

Bruce Metcalf *A Lion in Winter*

BY ULYSSES GRANT DIETZ



La Petite Mort (brooch), 2015
maple, Micarta, gold-plated brass,
sterling silver, glass cabochon, paint
5 1/2 x 5"



Nunc Stans (brooch), 2015
Delrin, silver
5 x 4"

BRUCE METCALF IS proud to call himself a jeweler and a craftsman. But he is equally comfortable calling himself an artist. Anyone familiar with his career knows that he is also an important writer on contemporary art and craft, as well as an articulate and provocative lecturer.

Metcalfe's work is in the permanent collections of two dozen museums in the U.S. and abroad, but he is in no way resting on his laurels now that he's well into his sixties. Every day holds a new discovery for this exacting artist, and while he is not arrogant about it, there is no false modesty in his opinion of his work. He is generous with his admiration of younger studio jewelers, but equally liberal with his criticism. The sharpest barb in his critical quiver is "cliché."

Metcalfe got his BFA in metalsmithing from Syracuse University in 1972, where he also studied architecture. He then received his MFA in metalsmithing and jewelry from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia. That was in 1977, and already his skill as a jeweler and a thinker was obvious.

A Light Lost at Sea, a student work from 1977, demonstrates both Metcalfe's technical prowess with a variety of materials, as well as his intentional focus on narrative and sculptural impact. Metcalfe makes jewelry, but he also makes art. There are no found objects here: every piece of this assembly is skillfully handmade, from the reverse drawing on the acrylic "sail" to the light bulb, lamp, and little boat in which it drifts. Metcalfe sees no inherent rift between craft and art, and no shame in wanting to make either. He is an advocate of manual proficiency, but is adamant about intelligence, too. Intelligence as it colors craft's role within contemporary culture and, more specifically, the art world, is not some immutable, fixed thing.



A Light Lost at Sea (brooch), 1977
acrylic, silver, brass, paint, ink
7 x 4 3/8 x 2"
COLLECTION OF THE NEWARK MUSEUM,
GIFT OF THE ARTIST

Wood Neckpiece #7, 1992
maple, cherry, oak, walnut, pine,
rosewood, cork, glass eye, plastic
teeth, tagua nut, grass, cord,
23-karat gold leaf, paint
15 x 10 x 1 3/4"
COLLECTION OF HOUSTON MUSEUM OF
FINE ARTS, GIFT OF ALICE C. SIMKINS

Metcalfe's own emphasis as an artist-jeweler has evolved substantially over the past two decades. A series of necklaces produced in 1992 exhibits the narrative method for which he is known, as it is infused with dark, even confrontational iconography. One of these pieces is in the Helen Williams Drutt Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and it is the composition of this piece that seems to foreshadow Metcalfe's direction in the 21st century. A disparate group of earth-toned, vaguely organic carved and painted wooden forms have been assembled in a way that might appear to be haphazard, but has in fact been calculated with immense precision, akin to Piet Mondrian's endless tweaking of his thick black lines and blocks of color. However, the centerpiece of the Houston necklace is one of Metcalfe's iconic homunculi, a bug-eyed creature who could be either threatening or beseeching. This narrative element is a feature that has disappeared

from Metcalfe's more recent work.

By the early 2000s Metcalfe had embarked upon a series of necklaces that dropped the use of overt narrative, while maintaining a subtle use of historical reference. *Willow Bough* of 2004 once more combines a group of disparate carved and painted elements with a gilt metal piece that evokes one of William Morris's most popular wallpaper designs from the 19th century. The color palette of *Willow Bough* is more

intense than that of Metcalfe's most recent work, and each finish and hue has been thought out with meticulous attention to both craft and composition. These necklaces of this series are baroque in

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Willow Bough, 2004
wood, paint, metal
diameter 12"
COLLECTION OF THE NEWARK MUSEUM
PURCHASE 2012 SOPHRONIA
ANDERSON BEQUEST FUND, LIFE
MEMBERSHIP FUND AND LOUIS
BAMBERGER BEQUEST FUND



California Poppies, 2012
maple, boxwood, Micarta, silver,
gold, gold-plated brass, paint
15 x 10"

their exuberant scale and rococo in their carefully poised asymmetry. There is nothing casual about the placement of the parts or the choice of colors. Adjacencies of color and form and texture matter deeply. The lack of explicit narrative, however, doesn't mean that Metcalf has abandoned intelligence.

Metcalf's most recent body of work was included in "Sin and Sensuality" at Gallery Loupe in Montclair, New Jersey, in 2015. I particularly like a statement the artist made about his newest work: "These necklaces and brooches represent a recent departure. They are neither narrative nor conceptual jewelry. Instead, I want to make jewelry that is decorative and comfortably wearable. Beyond that, I want these articles to become the center of attention when they are worn, and thus to make their wearers feel exceptional." For a maker like Metcalf to dismiss both the conceptual and the narrative seems a radical step. Somehow I think he's overstating the case to make a point: perhaps both ideas, narrative jewelry and conceptual jewelry, have begun to feel like clichés to him. In a cultural context in which content is presumed to transform craft (low) into art (high), and thus transcend mere making, the conscious embrace of words like "decorative" and "wearable" is pretty profound.

Five Unclaimed Wishes, a necklace from 2013, shares the same vocabulary as *Willow Bough*, but with two distinct variations. Its palette is pastel and feminine, giving it

a sensuous softness. Additionally, there are elements—the carved wishbones—that are recognizable, for all their biomorphic abstraction. This detail, along with the title,

There is nothing casual about the placement of the parts or the choice of colors.



Fossil Bird (brooch), 2013
maple, holly wood, epoxy putty,
gold-plated brass, paint
5 x 3"

Five Unclaimed Wishes, 2013
maple, gold-plated brass, sterling
silver, 18k yellow gold, gold-leafed
found object, paint
12 ½ x 9"



suggests a narrative that is largely left to the wearer's imagination. *The Fossil Bird* brooch, also from 2013, echoes the necklace's soft palette, but introduces a handcarved replica of a bird skull slyly at odds with the feminine color scheme and corsage-like form. The surreal detail of the skull is whimsical, not intended to impart meaning so much as to add interest: shape, line, texture. This is a jewel meant to be both beautiful and unsettling. It is, like all of Metcalf's jewels, a carefully controlled exercise in formalism. It is about the arrangement of shapes and colors and surfaces, not about any hidden meaning or pithy concept. The act of assembling these disparate parts into something that provokes an aesthetic response of pleasure is meaning enough.

The biomorphic look of so much of this recent body of work has a sleek smartness that taps into the mid-century modern very much in the air these days. But it also speaks to the ongoing influence of post-modernism, which made the love

of ornament acceptable once more. Another recent group of Metcalf's jewels takes on a darker, almost sinister palette and thus arouses a very different feeling.

California Poppies from 2012 combines black, purple, and blood red with dark oxidized silver. It is a somber scheme, given a slightly Goth edge through the clawlike elements that could be either parts of some sea creature or the seed pods of something poisonous. Somehow the figure of Disney's Maleficent comes to mind. It is a necklace that exudes power and strength, but not necessarily in a benevolent way. Two brooches, *La Petite Mort* from 2015 and *Bloodspur* from 2014, present us with a similar, but even more ominous aspect. *La Petite Mort* (Little Death, which is a romantic euphemism for sexual climax and subsequent melancholy) is elegant and funereal, graceful in its

Bloodspur, 2014
maple, gold-plated brass, paint
5 1/2 x 2 1/2"

Daphnis and Chloe, 2015
silver, Micarta, boxwood, glass
cabochons
6 x 3"

sweeping lines. There is something brooding and formal about its windswept asymmetry—the corsage-like quality of *Fossil Bird*—but the thorny points also evoke a frisson of fear. *Bloodspur*, with its slippery red scrolls, truly crosses the line into sinister, becoming the sort of jewel a creature of the night or a dark wizard would wear (though I hear Bruce guffawing as he reads this).

The real point is that these pieces, quite intentionally, have no specific meaning. Their suggestiveness allows for a range of interpretation, or simply an emotional response, depending on who is looking. *Daphnis and Chloe*, also from 2015, shares everything with *La Petite Mort* except for its palette. Ethereal rather than somber, it conjures visions of light rather than dark, in spite of the sharp bits (the story of Daphnis and Chloe has its painful elements, after all, as do most love stories).

A final group of Metcalf's recent work is deceptively simple and seductive in a rather different way. Called *Nunc Stans*—literally “the now that stands,” but meaning “eternity”—these large-scale pieces are carved from a single material, a milky-white synthetic called Delrin®. A view of one of these in development demonstrates the complex process Metcalf undertakes for every piece he creates. Elaborate drawings, colored to indicate position in the viewing plane, allow Metcalf to plan the engineering required to mount the various elements

to the handmade silver armature. Metcalf's jewels are always beautiful from the back; they are extremely well built.

The sprawling *Nunc Stans* brooch from 2015

This august, respected, sometimes irascible lion of the jewelry world continues to invent and create and surprise.



brings to mind one of those high-speed photographs of milk splashing. This aspect of being frozen in the moment helps clarify the meaning of the name. Metcalf is citing Boethius, a philosopher from late antiquity: “The now that passes produces time, the now that remains produces eternity.” The “now that remains” is *nunc stans* in Latin.

On the other hand, this high-minded aspect of Metcalf's work is made more modern and gritty with his candid description of these works as suggesting splattering semen: the male life force, the moment before conception. But these thoughts are not meant to be explicit; they are the product of an active and generally sardonic mind. The brooch, in all its rococo asymmetry, is graceful and gestural. In spite of its lack of color and flash, it is eye-catching and arresting when worn. It makes the wearer the center of attention, even as it makes the viewer a wee bit uncomfortable, because the artist knows that we know exactly what it resembles.

The *Nunc Stans Large Circle* brooch is even more flamboyant. Both acknowledging and exploding the traditional concept of the ladylike circle brooch, its large scale and organic, frozen liquid movement might suggest contemporary sexual slang: a pearl necklace.

Bruce Metcalf never rests. This august, respected, sometimes irascible lion of the jewelry world continues to invent and create and surprise. He cares about his jewelry as art; but he cares equally about his art as jewelry. He demands a lot of the people who would buy and wear his work—or look at it in museum exhibitions—but he gives as much as he asks.

Ulysses Grant Dietz is Chief Curator and Curator of Decorative Arts at the Newark Museum.



Nunc Stans Large Circle (brooch), 2015
Delrin®, silver
5 1/4 x 5"