

*Dorothy Erickson, 'Ocean Currents', 1997, tablepiece, sterling silver, 18 ct gold, aquamarine, steel, 35 x 80 x 13 cm*

## A LIGHTNESS OF TOUCH

Throughout a career spanning two decades, Dorothy Erickson has sought to create jewellery that moves in unison with the body and belies the inert nature of the material object. Text by Margaret Moore.

It is often the case with distinguished, senior artists that their art is, at times, subsumed by separate career pursuits. Pursuits which are either chosen, bestowed or owing to some other physical or circumstantial necessity. Western Australian jeweller Dorothy Erickson is a case in point. Ever an enthusiast for broad-based development of the arts through writing, exhibitions, curatorship, research and teaching, she has readily been distracted into projects around her own design practice, not least of which

*'Strings V', 1980, neckring with detachable brooch, stg silver, 18 ct gold, 22 x 22 x 5 cm. Collection: Australian National Gallery*

included a doctorate in the history of gold and silversmithing in Western Australia.

Erickson has undertaken numerous editing roles, written extensively for journals and worked in the area of architectural and design heritage research with collaborator, Dr Robyn Taylor. In contrast to the scope and enrichment that working in these areas provided, her jewellery career, conversely, suffered the debilitation of bouts of repetitive strain injury. Following something of a hiatus in "making", in recent months she has enjoyed a reinvigorated period

*'Golden Brolgas', 1992, brooch pair, 18 ct gold and sterling silver*





'Baque I', 1998, brooch, 18 ct gold, steel, carnelian, 5.5 x 5 x 1.5 cm. Shown in 'Artistic Australia', Japan, 1998

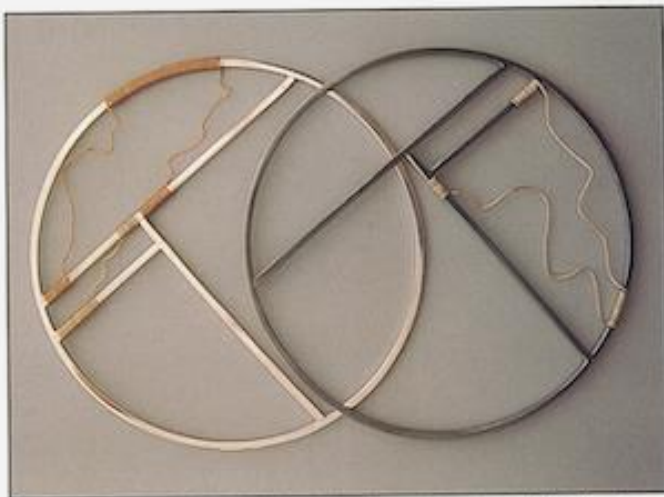
of production, the results of which offer a timely opportunity for reflection upon her work and its current directions.

Invitations in 1998, to provide work for a Japanese market and to help select and exhibit in an Australian jewellery exhibition at Galerie Tiller, Vienna, provided the impetus to unleash certain fermenting ideas into product. In her newest work Erickson has turned to the natural world for inspiration, as she has done so regularly before in a career spanning over 20 years. Approximations of marine life and the sea permeate her fluidly formed neckpieces, earrings, brooches and a singular table piece, all created in the past year. Her latest jewellery is a liberated distillation of many previous directions. There remains an observable reliance upon representation of the visible world, although it seems more freely

'Manta Ray', 1998, bodypiece, stg silver, stainless steel, 18 ct gold, exhibited in 'Artistic Australia' at six centres in Japan



Craft Arts International No.45, 1999



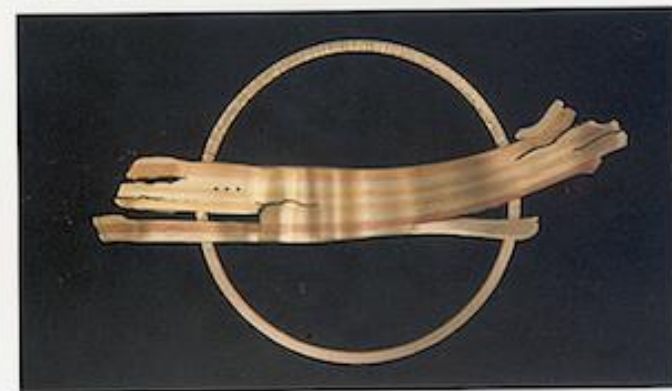
'Sonnet Armings IV and V', 1982, stg silver, 18 ct gold, mookaite, 10 x 10 x 5 cm. Collections: Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim, Germany and the V&A Museum, London

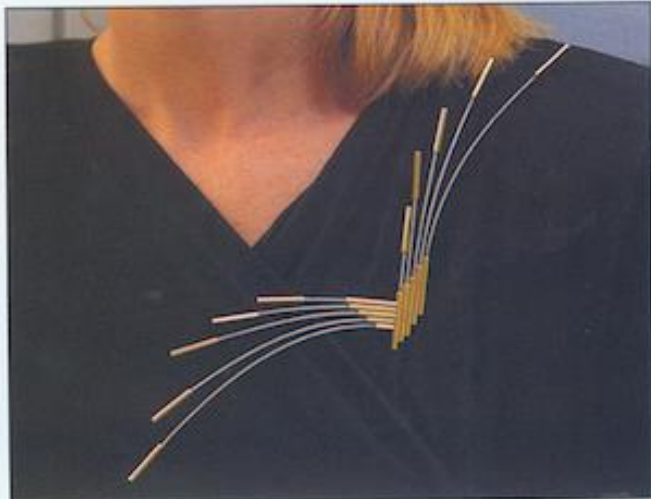


'Strings Braclets', 1979-80, sterling silver, 18 ct gold and copper wire, 10 x 10 x 5 cm. One in the collection of Inge Astenbaum, Vienna

expressive of its own design and its materiality. Earlier and formative works appear by comparison, and not surprisingly, more studied. Many pieces from the 1980s are startling and dramatic in their simplification. The new marine pieces are enticing, ebullient, and less tensile and confronting. The whimsy is more declared through the liveliness of the design, the restraint of scale and the juxtapositions of materials.

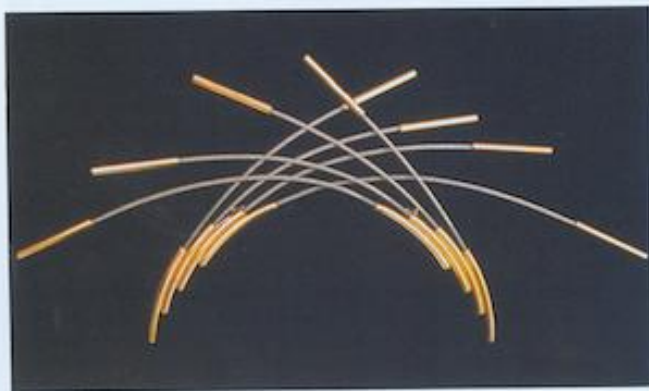
Below: 'Souris Brooch', 1983, stg silver, copper, gilding metal, 7 x 5 x 1 cm. Private collection, Vienna



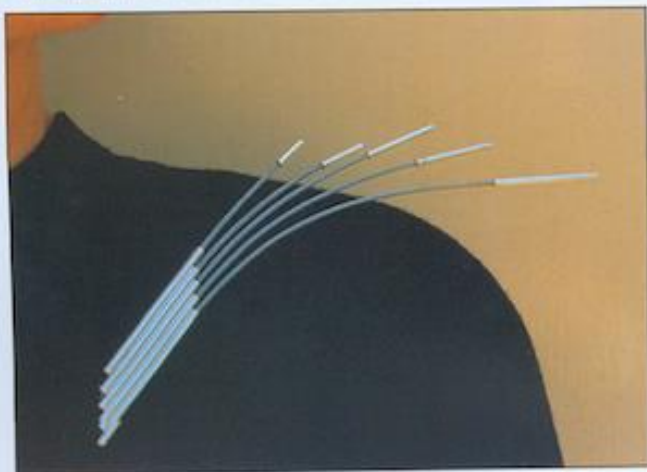


'Golden Bird of Paradise', 1992, brooch, 18 ct gold and steel, 25 x 25 x 1 cm. Dalder Collection.

Throughout her career Erickson has not limited her sources to the sea, nor has she confined her primary influences to other designers or jewellers. She has allowed her work to be informed by a diverse education, coupled with a breadth of interests. Her work has successively drawn upon flora and fauna, landscapes, the sky and other phenomena and has, at



'Golden Brolgas', 1992, brooch pair, 18 ct gold, sterling silver. Variable configuration



'Ceranthus', bodypiece from the Sea Shore Collection, 1997, sterling silver, steel, carnelian, 18 x 19 x 6 cm

times, incorporated the land itself in the form of hard-stones combined with precious metals. On reflection, she acknowledges the importance of both circumstantial and contrived opportunity. She gives parity to the value and significance of differing associations with a range of artists, recognising that some influences have been of a precise, practical nature and others an experiential one of relating to shared perception and analysis.

In a recent interview Erickson commented upon the worth of early professional friendships with landscape artists such as Robert Juniper and Mac Betts, on the impact of attendance at a workshop with German jeweller/sculptor Claus Bury in 1980 and student experience with visiting American Harry Hollander. She attributes Wilhem Mattar with introducing her to working with cable in Cologne in the early 1980s and acknowledges the exchange of long-standing friendships with British jewellers Wendy Ramshaw and David Watkins.

Other key mentors in Erickson's professional development were Eric Car, who taught her to "raise" metal; Monty Holst from whom she learnt forging; Chris Grogos who instructed her in setting stones; and various dental technicians who initiated her into the finer points of metal casting. On a more personal and primal level, Erickson recognises the influence of her upbringing with her mother, Dr Rica Erickson, who is a distinguished botanical illustrator, historian and author.

Also traceable in Erickson's jewellery is her background in drawing and painting. In early works, such as *String Bracelets* of 1979, the loosely woven copper wire entwined within a fixed rim has a drawn, meandering quality, reminiscent of trails of cirrus clouds and rendered with the delineation of a hand-drawn interpretation. There are brooches in gold, silver and mookaite from the *Pilbara Series* of 1983 that read pictorially like a framed image of the land, subtle in their three-dimensional illusion. The stone is presented in a painterly or photographic manner contained by angled metals.

One of Erickson's earliest ambitions was to study fashion design, but a lack of availability of courses

'Willy Wagtail Brooch', 1990, sterling silver and steel cable, 15 x 3 x 5 cm. Private collection, Perth



'Seashore Necklace', 1997, 18 ct gold, aquamarine, 19 x 19 x 1.4 cm. Exhibited in "20 Years of Maker's Mark", 1998

in Perth during the 1960s meant that she followed a conventional path into teaching, then travelled extensively in the UK and Europe before returning to Perth. She then commenced studies in painting and printmaking at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT, now Curtin University). Prior to this she had private tuition in Perth in painting and drawing with Henry Froudust. In England she had studied botany at the Chelsea Institute. In 1970 she became one of the first enrolled students in the newly offered jewellery course at WAIT under Frances Gill. In the 1990s she returned to academic study to undertake her doctorate.

Erickson received notable critical and curatorial acclaim early in her career with a commission from the National Gallery of Australia, under the directorship of James Mollison, to produce a body of work for the national collection. She was also included in the 1982 "Tendenzen" (Trends), a significant international survey exhibition at the Schmuckmuseum in Germany. Such opportunities exposed her work to international and national audiences almost from the outset. This traversal, so early in her career, of the perceived divide between being a state, national or international artist that besets so many emerging Australian artists, provoked a confidence and an energy for experimentation.

Her work in the intervening years has explored geometric intersections and kinetic forces. Pieces inspired by the physiognomy of birds resulted in a series of work that not only captures the essence of flight but also the preening and parading of dancing broilgas and peacock displays. When worn, many of these pieces, such as *Peacock II*, *Golden Bird of Paradise* and *Golden Broilgas*, emulate the affectations of their namesakes. Even when confined to static metal, before Erickson adopted the use of flexible steel cabling, the desire to convey movement is discernible. Pieces that offer detachable components and options in the way they are worn, imbue the work with an autonomy and a potential for motion on different wearers. Positive and negative space is considered equivalently in her designs to ultimately convey this allusion.

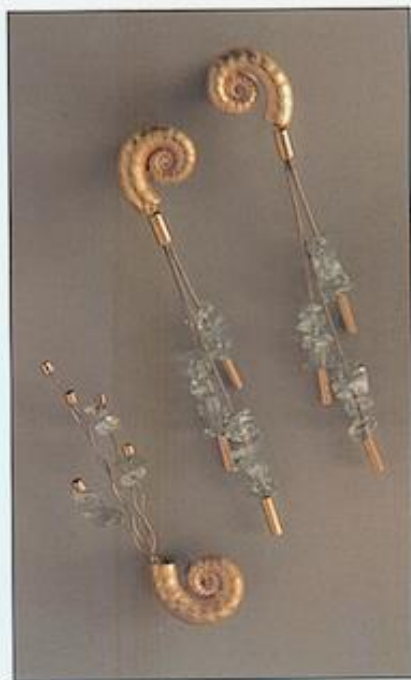
'Periclude', pendants from the Sea Shore Series, stainless steel, 18 ct gold, 18 ct gold. Exhibited in Japan, 1998



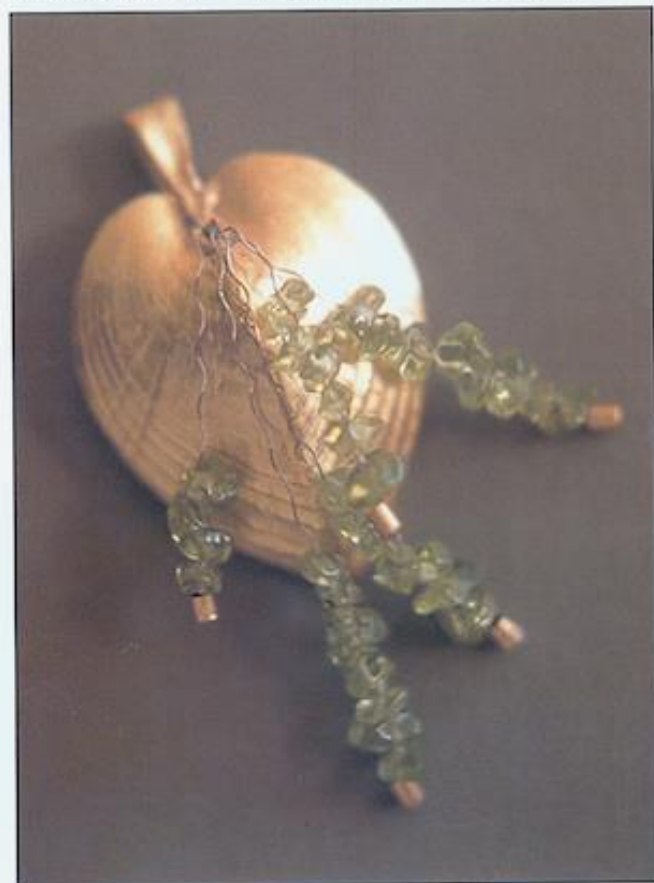
'Sea Anemone III' from the Sea Shore Collection 1997, 18 ct gold, 18 ct gold, 18 ct gold, 18 ct gold, steel cable, 7 x 9 x 0.6 cm

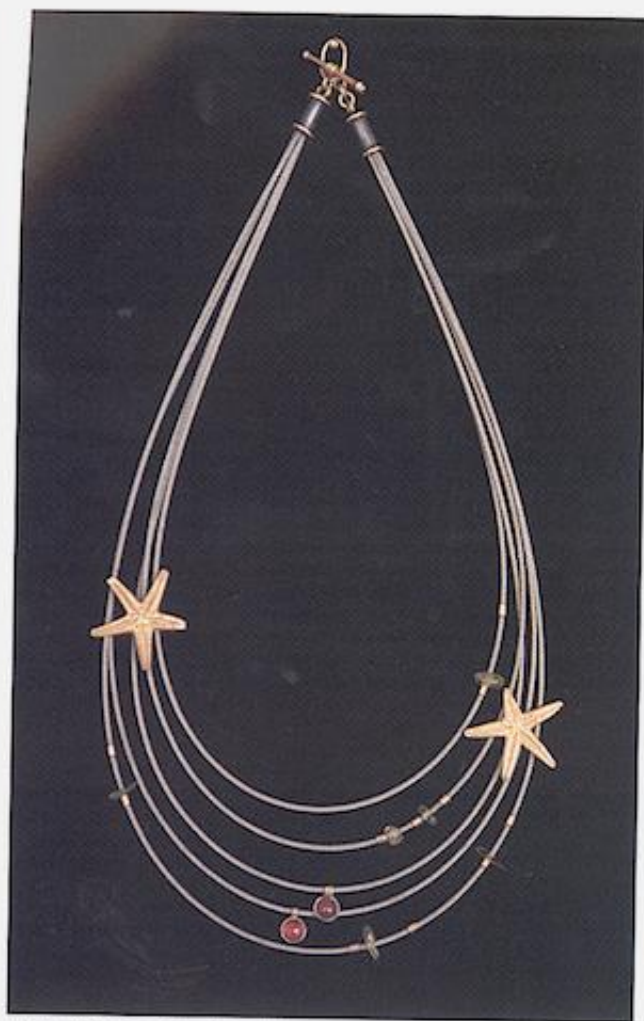


'Tubeworm Tremulant Pins', exhibited in Japan, 1998



'Spindula II Earrings', 1998, sterling silver, steel, gemstones and 18 ct gold. Exhibited in Japan, 1998





'Sea Noel', 1997, necklace, 18 ct gold, stainless steel, pendant, rhodolite garnet, sterling silver, 12 x 20 x 0.5 cm. Exhibited in 'Artistic Australia' in Japan, 1998

'Whirlpool', 1998, bodypiece, stainless steel cable, sterling silver (oxidised), 18 ct gold, 40 x 22 x 0.6 cm. Exhibited in 'Artistic Australia' in Japan, 1998



While all jewellery is enlivened by its wearer, wearability is of paramount concern to Erickson. This commitment is evident in the freedom given to the wearer in the positioning and "play" of a piece. Her use of differing materials and techniques has simply made this more direct and viable.

Like folds of fabric or threads of cotton, the new work on a marine theme gathers together fine strands of steel cable with 18 ct gold that is scattered or punctuated with gemstones. The glint of gold or the translucence of the stones are fractured and dispersed with every movement of the hand or of the wearer, imaginatively evoking breaking waves, ripples at the shore or sea anemones. There is a lightness of touch in this jewellery that evolved from earlier kinetic designs and audacious body wear. Well-documented bodypieces, such as *Peacock II* from 1990, epitomise the sculptural energy achieved consistently by Erickson. It is most equivalently realised again in 1998 with *Manta Ray*, although there is a softening in the way the latter piece falls over and upon the body in contrast to sitting on or across the body.

There has always been an interest in harmonising the relationship between wearable object and body form, interlinking the contours of metal or stone with the contours of physique. Technically, Erickson has devised or employed clasping methods which occasionally give the wearer flexibility in how a piece is worn. A length can be adjusted or strands gathered at varying points, altering the emphasis of the line or character of the design. Elements in the new work suggest this relationship is more effortlessly achieved, the jewellery surrendering to the wearer, although no less engaging to the viewer. In spite of their elaborate nature, the marine pieces are gently comfortable in their role of adornment.

Some of the new pieces also share aspects of the literalness of Erickson's graduate series from the 1970s, that depicted fruit forms in resin inlays with silver. Works incorporating cast shells in a distinctly representational manner owe something in lineage to the student fruit studies and possibly the early excursions into drawing and painting classes in Perth. The delicate *Sea Shore Necklace* (1997), *Spirula II Earrings* (1998) and *Ocean Currents Tablepiece* (1997) are all festive in feel and provide unambiguous references to their heritage, by conjuring up the stealth of the sea anemone or the natural treasures washed to shore. The marine series offers a refined, figurative imagery that has not featured stylistically before. Even when birds, landscapes or skies have previously been evoked, it has been in an abstracted, geometric or distilled language.

Erickson's jewellery is an amalgamation of technical adventurousness with the development of an artistic vocabulary derived from personal observations and research, as well as experience in working both in two and three dimensions. Her pursuit of jewellery that operates in unison with the body endures and gives her work an articulation and expressiveness that belies the inert nature of the material object. It is apparent that her jewellery career weaves in and out of all her interests and the pieces themselves shift back and forth in the development of ideas and images. The recent "marine" jewellery sustains Dorothy Erickson's practice and continues to expand her vocabulary in Australian jewellery and design, as well as her audience and market.

**Margaret Moore**

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