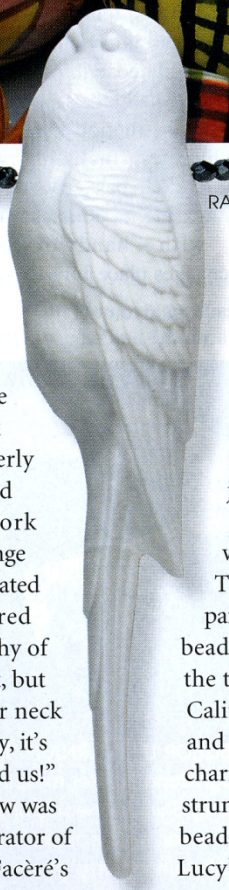


# A Feast of Beads



DEBRA FRITTS

MEGAN BOGONOVICH



RANDY LONG



KRISTEN CLIFFEL

There were many delights in A Feast of Beads, a recent Facère gallery exhibition of jewelry made by ceramic artists and jewelers who work with clay. But perhaps none of the work was so utterly exuberant and purely pleasurable to the eye and the hand as the large clay bead necklaces made by New York sculptor Megan Bogonovich. Her hollow clay beads range in size from cherries to tangerines. They have the elongated dimensions of kiwis and look like brilliantly-colored tropical fruits embellished with the swirling calligraphy of Islamic tiles. The necklaces are surprisingly lightweight, but make bold statements. Put one of these around your neck and you might as well be shouting out to the world “Hey, it’s great to be alive! Look at all the beauty and joy around us!”

With works by seventeen American artists, the show was organized by Gail M. Brown, a Philadelphia-based curator of contemporary craft. The show came about through Facère’s owner Karen Lorene’s intention to tie in with the Seattle NCECA Conference for arts educators who specialize in clay. Many galleries around the city featured ceramic art during the conference. However Facère’s show was singular in that Brown asked ceramic sculptors who normally do not make jewelry to scale down their work and come up with clay jewelry

that in some way incorporated the idea of beads. Approximately two-thirds of the artists in the exhibition are ceramic sculptors with little or no previous experience making jewelry. The remaining are jewelers who sometimes use clay in their work.

One of the most pleasing aspects of A Feast of Beads was how terrific the work feels when you handle it. The clay is smooth yet it has a heft in the hand that is particularly appealing in the pieces that are the most like beads. Bogonovich’s fantastic necklaces are wonderful to the touch. So are the necklaces by Karen T. Massaro, a California sculptor; Pattie Chalmers, an Illinois sculptor; and Kathryn Narrow, a Pennsylvania potter. Massaro’s charming clay beads look like colorful bits of fancy candies strung together into a necklace. Chalmers’s necklaces are beads with a provocative surrealist twist. Her necklace Lucy’s Pearls is a choker made of clay “eyes,” each one open and looking. Her Campfire Heart suggests a heart inflamed with passion. And though Narrow’s black and white bead necklaces are more conventional, their nod to the subtle abstract patterning in some ethnic jewelry is inescapable.


The history of beads is as old as humankind. Beads are worn not only to display personal style, status and wealth, but



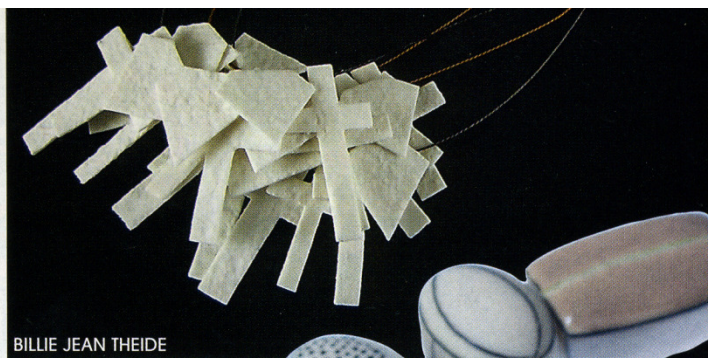
also to ward off evil and help send off prayers. Kristen Cliffler, an Ohio sculptor, made a set of worry beads out of tiny clay bees, hearts, blue birds, and other symbols of what life is supposed to be about. She calls them Worry Beads for the Ever After and she also made a jewelry box for them. It is a ceramic cupcake topped by a fairy tale cottage. The top of the cupcake comes off and you store the beads inside. The beads and their cupcake vault are sweet like a toy for a young girl. But there is a sly barb here. The cartoon quality of the piece begs the question of whether living happily ever after is real, or, like a fairy tale, pure fantasy.

In the exhibition *Facère* did not show images of the sculptors' regular work. But a presentation given at the opening made the perhaps not surprising point that most of the sculptors made jewelry that looked a lot like their sculpture, only a lot smaller. Debra Fritts, a Georgia sculptor, is known for her explorations of the female figure and faces. For *A Feast of Beads* she made dramatic necklaces and pendants of women's heads. Jenny Mendes, a potter and sculptor from Ohio, normally makes narrative work with a folk art quality. Her terracotta pendants for the *Facère* exhibition are endearing, colorful little heads of animals and spirits. Perhaps you wear one of these serene little creatures for good luck.

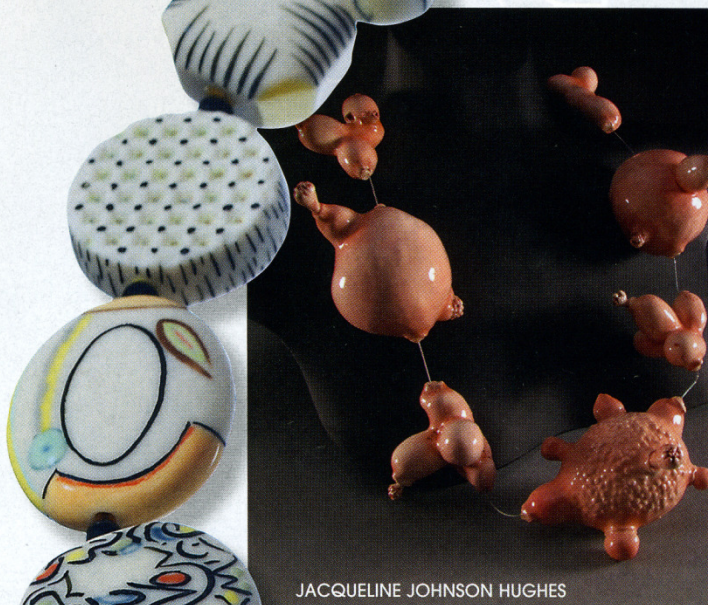
A *Feast of Beads* made it clear that in the hands of artists, clay makes wonderful jewelry. But several of the artists who work with porcelain took their assignments a couple of steps beyond simply making lively, aesthetically attractive jewelry. Their skill with porcelain resulted in elegant, refined work with an avant-garde sensibility. Randy Long is an Indiana jewelry artist whose white porcelain Parakeet Bead necklace is like a *haiku*—small, perfectly balanced, discreet. Besides the parakeet bead, which Long slipcast using fine Hungarian porcelain, the piece includes small Swarovski crystals, hematite and white jade beads. Billie Jean Theide, an Illinois metalsmith and ceramic scholar, also used Hungarian porcelain for her subtle necklaces, including one that consists of a couple of dozen of small, flat, porcelain crosses and other shapes strung like talismans on a sterling silver and nylon cord. The porcelain charms sound like delicate wind chimes when the wearer moves.

Blake Jamison Williams's pieces also have a musical quality. Pick up her Rose necklace and it makes a gentle clinking, like the sound of small seashells carried in a wooden box. Williams's necklace, haircomb and earrings are porcelain petals strung together like beads. Williams is a Michigan sculptor whose usual work involves ceramic sculpture made for installations and conceptual work. But in *A Feast of Beads*, her work was about beauty and the exquisite enchantments of the natural world, whether we are considering flower petals or porcelain. 

*Facère's next show opens at its Seattle, Washington, location on July 18 with an artist lecture and gallery reception. IDIOSINCRATIC, featuring nine jewelers, explores the concept of sin in all its infinite permutations.*



BILLIE JEAN THEIDE



JACQUELINE JOHNSON HUGHES



KAREN T. MASSARO

BLAKE JAMISON WILLIAMS