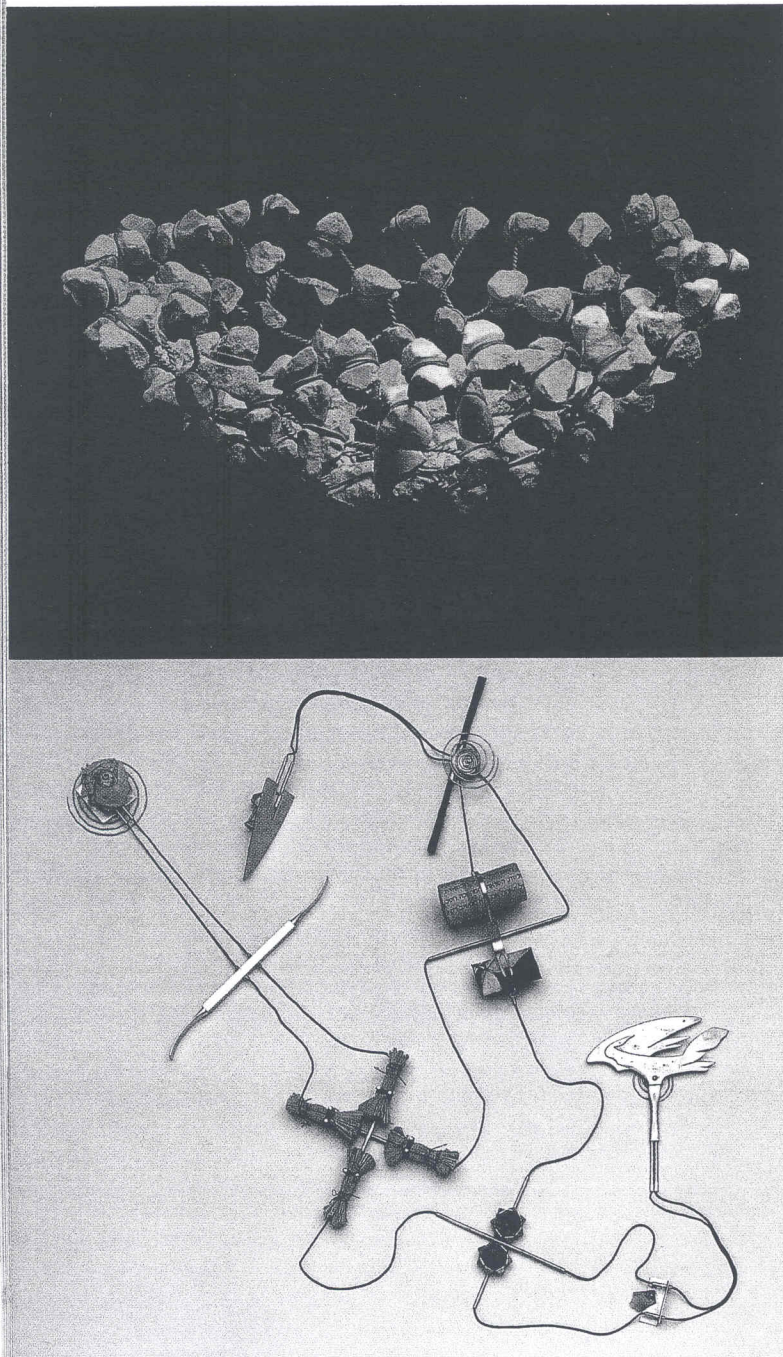


# BIANCA ESHEL-GERSHUNI, VERED KAMINSKI, ESTHER KNOBEL, DEGANIT STERN SCHOCKEN

RACINE ART MUSEUM

RACINE, WI

SEPTEMBER 17, 2006-JANUARY 21, 2007



During the uncertainty of the Gulf War in 1991, the Israeli jeweler Bianca Eshel-Gershuni persisted in working at her studio near Tel Aviv. Despite the warning blare of sirens every night on television, she continued to fabricate a richly ornate series of painted silver fish brooches, inlaid with semiprecious stones, shells, glass and found objects. Pondering her work later, Eshel-Gershuni realized that a larger brooch in the series had metamorphosed during its making into the image of a combat plane, complete with two tiny sample bottles of men's cologne—which she had previously attached to the wings—as missiles.

This anecdote—related 16 years later in a catalog—crystallizes the realities of making art for Eshel-Gershuni, Vered Kaminski, Esther Knobel and Deganit Stern Schocken within the intense, precarious politics of life, death and war in Israel. Works by the four are brought together in the exhibition "Women's Tales: Four Leading Israeli Jewelers," co-organized by the Racine Art Museum and The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

These are masterly artists. All born before 1954, the four have created highly individualized bodies of work which—though none are concerned with making "political art"—acutely and poignantly reflect an era of enormous social and political volatility. It is an era in which Israel has formed its identity in the Middle East, the roles of women have radically expanded worldwide and the fundamental nature of art jewelry has undergone a thorough interrogation within the field.

The painful vagaries of war, for example, assert themselves in Knobel's baroque, leaf-infested *Camouflage Necklace*, 1982, composed of recycled materials which evoke the wreaths used in Israel for fallen soldiers, or in the mordant, elegiac hand ornament titled "My Grave," *Ring*, 1977, by Eshel-Gershuni, whose 27-year-old husband died in the 1956 Sinai War. While Kaminski has pursued the use of alternative materials in her art for conceptual reasons, it is probably no accident that she entwines gravel stones from Jerusalem streets within her delicate metalwork, eliciting an intensely literal identification with the land of Israel itself.

While their art is clearly informed by a distinct sense of place (and most are not particularly well-known in the United States), all four artists have worked prominently at an international level. Kaminski, Knobel and Stern Schocken studied art abroad and garnered one-person exhibitions at the celebrated Galerie Ra in Amsterdam, an early outpost of the revolutionary "New Jewelry" movement during the 1970s and 80s. All four have had a hand in the aesthetic upheaval within the international community of metal artists who have probed the most elemental assumptions, forms and meanings of jewelry.

Each artist has a signature style (Eshel-Gershuni and Knobel generate a richly sensuous materiality, while Kaminski and Stern



Schocken tend to emphasize a crisply refined sense of line), but all address similar themes in "Women's Tales," themes which carry the hallmark of avant-garde jewelry practices. Jewelry is a hybrid art form here, straddling the conceptual and the physical, operating within the realm of ideas as much as within the world of decoration. In that vein, Stern Schocken's *Body Pieces*, a series from the 1990s, emerge as small silver assemblies of mobile architectural units laid out over the body like the plan of a city on a landscape. A deft blend of architecture, sculpture and jewelry, this art utilizes construction and use of space as well as jewelry's ornamental possibilities for aesthetic punch.

All four artists, too, emphasize jewelry's intimate relationship to the human body (Eshel-Gershuni carefully finishes the back of her pieces, which touches the wearer's body). Wearability places jewelry within the context of site-specific sculpture. It stands at the nexus of a dynamic relationship between the wearer, who "performs" the art's message, and the viewer, who encounters it. Knobel's series of *Immigrants Brooches* from the 90s, for example, cut from the tin of Chinese tea boxes and balanced on tiny wheels, sensitively reiterates the predicament of those who have been forced from home.

Finally, the work of these Israeli jewelers challenges the significance of preciousness, a theme which reverberates consistently throughout jewelry art's international community. In the early 1990s, for example, Kaminski produced an elegant series of cast concrete brooches embedded with metal, just as Stern Schocken was also fabricating her own series of brooches, small silver spirals stuffed with silk fabric rather than valuable stones. Both sets of work are clever elegies, as is the entire exhibition, on the search for the sublime within the precarious nature of everyday life.

—POLLY ULLRICH

The exhibition is at the Bellevue Arts Museum, Washington, March 8–June 17, and travels to other U.S. venues through June 25, 2008, before touring Europe in 2008–9. The tour ends at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, in 2009–10. The 128-page hard-cover catalog, with contributions by Davira S. Taragin, Alex Ward and Helen W. Drutt English, is \$50 from Hudson Hills Press, Manchester, VT, 802-362-6450.

*Polly Ullrich is a Chicago-based art critic.*

TOP AND BOTTOM: BIANCA ESHEL-GERSHUNI—*Brooch*, 1991, silver, paint, shell, turquoise, pearl, plastic, 6½ by 4⅞ by 1 inches; ESTHER KNOBEL—*Immigrants Brooch*, 1993, recycled tin can, nickel silver, elastic band, stainless steel, 4¾ by 5 by 1½ inches. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP AND BOTTOM: VERED KAMINSKI—*Basket*, 1991, stones and brass, 4¾ by 12 by 12 inches; DEGANIT STERN SCHOCKEN—*Body Piece (City)*, 1993, nickel silver, stainless steel, paper, silver, shell, 30 by 10 by 1½ inches. Photos/Michael Tropea.

