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REVIEW | *The Life and Times of Robert W. Ebendorf: Jeweler and Metalsmith*
December 21, 2014



The Life and Times of Robert W. Ebendorf: Jeweler and Metalsmith
Exhibit and Artist Conversation | Racine Art Museum

Robert W. Ebendorf is an artist absolutely in love with his work. I was fortunate enough recently to get to meet him, chat with him, and view a sizeable exhibition currently on view at the Racine Art Museum. Ebendorf is a master jeweler who is quietly confident, particularly for someone so accomplished. More so, he is an even kinder soul who held back tears when thanking others who have supported him along the way, artistically or otherwise. Resplendently joyful, graciously humble, and genuinely sincere, Ebendorf is one of the most engaging people I've met in a very long time - the kind of person I hate to say goodbye to, wishing I had known him for many years instead of just thirty short minutes. It should not have been a surprise then when I find my attraction for his work to behave in much the same fashion, drawing me in and inviting me to linger. Each playing to my long-held associations with both common and extraordinary remnants of our collective existence and subsequently divulging my (and his) innermost secrets. It is the work of a master indeed.



Robert W. Ebendorf has spent the last 50 years creating jewelry, assemblages, and hollowware from metal and found objects. A cumulative realization of his life story, his pieces celebrate a timeline of his concepts and aesthetics and serve as a record of where he began to the joyful place he has conjured for our adornment. And it all began in Kansas. His familial experience is evident everywhere in his work: the sense of tailoring, the awareness of the body, and the skill of a craft he learned from his grandparents. There is the freedom learned from crafting and gluing sea shells to place cards for his mother's bridge club, and the wild abandon with which he juxtaposes parts and pieces celebrated from arranging his own museum of artifacts with his father in the garage. During his talk, Ebendorf mentions his lifelong struggle with dyslexia and how his efforts to overcome it are always prevalent. He likens his diagnosis with his abilities to "shuffle" and collage the words, objects and images in his work. I find this an interesting comparison - a unique ability to maneuver and manipulate components he has scavenged echoing the distortion he experiences in real life. Yet here, under his control, they become shapes, forms, and designs within his compositions as opposed to any pause in his comprehension. If this is a

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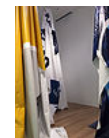
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Go on...say hello.

hindrance, it is invisible in more ways than it shows. The end result is utterly compelling jewelry and objects such as *Off the Street*, *From the Beach*, 1992, (featured at the top of this article) a neckpiece which includes pink plastic spoons, plant identification tags, and other miscellany found while Ebendorf walked with his daughter on the beach and to school. Each a history of his daily journeys, of memories created in his own life, and his documentation of finding the beauty in the unexpected. It is literally work from his sleeve for our bodies.

"I belong to a family of makers," Ebendorf says, "and I take that history to heart and with great seriousness." Meticulous and precise, mimicking the Scandinavian design concepts he cultivated through a Fulbright Fellowship and secondary Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant to Norway, Ebendorf's base of craftsmanship is evident in all of his work (not just his silver pieces, though they are spectacular). An engaged problem solver with an intuitive spirit, his discipline in the art of making and the mastery of technique established during this pivotal time is the foundation from which he has drawn from throughout his career, evident in works such as *Saccharine Dispenser*, 1975. His technique is seductively perfect, demanding respect and inviting me in to explore his ideas. In our brief conversation, Ebendorf repeatedly says, "I paid my dues (referring to technique) and now I can be the outlaw." I couldn't agree more.



Considered a pioneer of contemporary art jewelry and celebrated for his imaginative combinations of materials, Ebendorf uses found objects and discarded remnants (bits and pieces of what others might consider trash), as well as non-precious materials and precious metals to create his treasures. "Instead of maybe using diamonds and gold and pearls all the time," he says, "I might be using a piece of metal off the street...but these objects become my gold, become my precious material. And I treat them with that kind of respect." His active curiosity has led to the inclusion of a wide variety of materials, ranging from Korean newspapers to natural river stones, Formica to discarded consumer goods, and bones to aluminum cans.

Keep It in the Can, 2013 is a prime example of Ebendorf's cravings to challenge himself to make the used into something new. Fearlessly he turns a discarded aluminum can into a delicate brooch, taking me on his journey to bring a radical idea into form – always highlighted by his masterful skills and honest sensibility of adornment. There is memory contained in these objects, and it is re-applied through the artist's eye and transformed further when I pin it to my chest. The history and past come with these lost items, all re-configured for a beautiful future. Ebendorf elaborates, "I began with a quiet sense of design (in Norway) and was then able to move to materials that were unorthodox. But it isn't about the material per se, it's about what I'm thinking." While the materials play the starring role in his work, the value of his pieces aren't defined by the material, but rather his concepts subtly at play.



When I met Robert face to face, the first thing I noticed was the glistening in his eyes and a mischievous smile obviously hiding delicious tales I couldn't wait to hear. He tells the captivated group gathered, "It's all about being joyful and playful." It's so rare, yet wonderful, to hear an artist talk about their practice being full of joy, full of adventure even. So much so that this is, in fact, the entire point to his work. His inquisitive sense of play allows him to turn his investigations into what he refers to as "representations," such as *The Snake that lives in Ron's Garden*, 2012. His self-imposed provocations engage both our imaginations (his and mine) by questioning the very nature of adornment itself as well as ideas about the preciousness of jewelry at large. Ebendorf's conceptual approach to jewelry lies not only in the intellectual repositioning of familiar objects, but more so in his abilities to physically transform materials in curious ways. Ebendorf says, "I make no distinction about materials. They can be gold, snakeskin, tin foil, or rusty metal. They all have beauty and I want to dance with them." His beautiful

objects are not simply about re-fashioning the mundane, but they also elevate the value of what might otherwise be thrown away or overlooked. By reassessing the meaning of the artifacts of his daily life, as well as my own, his pieces often reverse the idea of what is considered to be precious. The profound incongruity between what his pieces are made from, and what they become in his hands is, in the end, what gives his pieces their beauty. And it is his ability to create such beauty that gives his pieces their value.

There is beauty in the unexpected, and in Ebendorf's case, there is beauty to be made out of chaos – he notes, "I know I challenge people who want conventional beauty – I use broken glass and found bone alongside pearls." As seen in *Neckpiece*, 1994, Ebendorf boldly confronts artistic and material hierarchies through his use of disparate materials, confirming that beauty (conventional or otherwise) can be found in unforeseen places. His self-conscious approach of interesting and unanticipated juxtapositions transforms the historical identities of adornment, and then he invites us to wear them. "I am fearless about adornment," Ebendorf confirms. While I could persuasively argue that each of his works are sculptures as well as jewelry, almost all are meant to be worn. While taking the form of brooches, neckpieces, and other traditional forms, his jewelry is not always conventional in how it frames the body but it does keep the body in mind.



Subtle but not simple, *Neckpiece*, 1990, crafted from wood, found paper, gold string, graphite, and copper, has the boldness that is typical of Ebendorf's aesthetic. At the same time, the piece is light-years from the tradition of fine jewelry making that uses sumptuous gemstones and precious metals for glittering effect and enhancement

Not coming from an agenda to comment on religious, political or social issues (though sometimes present in the articles he collects), these particular appropriations are more connected to the symbolic power of images and the memorial aspects these items have experienced collectively, personally and historically before becoming a part of his work. *JC is a Handful*, 2014 prominently includes a found crucifix that somehow feels neutralized of its overt connotations. Ebendorf instinctively and expertly weaves objects significant in message and meaning as individual pieces as well as part of a larger cultural context into his work. It's fitting that he keeps me guessing not only to what material he is incorporating

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into his pieces, but also leaves the door wide open as to why.

Robert W. Ebendorf, is a master metalsmith and designer – an individual who has undoubtedly made significant contributions to the field of contemporary jewelry throughout his career. And this is a serious, detailed, and important exhibit that features the depth of his skills and celebrates the sheer breadth of his work. It exceeded my expectations in every way. But, what was most fulfilling for me was the confirmation that he is in fact, the rare and spectacular person I had imagined – a kind and generous man full of the joy, humor, and grace he so successfully infuses into his work. When asked what his response was to the exhibit, Ebendorf replied, almost overwhelmed, "seeing all the work together, my history and my past, the good and the dark, it's interesting to see it all together." Aptly put, and so you should.

The Life and Times of Robert W. Ebendorf: Jeweler and Metalsmith (featuring more than 100 works from almost five decades) is open at the Racine Art Museum through January 18, 2015. For more information, visit: <http://www.ramart.org/content/life-and-times-robert-w-ebendorf-jeweler-and-metalsmith>



Images (from top to bottom): *Off the Street, From the Beach Necklace*, 1992, found plastic objects and base metal, 2 1/8 x 14 3/4 inches diameter, Racine Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Brent Best, Photo: Tom Van Eynde; *Serving J.C.*, 1994, silver plate, sterling silver, tin, plastic, brass, and found objects, 16 x 12 x 12 inches, Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Artists, Photo: Tom Van Eynde; *Saccharine Dispenser*, 1975, sterling silver, brass, copper, pearl, opal and 14-k gold plating, The Porter • Price Collection, Photo: EMCox; *Ram It*, 2014, pearl, found objects, glass beads, and copper, 4 x 3 3/8 x 3/4 inches, Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Artist in Honor of John Satterfield and Linda Darty, Photo: Tom Van Eynde; *Keep it in the Can Brooch*, 2013, Found medallion, printed tin, aluminum can, and copper, Courtesy of the Artist, Photo: EMCox; *The Snake that lives in Ron's Garden*, 2012, found plastic, copper, pearls, and printed tin, The Porter • Price Collection, Photo: EMCox; *Necklace*, 1994, found bone, sterling silver, pearls, and nylon cord, Courtesy of the Artist, Photo: EMCox; *Neckpiece*, 1990, wood, found paper, gold string, graphite, and copper, Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Artist in Honor of Ron Porter and Joe Price, Photo: EMCox; *JC is a Handful*, 2014, found crucifix, jewelry, plastic, medallion and copper, Courtesy of the Artist, Photo: EMCox; Bruce W. Pepich, Executive Director and Curator of Collections, Racine Art Museum (left) with the Artist Robert W. Ebendorf (right), Photo: EMCox

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