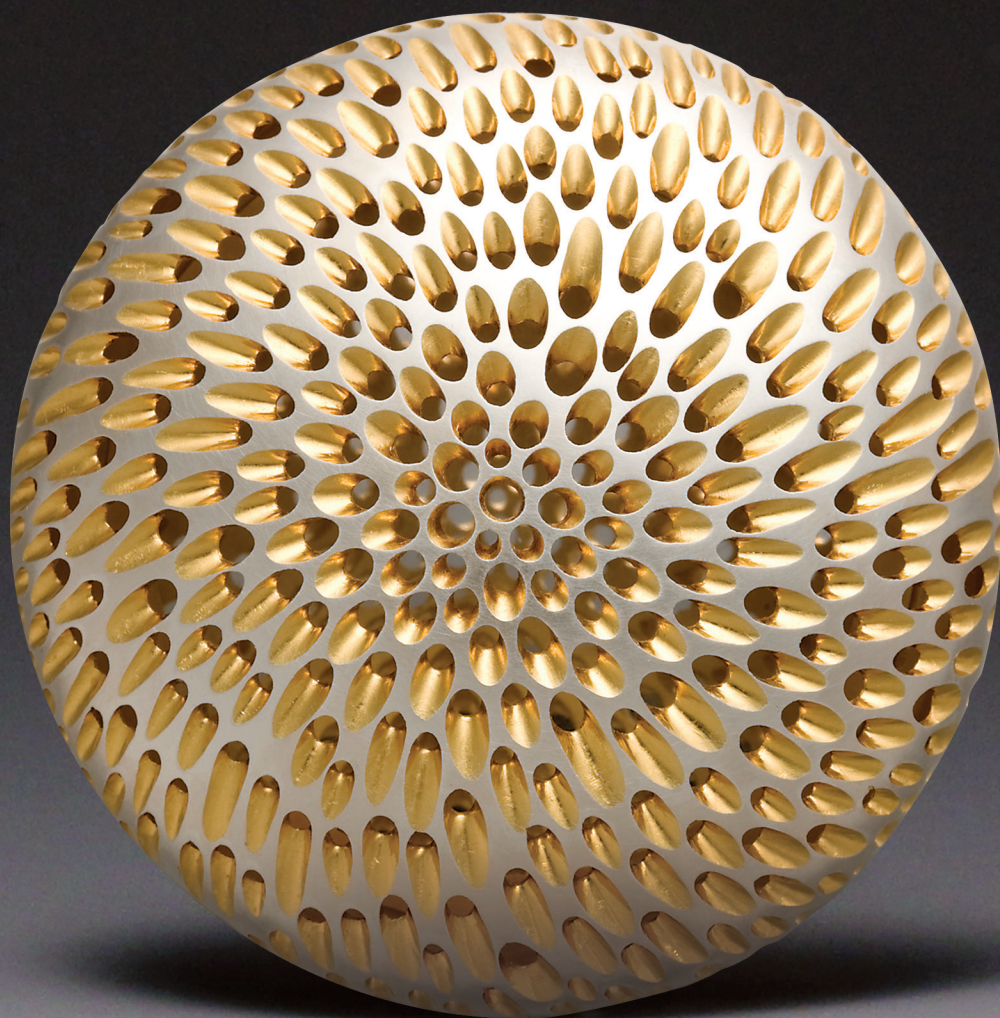
ORNAMENT

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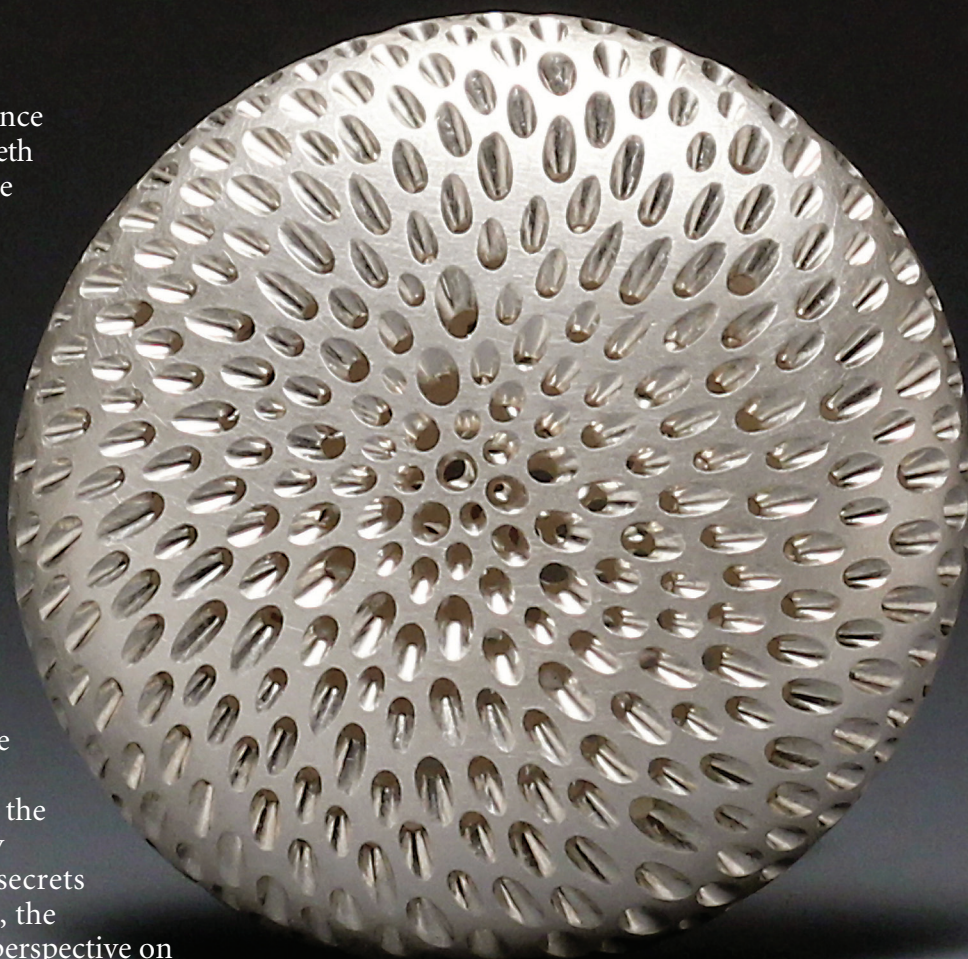


Heather Bayless

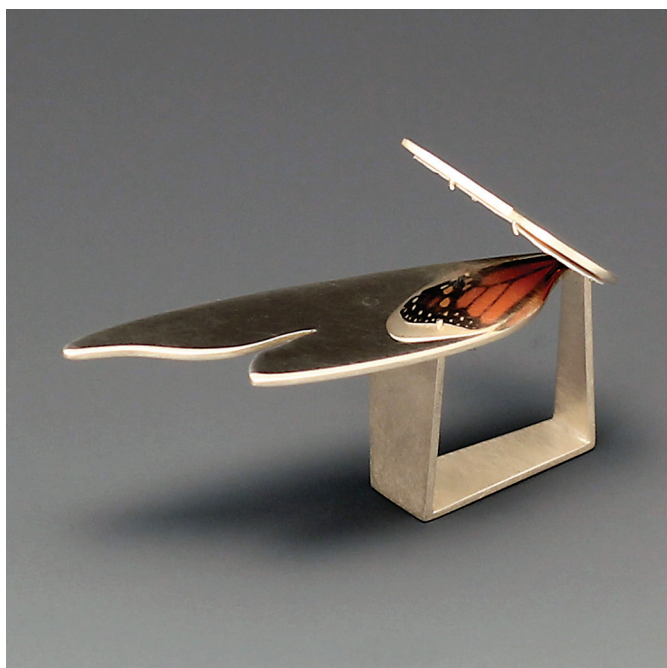
Nature Refined

Glen R. Brown

Discoveries in genetics since the middle of the twentieth century have drawn the imagination so compellingly toward the secrets of the microscopic that nature as it appears to the naked eye may in contrast seem almost devoid of mystery. We can scarcely imagine a time, except in the ignorance of childhood, when the sudden appearance of migratory animals, the turning of leaves or the growth of seedlings was inexplicable and wondrous. Today, it is generally taken for granted that the inquisitive attentions of science have long since answered the most difficult questions about the visible world and are rapidly closing in on the last elusive secrets of the invisible. Consequently, the recovery of a naïve vision—a perspective on nature that hearkens back to the simplicity of



After all, as Bayless observes, “the whole point of jewelry is to attract attention, to get someone to look at it and enjoy it.”



TUDINEM VITAE (two views) of sterling silver, photograph; handfabricated, 3 x 5 x 2 centimeters, 2010. *Photograph by the artist. Opposite page: HEATHER BAYLESS wears her SPOTTED RING of sterling silver; cast, handfabricated, 4 x 4 x 3 centimeters, 2008. Photographs by Kwang Choon Park, except where noted. LOOK AND SEE VI of fine silver and sterling silver; cast, handpolished, handfabricated, 5 x 5 x 2 centimeters, 2009. Photograph by the artist.*

childhood and the raw experience of early humankind—is today perhaps a greater artistic challenge than at any time since the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge discerned the “character and privilege of genius” in an ability to reinvest the world of daily experience with “the child’s sense of wonder and novelty.”

For metalsmith and jeweler Heather Bayless, a reinvestment of wonder in nature is an obvious goal, though, in her case, childlike vision is a complicated metaphor. “I grew up in the middle of nowhere in Upstate New York,” she explains. “My dad was a scientist, and every weekend he’d say, ‘Let’s go for a hike up the hill!’ He’d show us different types of trees, lichens and other things, and we’d make spore prints from wild mushrooms. If you take a mushroom that’s opened up and set it over a piece of paper, the spores drop out and make an image.” From the spirit of scientific inquiry and the insatiable curiosity of a child, memories formed that would, years later, enrich Bayless’s art. The transition from student work to her first important series hinged on the mushroom as a form and the spore print as an indication of the mushroom’s complexity as an organism. The alluring visual and tactile properties of the mushroom—in particular, the smoothness of its rounded dome—and the knowledge of its reproductive process combined to suggest the aptness of a mushroom-shaped spice shaker in the lustrous medium of sterling silver.

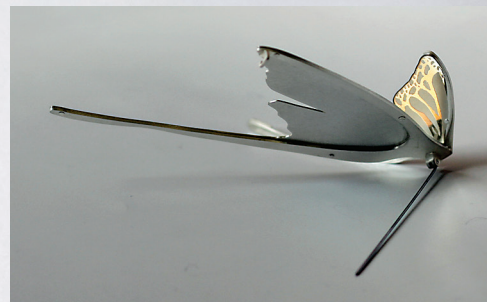
This key object, a talisman for her future work, was made while Bayless was completing her Master of Fine Arts degree at

Kookmin University in Seoul, Korea. The path from a small, rural community in Upstate New York to one of the largest cities in Asia had led her through Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in metalwork in 2003. In that year, she was chosen as one of two undergraduates and four graduate students to accompany professor Susan Ewing to Korea for field study. “We visited Kookmin University,” Bayless remembers, “and I was impressed by their facilities and their student work. I had always wanted to study abroad, so I enrolled as a graduate student in 2004.” In her second year, she received a Fulbright Research Grant, which added incentive to explore her own directions in metalwork while taking advantage of the excellent facilities at Kookmin. Even after completing her degree in 2007, she remained affiliated with the university as a researcher in the Institute of Environmental Design. In 2009, she began teaching at two other universities in Seoul.

The relentless bustle, choking fumes and endless cacophony of a city of over two million people wore on the nerves of the small-town native, and Bayless was constantly thankful for the location of Kookmin University not only on the outskirts of Seoul but near the pine forests and granite peaks of Bukhansan National Park as well. “My house was very close to the university, and the university is literally on the edge of the park,” she recalls. “It was good to go there to hike and look for inspiration.” No doubt the forest trails brought back memories of youth



SPOTTED RINGS cufflinks of oxidized sterling silver, twenty-four karat gold plating; cast, handfabricated, plated, 4 x 3 x 3 centimeters each, 2008.



FUGA PHANTASMA of sterling silver; handpolished, sandblasted, handfabricated, 7 x 11 x 3 centimeters, 2010. Photograph by the artist. Left: SPOTTED PENDANT II of fine silver, sterling silver, enamel; cast, *plique-à-jour*, 2 x 4 x 4 centimeters, 2008.

and played a significant role in directing her work toward natural plant forms such as cattails, bulbs and, most important, mushrooms. The Spore Shaker of 2006, blending early recollections with the joys of rediscovered nature on the edge of a sprawling metropolis, seemed to embody for Bayless the recuperative, inspirational capacity of art and to define an advantageous direction for her work. In 2008 her first significant explorations of jewelry took the form of two sterling brooches, Gills and Pomander of Gills, that resembled the undersides of mushroom caps.

Of these groundbreaking pieces, the pomander brooch would prove the most significant, because it carried into the realm of jewelry the concept of container that had been crucial to the Spore Shaker. As Bayless explored the mushroom shape and recalled how it had once been associated in her mind with mysterious hidden contents, she began to abstract an image that would define a new series evocative of natural forms, curiosity and discovery. Instructively titled Look and See, the series consists of hollow, domed brooches and pendants, porous with radiating patterns of holes that provide glimpses into the

protected interiors. Some of the brooches, fitted with hinges and clasps, are potential pomanders or locket, but others seem to guard their secrets more assiduously, incorporating mirrors in their interiors so that an enquiring gaze toward the contents is always reflected partially outward onto the infinitude of the exterior world. Seeing, in those cases, is a kaleidoscopic experience of light, reflection and illusion.

While mirrors add a small element of drama and unpredictability to the Look and See pieces, a more prominent visual element is the silver of which the pendants and brooches are primarily composed. Bayless, who professes an “addiction” to silver, has used her Look and See series as a means of exploring both a wide range of procedures through which the metal can be worked and the great variety of visual effects that may result. Some surfaces are polished to a gleaming white, while others are left a soft, matte gray. Some are lustrous with gold plating or exploit a dark firescale to produce contrasts with areas of shining silver. This attractive effect is achieved by plating the pieces with a coating of fine silver then sanding the domed surface down to the level of the firescale while leaving

UNUM MOTUM of stainless steel, sterling silver, photograph, resin; handfabricated, 7.5 x 10 x 3 centimeters, 2011. Photograph by the artist.

the smooth interiors of the holes bright. Some of the Look and See pieces are soldered, but many others rely on cold connection techniques to join the parts. Some of the brooches and pendants are fabricated, while others are made by casting.

The latter process is especially appealing to Bayless, who took note of the precision and efficiency of the metalsmiths of Seoul and was impressed by their ability to cast a variety of objects on short order. "In a certain part of the city," she remembers, "there were workshops where you could drop something off for casting and pick it up, literally, the next day." She became particularly interested in the vacuum casting technique employed in those workshops and now emphasizes the greater consistency and safety of that technique in the classes that she teaches in her current position as adjunct instructor at Kansas State University. In her own recent work, she has employed vacuum casting most extensively in an offshoot of the Look and See series that she calls the Spotted Rings and Pendants. These pieces incorporate hollow, cast forms—less mushroom domes than wheel shapes—that are pierced in radiating patterns of holes like their precursors in the Look and See series. Although they do not contain mirrors, the Spotted Rings and Pendants do invite close inspection and offer intimate views of light and dark



dynamics to anyone peering into their interiors.

Conceived as much in relation to acorn caps and chrysanthemum blooms as to the domes of mushrooms, the Spotted Rings and Pendants elicit strong impressions of natural form, despite their metallic surfaces. In some cases, they have been enhanced with natural colors, enamels in various hues of green and brown, through the surface-tension version of the *plique-a-jour* technique. When she began applying enamels to her works late in 2008, Bayless filled all of their holes, producing subtle arrangements of color but entirely closing off the interiors of the hollow forms. Although the appearance that this created was akin to the variegated markings—the natural camouflage—on mushrooms and other organisms, she ultimately missed the views of the interiors and the sense of mystery that they generated. Consequently, in subsequent works she has typically filled only some of the holes, relying for visual complexity on the relationships between interior and exterior, surface and depth, color and *chiaroscuro*.

The Look and See and the Spotted Rings and Pendants series have been ongoing since 2008, but when Bayless arrived in Kansas in 2010 the change of scenery and the proximity of wildlife inspired a new body of work: *Viatoribus Viae*. Although this Latin title, suggestive of genus and species, intentionally conjures a scientific taxonomy, the words actually refer to a path of travel. "We had just moved here," Bayless recalls, "and the Monarch

LOOK AND SEE I and II of sterling silver, mirror; cast, handfabricated, oxidized, 4.5 x 4.5 x 2 centimeters each, 2008.



POMANDER OF GILLS of sterling silver; raised, handfabricated, 5.5 x 5.5 x 1.5 centimeters, 2008.





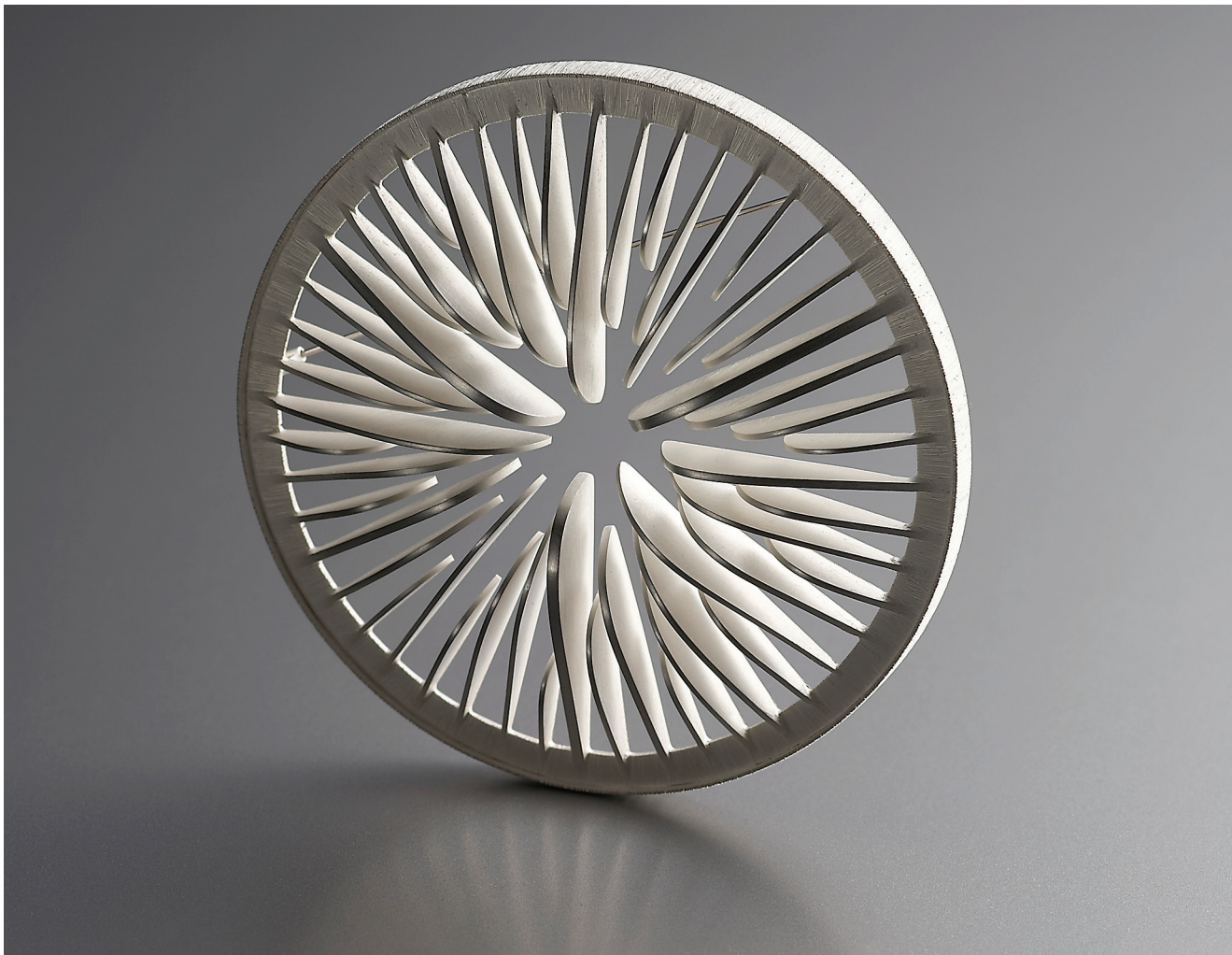
SPOTTED NECKLACE of fine silver, sterling silver, enamel; cast, plique-à-jour, 4 x 4 x 1.5 centimeters, 2008.

butterflies were coming through in the fall. One of my friends mentioned that she and her dog had stirred up a bunch of butterflies out in the woods on a walk. So, I started thinking about migration and instinct.” Particularly intrigued by the Monarch’s clustering behavior, Bayless conceived of a series that might combine the mysteries of migratory activity with the kinds of visual surprises that her Look and See works incorporated. The result was the first of an ongoing series of brooches that blend digital-photographs with reflective surfaces to create anamorphic images: depictions of Monarch butterflies that open into their full potential only when viewed from a certain perspective.

Desiring to incorporate the vibrant orange, black and white color scheme of Monarch wings into her Viatoribus Viae series but unwilling to sacrifice the lives of insects for her art, Bayless relied on photography to capture what she sought. “I was lucky to be at a research university,” she says. “I took a camera over to Kansas State’s insect zoo, and they pulled out some specimens of Monarch butterflies for me.” The resulting images of wings have been used multiple times in the series. After sizing them in Photoshop and printing them on photographic paper, Bayless carefully cuts them out by hand, glues them onto the metal planes of her brooches and seals them with an attractive convex coating of clear resin. Rather than silver, the




SPOTTED RING of fine silver, sterling silver, enamel; cast, handfabricated, plique-à-jour, 9 x 4 x 4 centimeters, 2010.
Photograph by the artist.



GILLS of sterling silver; handfabricated, 5.5 x 5.5 x 1 centimeters, 2006.

metal she prefers for the Viatoribus Viae brooches is stainless steel, which she cuts from flat sheets that have been rolled without directional lines so as to retain mirror-like surfaces. The reflective property is crucial, since Bayless only incorporates images of single wings and relies on the shiny metal to complete the pair through illusion. Attached at right angles, one of two planes carries the photograph while the other serves as the mirror.

Due to the shifting nature of its imagery—the flashes of color and the expansion and contraction of reflections as the brooches respond to their wearers' movements—the Viatoribus Viae works might be aptly described as kinetic jewelry, despite possessing no moving parts. The brooches, in other words, can be fully experienced only when they are in motion. An obvious parallel (and one no doubt deliberately cultivated by the artist) could be made to the living insects that the brooches represent. Rather than isolating the formal beauty of the Monarch's wings through aesthetic abstraction, Bayless has conceived of a solution to the difficult problem of implying the living

essence of the Monarch, something more akin to energy than to a material element. It is, of course, no coincidence that both beauty and fascination of discovery characterize the illusion of vitality generated and sustained by the Viatoribus Viae series. The same traits are reflected in the Look and See series and Spotted Rings and Brooches. After all, as Bayless observes, "the whole point of jewelry is to attract attention, to get someone to look at it and enjoy it." 

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SUGGESTED READING

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