

Multi-skilling. It's one of those coy euphemisms that abound in our age of cut-backs in the name of (another coy euphemism) "rationalisation". Basically, it means that, with an absence of job-security, you've got to be prepared to do anything to survive. Well, while those in "straight" occupations/fields might think this is something new, for those in the arts it seems like simply business as usual – there's never been anything as cosy as "job security". However, careers are possible, even highly successful ones, if you're prepared to put as much creativity into your professional development as your art/craft work. Here, Fred Stewart profiles the career path of pioneering local jeweller and academic, the indefatigable Dr Dorothy Erickson, to show us how, with enough gusto, such a career can be managed. In addition, he reveals the incredibly significant work Dorothy has done to support and further craft in WA over some forty years of passionate commitment to her causes...

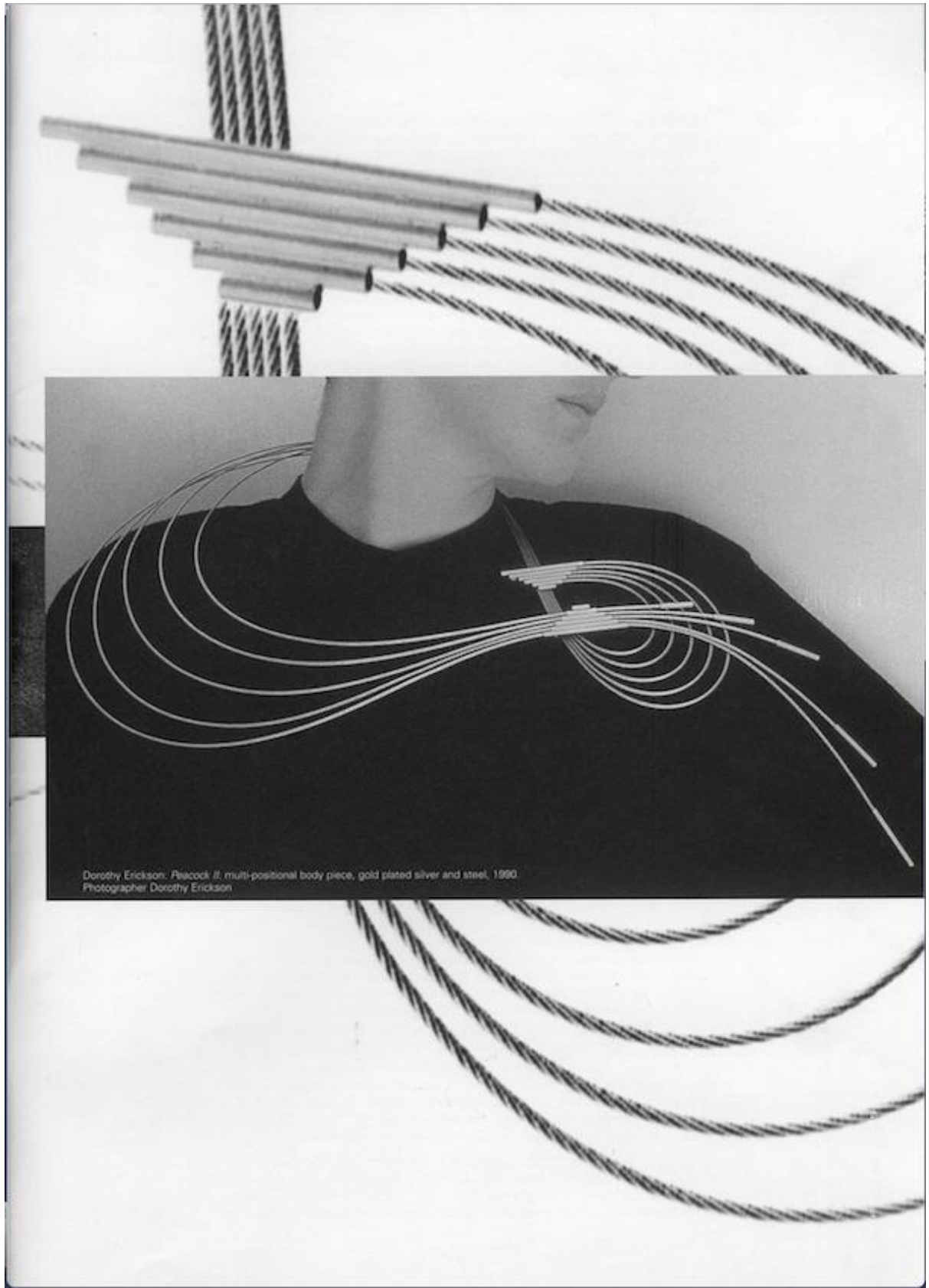
DOROTHY ERICKSON

THE MANY FACETED WESTERN AUSTRALIAN JEWELLER

Combining academic excellence as a respected scholar on craft (and other) histories with international standing as a jeweller, the career of Dr Dorothy Erickson is, to put it mildly, a many faceted one.

Erickson began her professional life in 1959 as a primary school teacher when she accepted a posting to Bolgart, the very same small country town in which she grew up. Two years later, she earned a position at Nedlands Primary School as a demonstration teacher. Shortly after taking up this appointment, though, she took time off from teaching in order to spend a few years in the UK and Europe on an extended working holiday. Significantly, as it would turn out, her stay in England provided her with numerous opportunities to absorb London's cultural life, such as the (then) newly established Design Centres that were stocked with well designed and crafted objects.

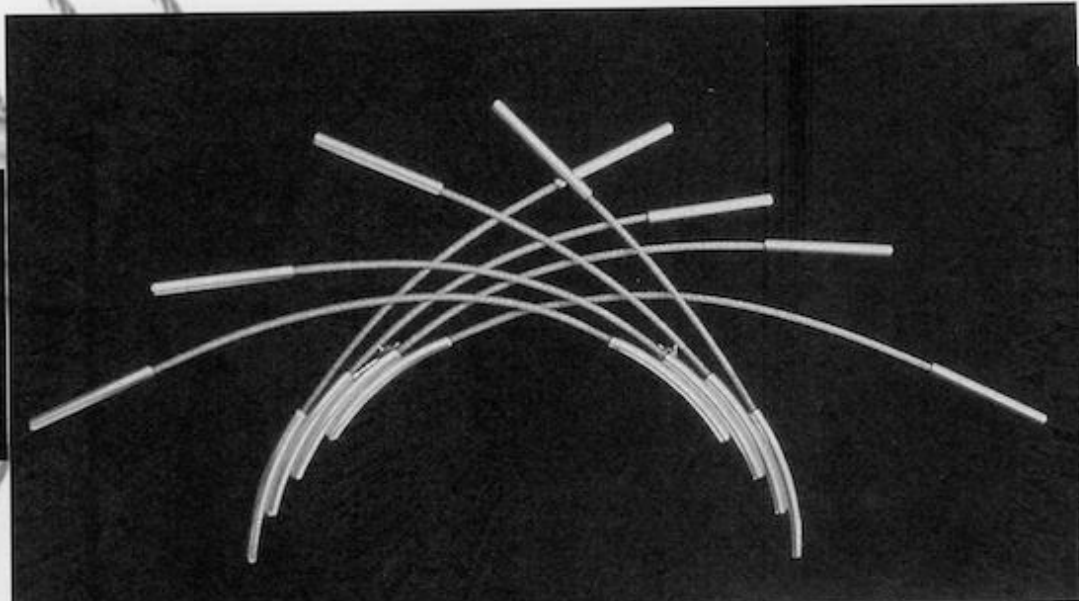
Inspired by the journey, it was upon her return to Perth in the mid-sixties that Dorothy's practical involvement with jewellery began, when, having been given a beautiful opal by her mother, she designed a pendant to be made up by local craftsman, Francis Gill. While ostensibly a minor event, it was to act like a slow fuse



Dorothy Erickson: *Peacock II*, multi-positional body piece, gold plated silver and steel, 1990.
Photographer Dorothy Erickson

that would ignite a creative bang in the life of the young teacher. The resulting "explosion" might be said to have occurred in 1969, when Dorothy enrolled in an Art Associateship course at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) – now Curtin University of Technology. One year later, jewellery was offered for the first time as an elective and, as the first student, she signed up under Francis Gill. After only two weeks in the program she was, to use her own words, "comprehensively hooked" and in 1973, graduated from the course with a major in jewellery silversmithing.

Success followed relatively quickly as, after another spell in Europe and the UK in 1976/77, she became the first Resident Graduate Craftsman of WAIT's 3D design (jewellery/silversmithing) department¹¹. During this intensely creative period, her work was included in a 1977 National Touring Exhibition. And, capping off this early recognition, was a commission from the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra¹², to produce a body of work for the national collection: *Homeward Bound*, was the resulting work. In addition, it was around this time that she worked as



Dorothy Erickson: Golden Brolgas, multi-positional brooch pair, 18ct gold, stainless steel, 1992.
Photographer Dorothy Erickson

Artist-in-Residence at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, where an exciting range of work, *The Strings*, was designed and made. Inspired by a sculpture workshop in 1978 held at Noojee, Victoria, by the German sculptor/jeweller, Claus Bury, *The Strings* attracted many favourable comments from critics who particularly focused on her experimental utilisation of unusual materials such as Western Australian coloured stones like mookaite, tiger iron or chrysoprase. Ever industrious, 1978 also saw Dorothy conceive and organise the touring exhibition *From the West* that showcased work by eleven members of the WA jewellers group.

On graduating (again) from WAIT in 1979 with her Bachelor of Arts (Design) degree, she began working as a lecturer in art history and 3D design. Importantly, she kept up her other various outside commitments. In 1980, therefore, she attended a conference of jewellers at Mittagong, where it was decided to form a national body to be known as the Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia (JMGA). Dorothy was co-opted to the national secretariat for the first four years and, on arriving back in Perth, established the WA Chapter of the JMGA.

It was also in this year that the increasingly busy jeweller became President of the Crafts Council of Western Australia. Her two year stint at the helm of the state's peak craft organisation came at a time when it was enthusiastically oriented to furthering craft practice and discourse throughout the state, but was increasingly frustrated by

inadequate premises. In order to redress this major hurdle to the development of WA craft, Dorothy became active with members of the board – though, in particular, with Annette Pedersen, (then) Executive Director – in negotiations on the matter with the (then) Minister for the Arts, the Honourable Ron Davies. The result of their discussions was the Crafts Council acquiring, at peppercorn rental, the refurbished old Perth Railway Station premises. At last, therefore, the Crafts Council was able to provide the craft community with a service that did credit to their practitioners' creative products. Consequently, in recognition of her service to the Crafts Council, now CRAFTWEST, Dorothy was made a Life Member of the organisation.

Even while Erickson's administrative activities were continuing apace, so too, were developments in her jewellery work. In particular, she was introduced to the manifold possibilities of fine steel cable by Wilhelm Mattar, when she visited Cologne in the early 1980s. Employing the linear material with immense creativity and finesse, Dorothy exploited its essential characteristic of flexibility with imagination by gathering the gracefully looping cables and holding them in place

Dorothy Erickson: *Diplex Ovale*: stainless steel cable, 18ct gold, aquamarines, gold plated silver catch, 155 x 170 x 15mm, 1990. Photographer Robert Frish



with gold accented clasps. Work such as *Pan Pipes* (part of the series now known as the *Line Series*), were an outcome of this engagement, and are sensuous curving jewellery-forms with stunning and dramatic kinetic energy.

For a long time, though, and like so many other Western Australian crafts practitioners, Erickson had been influenced by the landscape. Luckily, she was able to explore this (profound) influence further when, in 1982, the Australia Council awarded her a grant which enabled her to travel to the Pilbara and absorb, at first hand, the vast, rugged, colourful landscape; no longer would she have to rely on photographs for inspirational imagery. On returning to Perth, her impressions were distilled in the *Pilbara Series* which, at its best, could be categorised as *amor vacui* (refined sparseness).

Indeed, 1982 was a good year for Dorothy as she was one of only four Australian jewellers to be selected for an invitation exhibition of international jewellery at the Schmuck 82 Tendenze (Trends) in West Germany. In the following year, she exhibited in the Robin Gibson Gallery, Sydney, and later at Galerie am Graben, Vienna, Austria, during September-October. In 1984, the work for these exhibitions was developed into a growing range of production pieces.

It needs to be noted, however, that all of this considerable activity was maintained even though Dorothy was having health problems that included the onset of RSI. In order to work around this, often massively debilitating, problem, the resourceful practitioner began using assistants to ensure that production kept ticking along. So, even with the restriction of illness, she managed to produce work that earned her a place in the 1986 International Jewellers Art Exhibition, held in Tokyo and Kyoto; she was one of only five Australian jewellers selected for this important juried show.

After an exhibition in Perth in 1986, the work made for the international show was exhibited in Sydney's Contemporary Jewellery Gallery. Such were the pieces' aesthetic success, that they prompted an invitation from the ABC to feature Erickson's jewellery in the television production, *The Makers - Craft in Australia*⁽¹⁾. This invitation necessitated some additional work and the jeweller made the most of it by scheduling exhibitions in Vienna and London, some of the pieces from which period of production are now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Recognition on the international jewellery scene was confirmed, no doubt as reward for the talent, drive and painstaking attention to both the formal and promotional aspects of her work.

Unfortunately, as she was having these impressive successes, Erickson was beset with the increasing physical restrictions associated with her worsening RSI: work at the bench was beginning to seem almost impossible. This situation prompted her to turn her attention to academia. In 1986, then, she commenced her research for a Doctorate in Philosophy at the University of Western Australia, which she successfully completed in 1992. Her ensuing thesis was titled *Aspects of Stylistic and Social Influence on the Practice of Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia*, and has become a landmark study on Western Australian jewellery. Dorothy's passionate interest and advocacy of local craft histories was developed during her important stint as

co-editor (with Dr Robyn Taylor) of *Craftwest* magazine⁽⁴⁾. During their editorship, aspects of little known craft practices were given more prominence than ever before, effectively grounding contemporary developments through their relation to increasingly well documented historical contexts. Indeed, as Louise Howden-Smith, (then) Executive Director of CRAFTWEST, stated in her annual report for 1996:

I would like to acknowledge the editors of *Craftwest*, Dorothy Erickson and Robyn Taylor. Under their scholarly influence, craft practice has been applied in a historical context, discussed in

the light of contemporary theory and tested for its relevance in our lives today. *Craftwest* is respected nationally for its consistent editorial vigour.

In the midst of her significant academic achievements, and in spite of yet another bout of RSI, Dorothy accepted an invitation from the National Gallery in Canberra to participate in 1991's *Veneers and Facades* exhibition. The resulting work was a natural extension and application of the techniques used in the *Line Series* and *Bird Series*. By careful management of the length, flexibility and width of her trademark steel cables, Erickson managed to capture perfectly the cheeky nature of the willy wagtail, the dancing of the broilgas, and the stately strutting of the exotic peacock, as well as the formal interplay between the pieces and the moving body (where they achieve their full aesthetic impact).

Still on the fast-track, Dorothy has, in collaboration with Marion Hosking and Carla Makigawa, organised the touring exhibition *Australian Jewellery and Objects* which will open in Sydney at the Crawford Gallery in April 2000, the Gallerie Tiler, Vienna, in October, after which it will tour other galleries in Austria and Germany. Eighteen jewellers will be represented, including Marion Hosking, Carier Makigawa, Brenda Ridgewell, Carolyn Delzoppo, Catherine Truman, Sue Lorraine, Yuri Kawanabe, Alice Whish, and Bridie Lander.

On the jewellery front, Dorothy's new work, inspired by the land and sea, continues to use the coloured stones of her previous artistic explorations. Utilising the tremulous quality of stainless steel wire, the stones are fixed to provide the impact that enhances the appeal of the wearable object; they are truly vibrating jewels of adornment. Interestingly, as part of her continual material investigations, her very latest move has been towards the use of magnets to allow the "user"/wearer to separate, rearrange or create an entire new look, by positioning pieces as they desire.

Well, with all these many, now flourishing, facets to her career, Dorothy will definitely not be content to rest on her (deserved) laurels as academic and jeweller. We can be certain, then, that Dr Erickson will face the new millennium with all the considerable gusto we've come to expect from her...

May the force be with her...

Notes

- (1) During this time, she was working under the new lecturer, David Walker. Walker was a significant influence on Dorothy's development, as he was for so many other students during his distinguished teaching career.
- (2) Then under the Directorship of James Mollison.
- (3) It was shown in Episode 7: *Body*, released in 1989/90.
- (4) Dorothy Erickson and Robyn Taylor edited *Craftwest* from 1994 to 1996.

Fred Stewart

Fred Stewart is a former Senior Lecturer in Art Education at WACAE Mount Lawley (now a campus of Edith Cowan University); Life Member and Fellow of CRAFTWEST; Honorary Life Member of JMGA and a practising jeweller.