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Uncommon Means of Measure

THE JEWELRY OF KIFF SLEMMONS

BY MIJA RIEDEL

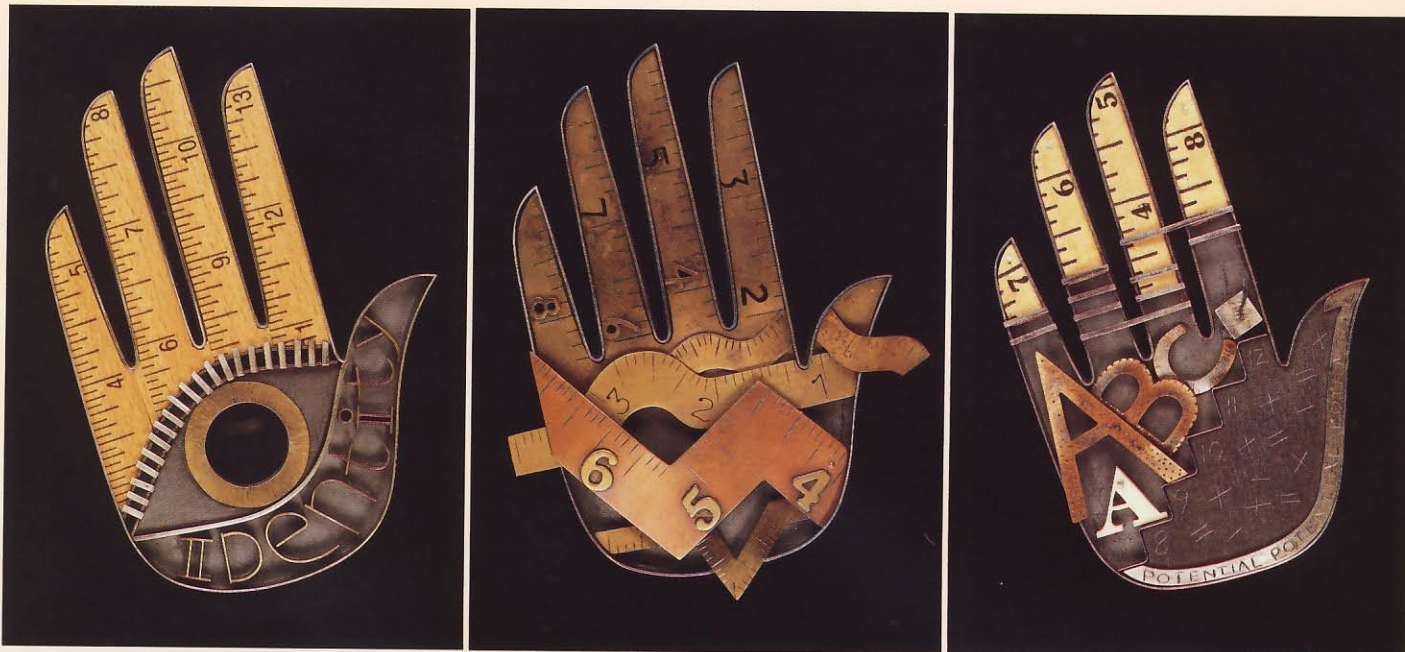
Kiff Slemmons's jewelry is created as much for the mind as for the body. Drawing on the intellectual and literary traditions of surrealists such as Marcel Duchamp, Rene Magritte and Man Ray, Kiff creates multiple layers of meaning in her poetic compositions by taking the commonplace out of context and elaborating on its metaphorical significance. The emphasis is on content and expression rather than decoration or formal, abstract concerns. In the tradition of contemporary metalsmiths like Ramona Solberg, Ron Ho and Robert Ebendorf, much of Kiff's work involves the thoughtful relocation of found objects which, by their very presence, reference something beside the piece of jewelry at hand. The images she creates are inseparable from the wide-range of non-precious materials with which she chooses to work. The results reveal the wide travels, and scholarly, reflective temperament of Kiff Slemmons herself.

Kiff was born in a small town in Iowa. As a girl she liked "playing baseball *and* wearing dresses, often at the same time" – an early indication of her natural predilection towards contrast and contradiction. She listened to *Peter and the Wolf* incessantly – "it must have been the only record in the house" – and later, to Stravinsky and Bartok.

Her mother was a pharmacist; the shelf-lined room where she mixed medicines was full of delicate tools and old scales. Her father, the editor and publisher of the town newspaper, was never without a pencil stub and a small steel make-up rule. As a child, Kiff often worked at the newspaper doing odd jobs, surrounded by the physical mechanisms and speculative dispositions responsible for the orderly dissemination of information and ideas. "I loved everything about the place – the presses, the smell of ink, the feel of the paper, the intricate plates of type with the words upside down and backwards. The Linotype machine was of special interest – a real contraption where hot metal was turned into type."

Those experiences left Kiff with a unforgettable love of language in general, and the printed word in particular. Puns, slogans, clichés, word associations and expressions intrigued her as animated alternatives for communicating elusive ideas. In 1962 she enrolled at Scripps College in Claremont, California, planning to major in Comparative Literature, but shortly thereafter she left for The Sorbonne in Paris. The following fall she enrolled at the University of Iowa to study art and French.

Kiff credits the Linotype machine in her father's workplace as being the catalyst which expanded her career to include metalsmithing; the old printing press was her first recollection of language and ideas made manifest through metal. By the time she graduated *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of Iowa in 1968, with a B.A. in art and French, she had already made one hundred pairs of earrings from two spools of brass wire. These she promptly sold in order to finance a trip to Mexico. This affinity for both jewelry and travel has remained with her as she has matured and attained success.



LEFT TO RIGHT

Self, 1991
silver, brass, ruler, mirror

Friends, 1991
silver, brass, copper

School, 1991
silver, copper, slate, ruler

All photographs by Rod Slemmons
Courtesy: The Artist

In the mid-seventies, in an effort to engage her intellect more actively in the metalsmithing process, Kiff banished the notion of purely decorative ornamentation and began making jewelry incorporating more of herself and her literary interests into her work. Some of these early pieces were commemorative shrines she made to house found objects or to honor close friends and family. Familiar and exotic materials, including antique dominos, pre-Columbian spindle whirls and Roman glass beads, were enshrined in an intimate format celebrating both their physical and metaphorical qualities. These commemorative pieces were especially significant for four reasons: they allowed Kiff's intellect and her emotions to affect her jewelry; through these pieces, she was able to establish a rapport between imagery and materials; embody large ideas in small spaces; and address the paradox of monuments which were grand in concept though not in scale.

Inspired by literature, music, Russian constructivism, surrealism, extensive study of the global history of jewelry and extended travels through Europe, the Far East, Scandinavia and Mexico, her technical skills developed as her ideas evolved. A self-taught jeweler, Kiff was interested primarily in concepts, not structured, academic experimentation. As a result, there is nothing superfluous in her sense of design, no empty exhibition of technical virtuosity. Her work has more in common with the expressive forms of adornment made by non-industrialized cultures than the formal, abstract inclination of conventional Western ornamentation; this is manifest in her own work by her choice of materials and the poetic effect of her compositions.

Materials which are inseparable from meaning figure prominently in much of the jewelry in non-industrialized civilizations and the specific significance different cultures find in certain materials has long been of interest to her. To the Maya, jade was a sign of fertility, a symbol of water and the cyclical nature of life; in Benin, coral protects the fertility of the land and is washed in blood each year to renew its strength; only Hawaiian royalty were permitted to wear the Lei Niho Palaōa pendant carved from whale ivory and strung on a fat, woven strand of human hair made from dozens of tiny braids. An element's significance, ranging from subtle to overt, is inseparable from the piece of jewelry it becomes. In the words of Man Ray, one of Kiff's surrealist mentors, "the object becomes the idea." The communicative potential of objects infused with meaning added a level of depth to jewelry making which Kiff found to be imperative.

In his 1923 assemblage, *From What to Write a Poem*, Man Ray wove a quill through the materials the pen was meant to write on, making the poem and the materials one, uniting idea with object until the materials became the message. Kiff, similarly, began to make jewelry from objects which, by their very essence, would mirror the content of each piece. Using the materials to the effect of poetry rather than statement or pure aesthetics, Kiff began to invoke illusion, wit and metaphor in her work.



One of her earliest neckpieces, *Breaking the Ice* is based on her recollection of the long winters in Iowa. When it was too cold to go out thoughts turned inward and letter writing was a frequent pastime. Made from a giant silver pen nib and an assortment of stamps laminated between multiple layers of semi-transparent plexiglass which look like pieces of ice, the materials mirror Kiff's memories of the contemplative nature of winter life and portend the poetic evolution of her work. The piece is reminiscent of the poems of Emily Dickinson, whose way of using words and language Kiff admires greatly.

"The actual, individual word has whole worlds for Dickinson. A lot of what happens is between words in her poetry, and some of my feelings about what I'm trying to do are like that – like bending a note in blues or in jazz, playing a note that is somewhere in between two notes."

Kiff builds intimations and inferences into her work by designing it to be understandable on a variety of levels; these layers of meaning also satisfy her desire to create visually intriguing jewelry which is conceptually accessible to a wide audience. Her compositions embody the subtle, deep, interconnected spirit that accompanies gradual, tiered systems of building. In this sense, Kiff's approach is not unlike that of the novelist Lawrence Durrell, who planned the first sentence of each paragraph to be understood by everyone who read it and explored more complex, elusive thoughts in the lines which followed, repeating the same process at the start of each paragraph.

During a trip to Japan in 1983, Kiff studied the aesthetic and poetic possibilities of layering which permeate so many aspects of Japanese life, from temple architecture to kimono design. She was especially intrigued by the unlikely sense of depth this process lent to foreshortened Shinto shrines – a discovery with abundant potential for a jeweler. Kiff made a number of brooches exploring the architectural and spiritual essence of temples, and tall, eloquent Torii archways which the Japanese built on both land and sea, as monuments, portals, and frames for sacred spaces.

During this eight week trip, Kiff also developed a strong affinity for pebbles – the one material, beside silver, which appears continually in her jewelry. Stones were scattered around the Torii gates and balanced precariously on their lintels – tossed into the air by religious disciples who hoped the rocks would land on the crowning horizontal beam and stay there – leaving the particular devotee in better karmic shape than she had been before.

Kiff's collection of shrine and gate brooches marked the first time she had worked purposefully in series, a methodology favored by numerous contemporary artists and one which would come to characterize much of her later work.

"I was interested in looking at things in more depth and from different angles, and I did this literally by making a number of pieces. Later, this changed a bit in my way of thinking – until I was actually creating a number of pieces for a specific show that would all be exhibited together – almost as though they were all one piece."

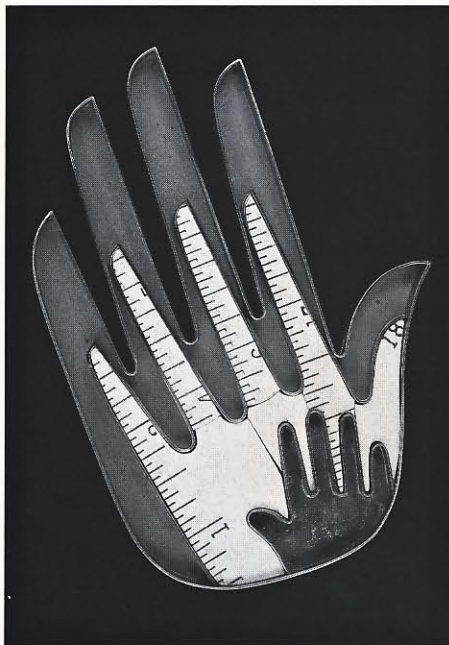
Nearly every piece Kiff has made in the past fifteen years has included small beach stones and oxidized sterling silver. The other materials she uses are chosen from a plethora of non-precious materials and are dependent on the content of the piece. In the manner of metalsmiths such as Ramona Solberg and Robert Ebendorf, she favors materials not frequently found in Western jewelry – walrus whiskers, zippers, rulers, pottery shards and, before ivory was exploited to disastrous effect, pieces of mastodon tusk. By incorporating diverse, unlikely materials into her jewelry, Kiff began the transformative process which has become a cornerstone for her work; metamorphosing the recognizable into something completely different by elevating it from the commonplace and juxtaposing it with thoughtfully chosen, metaphorically loaded images.

ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT

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World 1 & 2, 1991

silver, brass, ruler, ammonite, die



In this sense, her work follows that of the surrealist painter Rene Magritte, who wrote:

"My pictures showed objects located in places where we never come across them. This is the fulfillment of a real, if unconscious, desire on the part of most people. Even the conventional painter tries... to disturb the order in which he invariably sees objects... For me, given my determination to make the most familiar objects yell, they had to be disposed in a new order, and take on a disturbing significance: the cracks we see in our houses and on our faces seemed to me more eloquent in the sky. Table legs in turned wood lost the innocent aspect we ascribe to them when they suddenly appeared towering over a forest. A woman's body floating above a town was a favorable substitute for the angels who never appeared to me... This disturbing poetic effect which, produced by the deployment of objects taken from reality, would give the real world from which they were borrowed a disturbing, poetic meaning through a quite natural interchange."¹

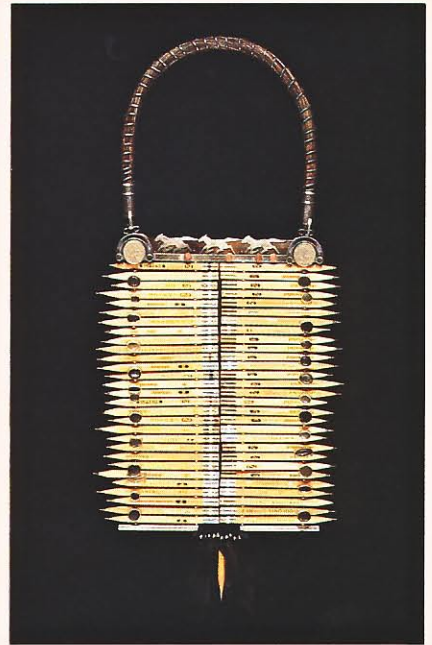
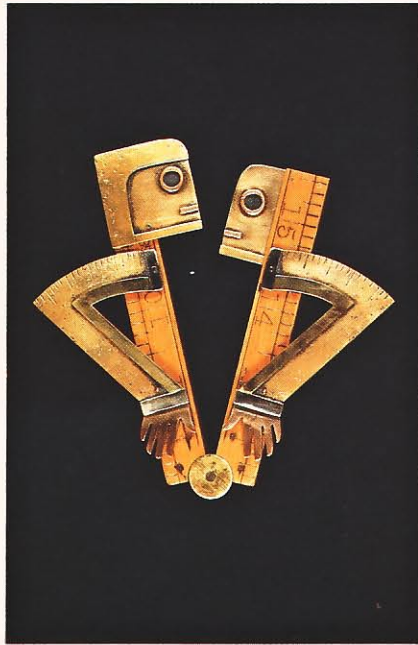
Attitude is from a series Kiff made about "two-ness" dating from 1991. It is constructed from an old, collapsible ruler she found at a junk store. Intrigued by the opening and closing mechanism and moved by the craftsmanship of the old tool, Kiff thought a long time about what to make with it before she fashioned the hinged, wooden instrument into a figure. The brass edge from which the ruler hung has been converted to a face seen in profile. The title refers to the arrangement of the parts of a body; a point of view; an arrogant disposition; and in ballet, to an angular positioning of the leg. Slemmons's figure holds its "arms" confrontationally on its hips at right angles; it wears an emphatic, dramatic, slightly comical expression. The two sides of the ruler open to reveal a hidden, second face, which faces the first. *Attitude* is a witty portrait of two individuals in one. Referencing the idea of multiple personalities, or the merging of two lovers into one, the folding ruler marks the increments with which one measures up, how we size each other up, and whether we are united or divided, open or closed.

Kiff's sense of responsibility to a well-made old ruler is a good example of her respect for fine craftsmanship in general, and for her own work in particular.

"I like my pieces to have a warmth to them... I like it that you can pick it up and even bash it or scratch it and it's not going to kill it some how, that it can take a lot of handling, and that the patina from handling it and wearing it doesn't diminish it. I like the things to be sturdy and well made. There's been a funny kind of prejudice, in the eighties, I guess, about things that were well made — 'Well, it's only craft', if it's beautifully made. If a work is gutsy, it means it's messy. But the trouble was that a lot of work was called gutsy because it was messy, and I guess I'm interested in something that can be tough but beautiful at the same time, and a kind of tension that comes from different things happening."

The tension of the unexpected figures heavily in Kiff's jewelry. The materials she uses are recognizable but far from home. What's going on is not immediately apparent because, at first glance, there are only displaced objects and fragments of ideas. There's also nothing very mysterious or intimidating about pencils or rulers. In a surrealist's version of bait and switch, the viewer is drawn in.

One of the best examples of this can be found in *Sticks, Stones and Words*, a breastplate modeled after 19th century Sioux Indian armor made from bird bones. Kiff has created her own politically-tinged, poetically-loaded version of this antique frontispiece from old wooden pencils in a necklace. The yellow paint of all the pencils has been filed off, except for the names of the manufacturers: Supreme, Save, Choice, American, Master, Preferred, Balance, Colonel, USA Federal and Blackfeet. The pencil, worn to a stub, dangling from the bottom center was made by the Union pencil company. The shaved pencils raise the question, "Who scalped whom?" Four tiny, pastel-pink erasers are bezel set at the top of the breastplate, just below the silhouette of three galloping horses. The Plain Indians wore bones across their chests as a symbolic form of armor; Kiff's breast plate of pencils suggests the power of the written word, of writing as a form of protection, a means of establishing order and communicating. In the context of the U.S. government and the Plains Indians, one might think of broken treaties, and the efforts to erase native Americans and their culture from North America.



It is Kiff's talent for juxtaposing images which gives her most successful pieces the visual equivalent of an electrical charge. Familiar objects are plucked like so many atoms from their scientifically desirable states of rest, radiating a tangible quantity of energy as they excitedly seek a new, stable and balanced condition with the other displaced materials in the unfamiliar context of her arrangements. The artist's thoughtful manipulation of imagery infuses her work with enough substance and contradiction to hold the components in uneasy balance. The multifarious associations, contrasts, puns and clichés she establishes add up to more than the sum of the disparate parts, and they continue to hold our attention long after we've realized, "Oh, they *are* pencils."

Again she quotes Magritte, speaking of his 1933 painting *Elective Affinities*:

"We are familiar with a bird in a cage. Our interest is quickened if the bird is replaced by a fish or a shoe but although these images are interesting they are unfortunately accidental, arbitrary. It is possible to arrive at a new image that will stand up to examination through its definitiveness, its rightness – the image which shows an egg in the cage."²

"What he's talking about here is imagery and how it works and I think he's making an important point. Just because you choose to put two objects, two images next to each other – which I think is being done a lot these days – doesn't necessarily mean there is any further meaning to it other than the kind of immediate, 'Oh, those are weird images together.' I think that people can mistake meaning. If there isn't any further meaning, there isn't any further meaning and he's obviously thinking about it in a more complicated way than simply juxtaposing two different images. There is the additional layer of the egg in the cage, rather than a shoe in the cage. An egg is connected to a bird as well as the whole notion of the possibility of birth being completely enclosed in the cage. It has a lot more suggestiveness to it. A lot of what Magritte was doing in his work is what I think I am interested in doing also. I feel an affinity with the ways he worked with imagery and stimulates your thoughts as well as your feelings about things."

Transport, made in 1990 for the *Artworks for AIDS* exhibit in Seattle, is both intellectually and emotionally one of Kiff's most engaging works. The miniature, two wheeled silver cart alludes to the personal trauma of mortal illness and the historical countenance of mass deaths. Such carts have been used in cities throughout the ages to remove victims of epidemics; "there is an implied connection between old and new plagues – with specific reference to AIDS."

FAR LEFT

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Attitude, 1991

brass, ruler

LEFT

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Sticks and Stones and Words, 1992

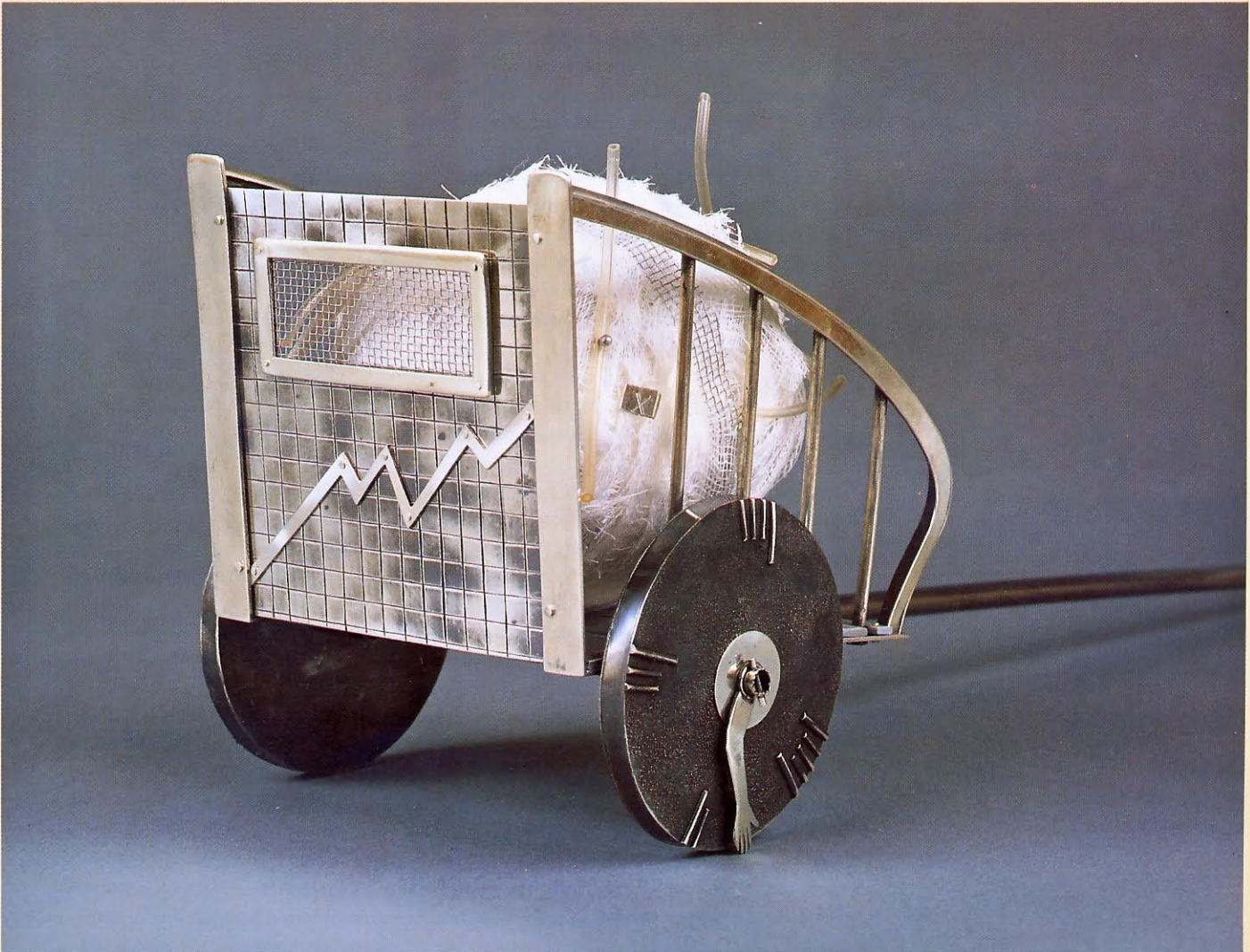
silver, copper, nickel, pencils,
pebbles, horse hair, erasers, deer skin

BELOW

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Transport, 1990

sterling silver, aluminum, gauge,
mesh, tape, tubing, pearls



RIGHT

Eye of the Bee Holder, 1986
sterling silver, ebony

BELOW

Self Portrait, 1986
sterling silver, ebony

NEXT PAGE

Parents 1 & 2, 1991
silver, brass, ruler, copper



There are graphic references to disease – a hospital bed, charts, tubes, bandages, screens, etc. A ball riding in the cart is made from a collection of the materials and experiences which define illness. It refers to a Yakima Indian tradition from Eastern Washington:

“When a female child is born, she is given a piece of string with a small object or bead tied to it. Thereafter, important moments and events are marked with additional strings and bits which eventually become layered into a ball. In old age, the woman unrolls the ball and tells the story of her life to her grandchildren – in reverse. In this piece, the reference is ironic – the ball is wrapped with gauze, bits of tubing, surgical tape, poetic words, pearls; indicating all that is accumulated through the course of an illness. The arms on the wheels (like gauges or clock hands) hang down whether the cart is in motion or not, indicating the inexorable course of AIDS.

The cart transports this ball “with ceremony as a kind of offering to the dignity and courage of those who struggle with AIDS and its consequences. It is intended to invoke a shudder of understanding in the face of death.”

Not all of Kiff’s pieces are personal memorials or elaborate philosophical forays; “Sometimes, after working in a very intense way I want to do something more gestural and more simple, that I can do quickly instead of spending weeks working on it.” Simple, eloquent compositions and a witty demeanor characterize such pieces as *Eye of the Bee Holder*, *Self Portrait*, and a series of bird pins entitled *Flock Talk*.

Kiff frequently works with images which have been used by artists for thousands of years – the hand, the eye, the human torso – always trying to present them from a new angle. If she can reveal something unfamiliar about something recognizable, her jewelry will carry unique content *as well as* the power of both conscious and unconscious historical references accompanying the image. This transformation of a would-be banal symbol is yet another example of the “displaced familiar” – it *is* another hand pin, another eye brooch – but Kiff has added something fresh to its long history.

In this manner, the human hand became the foundation of Kiff’s most ambitious series to date: the *Hands of the Heroes*. Over a three year period, Kiff made more than fifty hands, honoring such diverse personalities as Satchel Paige, Buddha, Emily Dickinson, Don Quixote, Roald Amundsen, Nelson Mandela, Jacques Cousteau, Leonardo da Vinci, Sigmund Freud, Annie Oakley, and Colette. Images and objects referencing the essence of each individual were fabricated and collaged together on identical, oxidized sterling templates: a commemorative tradition established by Kiff ten years earlier and a narrative tradition defined succinctly by Lloyd Herman as “story-telling... by reducing stories to symbols with strong, but often personal associations.”³





Making each hand from the same silver prototype was a self-imposed restriction Kiff found both challenging and liberating and she drew dozens of hands before settling on a form which had the versatile configuration she desired. Simplicity has always been a fundamental, significant element in Kiff's compositions, compelling because it leaves no margin for error, no baroque baubles behind which to hide. The hand of Don Quixote is an armor-clad gauntlet inset with a single, red leather rose. Gandhi's fingers are cut out in the shapes of keys. Sigmund Freud's hand is home to the id, the ego, the superego; inside the hinged middle finger is a small sterling penis; the two doors in the palm open to reveal two interlocking puzzle pieces, one black, one red.

In 1991, Kiff combined the hand with another favorite object, the ruler, in a series of ten pins entitled *Measuring Up*, commissioned by the Washington State Arts Commission to be exhibited in public schools throughout the state, notably, alongside paintings, sculptures, prints and photographs by nine other artists selected from a nationwide search. Kiff chose the hand because the image is well-suited to children both visually and metaphorically; she added rulers, numbers and pieces of slate – common classroom materials with which children are well acquainted. She made five pairs of hands focusing on five different sets of standards by which students are measured: those determined by themselves, parents, friends, school and the world at large. This series is an excellent example of ten brooches which are enhanced when exhibited as a group, but they are also designed to make complete individual statements.

Like many jewelers, Kiff acknowledges the occasionally prickly connection of jewelry to sculpture. Jewelry's mobile essence – its wearability – makes it an ideal forum for public art, and especially appealing to a metalsmith intent on interacting with a wide audience. However, her infusion of expansive, literary ideas into this intimate, often ornamental format has prompted more than one well-wisher to suggest, "Oh. Well – why don't you make sculpture?" the implication being that sculpture is bigger and therefore better.

"I confess to having twinges of worry about that from time to time in the past, but, in fact, I guess I just dug in my heels and thought, All the more reason to try and do it with jewelry, because, again, it's an unexpected place to think about these things, to see these things... And this is what I am interested in – making some kind of connection with people. I like thinking that they'll see something and get excited about it, or it will make them think some slightly different thought that day. If you can do that much, well, then it's worth it to me."

It is, finally, the lingering quality in Kiff's jewelry which makes it so potent – the visceral mysteries and paradoxes offer us the rare opportunity to recognize the sublime in the familiar, and invite our contemplation over time. The materials are the message, and the message is what counts. Kiff summarizes it most eloquently:

"The problem is always how to make something of utmost clarity with questions still inside it. Imagine wearing a necklace made of ice. After a warm evening all that remains is a memory and a sensation."

Mija Riedel is an artist and writer who lives in San Francisco, California.

- Notes**
1. Sylvester, David, *The Silence of the World*, The Menil Foundation, Abrams, 1992.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Herman, Lloyd E., introductory essay to *Brilliant Stories: American Narrative Jewelry* catalogue, 1993.