

Unique Designs of Jewelry and Sculpture.

Judith van Praag

She can't show much of her old work, "everything always sold". Sandy Lew-Hailer's never been one to document her creations well, but a wall of her studio is graced by a newspaper review showing the large photograph of a playful necklace; abstract shapes dancing around the wearer's neck. A page in Seattle Magazine (2001) shows "The Universal Nest", a lofty sculptural center piece, that she was commissioned to create by Carlo and Lalie Scandiuzzi, for above their dining room table. Not unlike the intricacy of a bird's nest or a spider web, the airy wire construction diffuses the light of inset ceiling fixtures.

Lew-Hailer was a design student at UC Berkeley and started her jewelry business in 1971. In 1979, when their daughter was two years old, Sandy and her husband moved to Seattle, where their son was born. While the children were small Sandy made her jewelry during school hours and between soccer practice and bed time. She worked from her home, in a backyard studio, happily casting gold and silver rings, pins and earrings which were sold in galleries all over the country; from "The Store Next Door" at the Whitney Museum of Art, to "De Novo" in Palo Alto and the gift shop at Walker Museum in Minneapolis. Locally she showed her work for 14 years at the Bellevue Art Fair, until she realized that her customers were coming to her. She had become known.

Lew-Hailer doesn't compare herself to others. She never needed the acknowledgment that comes with awards, being represented by prestigious galleries or having her work shown in a museum. The artist, beaming under her mop of ash-blond hair appears more than content, "I'm a happy girl, I do what I like."

She never felt the artist in her suffered motherhood. Making jewelry was her job, a way to make money, but mothering always came first. Yet, as soon as her children started junior high, Mom Sandy extended her possibilities.

In 1990 the artist took a welding class at Pratt Fine Art Center. From 1991 on she's been forging steel sculptures.

Inspired by "Cirque du Soleil", she created large copper bowls rimmed with dancing figures for a one-woman-show at "De Novo". She creates garden art; gates, and giant tie pins she calls "foo-foos" to be stuck into the dirt; decorative wall boxes or shields, and fire screens, all reminiscent of paper-cut art.

The connection between her jewelry designs and larger, later work is obvious; decorative pins and brooches have grown in scale from square inch to square foot; as if the earlier jewelry pieces were miniature mockups for later work. Lew-Hailer's jewelry and sculptures exist side by side, related but unique in their own right.

With her grown-up children out of the house, the artist as well moved on, into a professional space. The front part of "GrrDog Metalworks" studio, south of downtown Seattle, is filled with heavy equipment, tools of the steel artist. In the jewelry workshop in the back, her father's student dentistry drill and polishing trunk have a central place in the carefully organized space. Coiled precious metal wires, beads and gems -all sorted by color, shape, function- probably similar to the way Sandy's father must have arranged the tools of his trade. Dentists of yore used to craft their patients' crowns themselves, creating small sculptural pieces. Creativity runs in the Lew family.

I'm amazed at this small "gung ho" woman, manipulating heavy tools, "I'm wearing gloves," then switching to precision handwork.

"That's what keeps my hands agile, working both on small and large pieces. My doctor thinks that's exactly what has kept me from getting arthritis any worse."

Lew-Hailer is not represented by a gallery and yet she receives plenty of assignments. Word of mouth and direct marketing -once a year open studio events- bring her sufficient customers. This year marks the 23rd time she holds such an open studio.

"23 A prime number in a politically outrageous year", she says.

For that reason the theme of this year's show is "clowns". The open studio event –which takes place in November– is never advertised, but she does send out invitations. People who come to Sandy Lew-Hailer's showcase during ARTetc must make sure to be put on the International Examiner's mailing list. There's a lot to gain from rubbing elbows with a "happy girl who does what she likes".

Previously published on 10/6/2004 in the International Examiner.
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