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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

FORM AS SYMBOL: ALLURE AND DEFENSE

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October, 1994
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October, 1994
Introduction

In my thesis, I explore some recurrent ideas which I have become aware of in my work. The central idea of the work is to explore my fascination with the beauty that I find in organic form, specifically forms in nature which have a defensive function. Though the function of my work is not to defend, I explore the form itself in terms of its visual impact on the viewer. Another component of the work is my attempt to reconcile my respect and admiration for the jewelry that has been done in the past with the contemporary emphasis on creating novel and unique pieces which are expressive as opposed to functional. The thesis work is, thus, an attempt to combine some of what I find valuable about traditional jewelry and some more contemporary or personal themes.
Historical Context:
Where Am I?

For as long as there have been people, they seem to have adorned their bodies. Paintings depicting early people wearing ornaments made from carved ivory or antler have been discovered and dated from as far back in time as 40,000 years ago.\(^1\) And where there is jewelry, there are jewelry makers.

Perhaps jewelers have not always made their jewelry for the same reasons, but there are some characteristics which seem to have persisted since the beginning. Anthropologists think the jewelry worn by early people was probably worn as body ornament, for purposes of magic, and also to mark social rank. The artifacts are usually made of valued materials and show signs of having been crafted to enhance their desirability. From the great age of the early Egyptians through the Middle Ages of Europe, jewelers created ornate and technically amazing pieces of gold, silver, and precious stones for members of the royalty and the religious leadership, pieces signifying mystical powers and social stature. With the rise of the bourgeois class in Renaissance Europe and its growth through the Enlightenment period, the number of people wearing jewelry increased, and its social importance reflected the social importance of wealth.\(^2\) The pieces made at this time were highly ornate and technically challenging. The resulting increase in the production of jewelry made it possible for more craftsmen and even artists and sculptors of the time to create jewelry. By the 1800's, the developing middle class in Western

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\(^1\) From the forward of Gregorietti (1969)
\(^2\) ibid.
societies gave rise to changes in the form and purpose of jewelry. With the introduction of imitation stones and non precious metals, both available at lower costs than precious stones and metals, "costume" jewelry became available to more people. Jewelry began to be worn more often for its decorative purpose alone, losing its close link to social distinction. This also was the first time jewelry was worn almost exclusively by women, as the influence of the stark and plain puritanical English style of the time became the standard for Western male attire.⁴

From around 1870 and after, industrialization made manufactured work less expensive and less unique, while luxury, richness, and individuality were still fashionable and important. To compensate for this, value was increasingly placed upon excellence and individuality in design and craftsmanship. Celebrity jewelers such as Fabergé and Lalique began to emerge. Eventually, jewelers whose main focus was expressing their ideas through jewelry began to appear, and the works of these so-called "art-jewelers" bore personal significance to the maker and reflected a new conception of jewelry as art: Arlene Fisch, Mary Ann Scherr, and Jack Pripp are examples of this kind of jeweler.

It is important for me to locate myself in the larger context of the history of jewelry. I have great admiration for the craftsmanship and design sense of jewelers who lived in the past such as those who worked during the Age of the Celts and those who were part of the Art-Nouveau movement of this century, and I need to feel a part of what has traditionally been understood as jewelry. Nevertheless, I do not want to repeat what has been done in the past, but rather learn from it and

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³ ibid.
create something which reflects the contemporary world and my understanding of it.

My thesis work reflects this tension between traditional and contemporary concepts of jewelry in a variety of ways. The materials I use in my pieces are precious and semi-precious metals. This decision in part reflects the fact that these metals have physical properties which make them delightful to work with, and therefore lend themselves to the creation of jewelry. The ornamental and wearable characteristics of my pieces reflect obvious aspects of traditional jewelry. The deliberate attempt to make apparent the process which gave rise to each piece is my way of celebrating the craft of jewelry making.

My pieces are not intended to be magical items and are not meant to reflect the social status of the wearer. In these ways, my work breaks from the jewelry of the past. However, the pieces are intended to be more than just ornamental, and they are intended to convey a message to the person who sees them, while they are either worn or not. They may not protect the wearer from evil spirits, but they are made to appear to protect the space they contain. The conveyed message may not be "Look, I am powerful and rich!", but there is a message conveyed by the pieces and it does have to do with social interaction. This focus on jewelry as a means of expressing ideas places my work in the contemporary context of art-jewelry.
An Analysis of My Thesis Vocabulary

As a visual artist, I communicate my ideas through forms as opposed to communicating them by means of sounds, tastes, or spoken and written words. There are many kinds of forms in the arts. Roughly speaking, the world of form can be broken into two major parts: abstract forms and representational forms. Again roughly, this distinction corresponds to the distinction between representational and non-representational. For example, a realistic portrait is intended to represent the subject of the painting. On the contrary, an abstract expressionist painting is not intended to represent a specific reality other than that of the artists.

There are varying degrees to which a visual form can be representational ranging from highly concrete representational visual forms (e.g., an unaltered photograph) to more abstracted representational forms (e.g., the paintings of Matisse). My work is best classified in the category of abstracted representational visual forms. There are varying degrees of abstract in the art world. For example, the visual forms of Impressionist art are more abstracted than those of Academic art, but they are more representational (less abstracted) than the visual vocabulary of the Cubists whose work borders on the purely abstract.

Likewise, there are varieties of subjects from which abstracted representational visual forms are derived. For example, Man Ray abstracted from the forms of letters from the English alphabet in Shakespearean Equation: Twelfth Night. Jasper Johns' Numbers 0 to 9 involves visual forms abstracted from Arabic numerals. Industrial artifacts,
as in Fernand Léger’s Mechanical Elements, and common artifacts, as in Salvador Dalí’s The Persistence of Memory, are also subjects from which abstracted visual forms are derived. And of course representational visual forms can be abstracted from subjects found in nature.

Of the subjects found in nature, there are both inorganic and organic subjects. In my work, abstract visual forms from organic subjects dominate. I may never know with certainty why these tend to be most prominent in my work. It was not a conscious decision for me to work within the abstracted representational “category” of art. The natural or organic forms with which I work are an evolving vocabulary of symbols and shapes which find origin in my childhood and intellectual pursuits. Through experience, a person perceives and retains an impression of what they experience, maybe in a different way from another person. I believe that these perceptions and impressions are gathered and stored and eventually find their way out in the artist’s expression. It is the cultivation and exploration of these forms that an artist pursues in his or her career. Certainly, there is a basis in my childhood for the emphasis on organic forms. Most of my childhood was spent playing in and exploring the lush woods surrounding my home in New England and the shoreline of the Atlantic in Maine. The animals and plants I discovered found their way into the things I made and my early drawings. These early explorations are the source of my later intellectual pursuits in the science of Biology. My artistic focus has always been on natural subjects. The artists I have always liked and the art movements which I find most intriguing are those which employ fluid, organic lines and shapes. For example, I am inspired by the Art Nouveau movement and the artists who brought this change of style into the art world. I have found direct
influence from several German painters of this time, namely Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele. While they were not noted as the most startling innovators, they were certainly on the cusp of the Nouveau. What I am most drawn to in these painters' works are Klimt's fluid lines and Schiele's concave curves. (fig. 13, 14 and 15)

Even though I didn't conciously choose the organic vocabulary originally, it was a conscious decision to explore what these forms meant for me once I realized that I was instinctively employing them. All these experiences and interests got inside my head, and these shapes were constantly coming out in my work. Noting this, I stepped back and chose to pursue these forms consciously in my thesis. In the search of why I had these aesthetic interests and what they represented in my life, the thesis work began. In this investigation, I have learned much about myself I had never seen or expected. I think of the exploration as analogous with psychotherapy. I'm using the present artistic expression to explore the experiences and feelings which gave rise to them, letting them lead me to their cause.

The arts are a means of communication. Visual forms can be understood both on a symbolic level and on the level of aesthetic presence. We can consider a work of jewelry as a purely aesthetic object, as a pure form and solely with an eye to its aesthetic presence. Does it stand on its own? Does it hold its space? How does it relate to its environment or to other pieces? These are some questions which the viewer may ask at this level of consideration.

One kind of aesthetic presence is that of allure. The allure of a piece is the degree to which it captivates the attention of the viewer and draws the viewer toward it. At least initially, I am seeking to attract the
viewer and not to repel him or her. Beauty is another kind of the aesthetic presence which compliments allure. Not only do I want to create interest in viewing the piece, but I want to lure the viewer by means of an aesthetically pleasing form. I am not trying to intentionally create ugly or uninteresting pieces. This concern with the beautiful stems from my fascination with natural forms, the majority of which I find beautiful.

It is traditional for jewelry to ornament and decorate the human body. This has been one reason for making beautiful or attractive jewelry. My work is not about the function of jewelry as ornamental or decorative. Nevertheless, I seek to create attractive jewelry. The difference between my work and that of traditional jewelry is that the primary function of attraction is to direct attention to the form of the piece itself, not to highlight the attractiveness of the wearer. The beauty I seek to capture in my abstracted visual forms is that which I find in organic forms which have a defensive function. For example, the antlers of a deer strike me as elegant in their form and in relation to the animal as a whole. I find the visual composition of these organic forms to be pleasing when considered strictly on an aesthetic level, and I am interested in investigating the way in which these aesthetic qualities serve to highlight another feature of the very same forms, their defensive function.

In addition to its aesthetic aspect, I understand my work to be expressing an idea through a visual medium and to be aimed at a viewer

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4 Webster's defines "beautiful" as that which has beauty, and "beauty" is defined as the quality attributed to whatever pleases or satisfies the senses or mind. "Aesthetics" is defined, also by Webster's, as the study or theory of beauty and of the psychological responses to it. I cannot defend here the claim that some beauty is objective, nor can I here defend the claim that some objects cause the same aesthetic responses in all people. Personally I believe both of these claims, but for my purposes in the thesis work, it would be sufficient if at least some other people found the forms beautiful.
or an audience. This message, like many other forms of communication, is sent by use of symbols. My thesis work attempts to integrate the symbolic feature of the visual forms with their aesthetic features.

A symbol, according to Webster's, is something which stands for or represents something else. To use a familiar example, viewed without reference to its symbolic function, our spoken language is merely sounds in combination which together form only more sounds. Yet these sounds have meaning, they stand for and represent things and events. Within the visual world there are many symbols being employed for communication. Again to use a familiar example, written words are visual forms which serve as symbols. The many English words we read serve to stand for and represent many complex ideas.

Visual artists have often used visual forms to stand for and represent things, events, emotions, or ideas. Probably the most ancient symbolic visual form is the abstracted representational visual form of the human being. The visual forms in cave paintings are understood to represent the activities important to the human beings living at the time. A more recent example of a visual form used as a symbol in art is Picasso's use of the visual forms of musical instruments, most notably guitars, as symbols for sexual activity.

There is a symbolism of organic visual forms in nature. In my work, I try to achieve pieces which have design integrity (the non symbolic part of the work), and which stand for and represent several ideas (the symbolic part). On the non symbolic level, I am trying to present the beauty intrinsic in the defensive forms, the beauty of the natural word. On the symbolic level, one idea I am exploring is the way in which attractive forms are used, paradoxically, as defensive forms. Another more personal
idea is the human need to attract others and at the same time protect their vulnerability.

There are a variety of ways in which organic forms serve as defensive forms. As biologists tell us, many organisms in the natural world have what are termed primary and secondary defensive mechanisms. Primary defensive mechanisms are defined by Edmunds [1974], following Kruuk [1972], as "defenses which operate regardless of whether or not there is a predator in the vicinity."⁵ Aposematism is a commonly found primary defense mechanism in nature. The phenomenon of aposematism, following Edmunds [1974], is the having of "dangerous or unpleasant attributes, and which advertise this fact by means of characteristic structures, colours, or other signals so that some predators avoid attacking them".⁶ For an example, sea urchins have as primary defensive mechanisms a hard shell and spines. It is unpleasant for a predator to eat a sea urchin because it would get stuck by the spines when it bites the creature. The spines and the hard shell are primary defensive mechanisms because they are always operating. The spines are aposematric because they are highly visible and, therefore, serve as a signal to predators of the unpleasantness of eating sea urchins. In my opinion, the visual form of a sea urchin is very attractive. Viewed strictly in terms of this form, it is an aesthetically pleasing form. Fish apparently find it attractive too, since initially they are drawn to the sea urchin by its visual form. But this attractive visual form functions as a defensive mechanism. Once a fish, having been attracted to the sea urchin, learns that the spines hurt, the fish no longer tries to eat a sea urchin when it sees it again.

⁵ Edmunds [1974], p. 1.
⁶ ibid., p. 62.
The visual form is a sign to the fish that it shouldn't eat that thing. It is crucial to stress that aposematism works because the aposematic visual form is both attention-getting and a symbol that it should be avoided.

I have explored various aposematic visual forms in my thesis. As we no longer have any natural predators, human beings do not have natural armor or spikes to protect and warn others as do the sea urchins. However, we can choose to wear attention-getting things or act in attention-getting ways which, given our personal and cultural backgrounds, serve to signal defensiveness. I do not have any natural aposematic characteristics myself (that I know of), nor would I always want to be spiny. But sometimes when I feel vulnerable amongst people, I wish I did possess this primary defensive mechanism. Paradoxically, I usually feel most vulnerable among people when I want to be attractive to them, when I want to be accepted by them or at least not rejected. The conflict between wanting to attract and also wanting to be safe is natural, I think, to humans. Some of my "aposematic" pieces reflect this tension. The visual form of these pieces is intended to be attractive and visually pleasing but also is intended to be perceived as defensive. For examples, the Ring and Vessel series, the Brooch, and the Neckpiece series are "aposematic" in character. Ring #2, #3, and #4 and vessel #1 and #2, for examples, are aposematic because, although attention grabbing and intended to be interesting, the use of steel or bronze protrusions similar to spines signals the unpleasant characteristic of piercing. They serve as a flamboyant sign not to be touched. (fig. 1, 2, 5-11) The anticlastic curve of the Brooch is intended to be attractive and even vulnerable looking by exposing the hollowed underside, but the bronze spines or protrusions surround this space, symbolizing defense by
both threatening puncture if touched and making it difficult to touch the inside. They do not obstruct the sensual form of the curve, they actually enhance it as they radiate out from the spine (fig. 5). The neckpieces also have a protective pointed look. The tops of the pieces are peeled out and closed to create hollow points as they radiate from the neck in all directions (fig. 1, 2). In all of these above pieces, the visual form which is aesthetically pleasing and symbolic of defense is a permanent feature. Thus, they reflect the primary defensive mechanisms found in nature, and they also function as aposematic.

Secondary defensive mechanisms are those which operate during an encounter with a predator. These can be either passive or active. A passive secondary defensive mechanism, as defined by Edmunds, is one which requires no active role on the part of the attacked animal in order to work. For examples, the poisonous taste of an insect or the puncturing from the spines of a sea urchin do not require either the insect or the urchin to act. Active secondary defensive mechanisms, on the contrary, are those which do require the attacked animal to take action in order to work. A typical active secondary defensive mechanism found in nature is the "prepared retreat". As defined by Edmunds, a prepared retreat is a place either prepared by or a part of the animal into which it can retreat. Gastropods, a single shell bearing sea creature, are perfect examples of creatures with prepared retreats: once disturbed by a predator, they can withdraw into their protective shell. Mimicking this

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7 Again following Edmunds [1974], p. 136.
8 ibid., p. 136.
9 ibid., p. 144.
approach to defense, humans have made armor into which they climb before entering the battlefield.

Humans don’t have shells naturally, but we sometimes feel the need to retreat into a safe area. The Hair Ornament series reflects the idea of a prepared retreat. Each is a miniature sanctuary— the hollow forms surround a space, not unattainable yet protected. They are not human scale shelters; I do not think of my work as armor. Yet these elegant visual forms are intended to symbolize the idea of a prepared retreat (fig. 12). The Bracelet series was also made with this idea in mind, but the focus is not on shellform retreats. The curvilinear arms radiate and reach out from the arm. They are conceived of as being soft and fluid, more like the tentacles of a sea anemone, and as having their own retreat — the interior space created by the band they surround (fig. 3, 4).

Retaliation is another kind of active secondary defensive mechanism found in nature. Retaliation is more aggressive than retreat. The retaliation of an animal to its attacker is usually the last secondary defense employed.\textsuperscript{10} These may be the use of the animal’s gathering and eating apparatus (claws, teeth, beaks, or pincers). Other animals have specialized “weapons” for defense. Many primary defensive mechanisms may be employed in retaliation. For example, the sea urchins spines, which serve as aposematic primary defensive mechanisms, also serve to actively retaliate to a predator’s attack by piercing the predator’s mouth and throat when it is ingested. The spines then function as active secondary defensive mechanisms.

\textsuperscript{10} ibid. p. 182.
Retaliation is one of the more prominent active secondary defensive mechanisms available to human beings. Without spines and armor growing on our backs, our nails, teeth, hands and the weapons we make come in handy to repel attack. Visual forms which are used as active secondary defensive mechanisms appear consistently in my thesis work. For example, the pieces in the Ring and Vessel series have erect spines and are to be regarded as the more dangerous, potentially active defensive forms. They protect a soft stretched skin-like interior area which resembles a vertebra or fleshy web (fig. 7 - 11). Any of the abstracted organic visual forms in my thesis work which allude to the function of aposematic primary defensive mechanisms also can suggest secondary active defensive mechanisms.
Why?

So, you may ask WHY? Why abstracted organic visual forms which are defensive? Why do it in jewelry? I asked myself similar questions, and, in short, I'm not exactly sure how to answer this. As I was working on the pieces, I know I was seeking to explore the visual forms I was naturally drawing in my sketch book, and I know I was curious to understand the personal significance of these forms and the tension between the aesthetic and defensive properties of the visual forms. I explored the concept of attractive defensive visual forms both expressionistically (personal need, for myself) and exhibitionistically (public need, for response). After having made each of the pieces, I began to see where I might be going, and to develop some answers to these questions. I now believe there are at least three main ideas surfacing in the work.

One recurrent idea which I find guiding my work is the desire for a purely aesthetic response to the visual forms of the pieces. I won't say anything here about the art versus craft distinction. I'm not trying to add to that long and messy argument. But I do want the visual forms embodied in my jewelry to be considered from a purely aesthetic, and non functional, point of view. On the level of form before content, I seek the positive response to the work just for its composition or shape, and not for its craftsmanship or utility. In connection with this idea is the desire to elicit a specific aesthetic response, that of attraction, curiosity, and the desire of the viewer to approach the pieces.

I also am working with the felt tension between the purely aesthetic response that the piece elicits and the recognition, on the part of the viewer, of the defensiveness of the form of the piece. I want the viewer
to experience this tension between the attractive and the defensive simultaneously. I am therefore seeking a specific considered response to the visual forms in addition to the specific aesthetic response: a felt tension on the part of the viewer to approach and not to touch.

Lastly, I want to explore the analogy between the attractiveness of many defensive visual forms in nature and the human need to feel attractive to, yet safe from others. The natural visual forms I am working with are determined by their apparent defensive functions, but the same form considered from the aesthetic viewpoint is alluring. Abstracted to the personal level, the forms come to symbolize my felt need to be attractive while at the same time being safe.
Conclusion

I have always thought we could learn about ourselves by studying other animals. In my thesis, I address visual forms and their function in nature by working with abstractions of them and exploring their function in the human world. Defensive mechanisms and allure in the animal world are considered in connection with defensive mechanisms and allure in the human world. I have to stress that I don't think I have fully answered the why questions, and I don't think I will ever fully answer them. The thesis is just a beginning of a personal exploration of these and related ideas that reoccur in my work.
Bibliography


fig. 1. Necklace #1: sterling silver and fresh water pearls, 6x10x8"
fig. 4. Bracelet #2: fine and sterling silver, 7x5x6"
fig. 5. Brooch: sterling silver and bronze, 6x2x2.5"
Fig. 6. Ring #1: sterling silver, 1.5 x 2.5 x 2.5"
fig 7. Ring #2; sterling silver and steel, 2x3x3"
fig. 9. Ring #4: sterling silver and bronze, 5x3x3"
fig. 11. Vessel #2: mahogany and steel, 8x4x4'
fig 12. Hair Ornament series: sterling silver, bronze or copper, 8x1x1" to 12x2x2"
fig. 13. Egon Schiele: Autumn Tree with Fuchsias, 1909
Fig. 15. Gustav Klimt: right wall of The Beethoven Frieze. The Longing for Happiness Finds Repose in Poetry, 1902