

Creative Research Description

My Creative research is comprised of three different bodies of work that include urns and reliquaries, memorials, and jewelry. I am proud to call myself a “functional object maker.” In my holloware and jewelry design, function and the relationship of objects to the body have always been addressed. Urns and reliquary vessels combine my love of traditional holloware with the connection to the body. However, unlike jewelry that makes connections to the exterior of the body, the urn enshrines the body and becomes an important marker of a particular person’s life. Making a symbolic object to encapsulate the ashes of a person, which then marks a lifetime of memories, has great significance to me.

Death, which concludes all life, is a complex, often difficult, subject to address. Its poignancy and mystery touch us all. I was born and raised in a large city. It wasn’t until I moved to a rural farm over twenty years ago, that I started to become more accepting about our impermanence. Observing the cycles of each season has brought me closer to seeing and understanding life, death, and renewal. Daily hikes through wooded flood plains and across vast fields introduced me to the cycles of nature and to a more visceral experience of death. In nature, death may not be neat and tidy but it isn't the opposite of this either. Death is part of the cycle and this has been a concept I have been learning to embrace in my twenty years of country living. As a result, my first body of work consisting of urns and reliquaries are inspired by the cycles of nature that symbolize the passage of time. I create rich surfaces and use vibrant colors to evoke joy instead of sorrow. I strive to make contemplative vessels that comfort people, recall memories, and celebrate a life. In the center of my urns are intimate elements that represent new growth or a new beginning, which may be spiritually or philosophically interpreted. I leave this personal interpretation to each viewer.

The second body of work I create consists of memorials that allow me to work more figuratively and with visual narratives. Like the urns and reliquaries, the memorials honor something or someone who has died. Two recent memorials tell the story of the tiger and the Florida panther, both endangered species. To convey the plight of these trophy animals, the pieces are reminiscent of hunting trophies and objects in shooting galleries. However, the icon of the trophy symbolizes the beauty and struggle of the animal’s survival instead of the prowess of the hunter. When I see the vacant stare of the trophy kill, I visualize its life, and the loss saddens me. My work pays tribute to such animals and speaks of the perils they face. I use symbolic imagery such as marigold flowers, used in Day of the Dead celebrations, to honor the dead. Seed pods symbolize struggles for survival, reproduction, and fertility. Roots seek to find nutrients and stability and are a metaphor for the species’ perseverance. Charred bones represent loss and hopelessness, but also the beauty that endures through the decaying process. I combine traditional metal forming techniques with an electroforming process where I cut plants from my garden and use electricity to transform them to permanent copper flowers. This process is a race against time and preserving a living plant in a perpetual state, thus immortalizing it, just as I wish to immortalize the animals I commemorate.

The vessel again plays a significant role in several memorials. For example, in the piece *An Angel in the Room*, a large bowl replaces the tiger rug as a symbol of a domestic object found in a home. The unsettling act of serving a tiger head in a bowl, recalls the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist who symbolizes moral rectitude. This work is a commentary on the annihilation of certain species of animals and also honors the loss of many tiger species that have occurred in recent years. In the memorial titled *En Rejse*, the vessel references the Viking ship used in funerary rituals. The vessel symbolizes the journey of one man's life and cradles charred crumbling bones that are falling and returning to the ground to end the passage. The bowl in *Snared* encapsulates deadly Jimsonweed seedpods. I made this piece when asylum seekers were being separated from their children and jailed in the United States. It was my response to hearing stories of the death of some of these children while in incarceration. This piece expresses my deep sorrow and feelings of intense inability to help. The deadly pods are held inside the center of the bowl. The pods have also been transformed into something more optimistically gleaming and the bowl radiates outward as a symbol of my longing to be rid of such atrocities.

The third body of work I create is jewelry. Many years ago, while in graduate school, I was told that I must decide which to focus on: making vessels or jewelry. This didn't go over very well with me because I believe that one feeds into the other. A symbolic jewelry-scale component is usually incorporated into the urns and memorials. Similarly, my jewelry is often inspired by the vessels I create. In the work, *Flor de Muerto*, the ring becomes the reliquary and in the *XOXO Catherine* brooch, the jewelry turns into a reliquary. What ties all this work together is my love of form paired with my expressive use of color and/or texture. I use color boldly in some work and then make more quiet work when needed. However, form must carry the strength of the object, supported secondarily with a rich contrast of surface texture and/or color. All must be in balance.

An important component of my research is that I make each piece by hand. I use ancient metalworking techniques to form sheets of metal using my physical strength and specialized hammers. To achieve high quality, it takes many hours of repetitive work to create intricately detailed and refined objects. Recently, however, I have embraced the use of digital technology to help create repetitive forms in my work. For example, I created a CAD die-form that was 3D printed in a high-strength resin. Using this resin die-form, I was able to press multiple copper forms to make the Buddy Poppy flowers used in *An Angel in the Room*. I also created a CAD program to mill the wax model of the bleeding heart flowers found in the Catherine of Alexandria commemorative brooches. I'm learning more and more about how and when to use new technology to help achieve my goals of superior quality and greater production, however, all components are still refined by hand. I have a philosophical connection to the lineage of being a metalsmith. My ability to create highly refined objects by hand matters and is part of my practice. These unique skills are becoming rare and it is important for me to carry these on in my creative practice. This in turn plays a key role in my ability to effectively teach specialized metal working techniques to my students so that they may carry on the lineage of the metalsmith.

Professional Accomplishments and Significance of Accomplishments

When my work is juried into competitive peer-reviewed publications it's a significant accomplishment within my field. Since I have been promoted and tenured, my work has been published in two reviews in *Metalsmith* magazine and juried into two *Exhibitions in Print*, published by *Metalsmith* magazine. *Metalsmith* magazine, published by the professional organization of the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG), is an award-winning publication.

"Its mission is to explore, analyze, promote and document excellence and innovation in the field of jewelry and metalsmithing. In achieving this goal SNAG will produce and oversee the direction and content of a publication that will serve as a significant resource for the metalsmithing field. The editorial content of *Metalsmith* will emphasize contemporary activities, makers, and ideas, and incorporate supportive content, relevant critical issues, and the exchange of viewpoints." (From snagmetalsmith.org.)

Three of my urns were published in *500 Metal Vessels, Contemporary Exploration of Containment*, a juried and peer reviewed book published by Lark books. The 500 series books are described as:

"One of Lark's most distinctive and popular lines, this is the series lovers of fine craftsmanship rave about. It provides an overview of the best contemporary work in fields such as ceramics, jewelry making, woodworking, and more. Each book is juried by an expert, features informative introductory text, and showcases spectacular images of state-of-the-art work." (From larkcrafts.com.)

Recently my work was featured on the cover of *Jewellery History of Today, the magazine of The Society of Jewellery Historians*, Issue 37, Winter 2020, ISSN 2042-8529, London, England, UK. This periodical is published by The British Museum. My work was also cited in the article in this issue titled, *The Patron who Updates the Past*, by Managing Editor Kristen Kennedy, pp. 13-15.

Since 2018, after I stepped down from over eleven years of serving in administrative positions, my work has been juried into nine international exhibitions and four national exhibitions. During this time my work has received three awards in recognition from one international exhibition and two national exhibitions. Also during this time, I have had one solo and one two-person exhibition. The solo show I had last summer was right after the country reopened from the COVID lockdown. During this uncertain time, I drove to Indianapolis twice to install and take down the exhibition. It was difficult for me to leave the safety of home and stay in a hotel, eat while on the road, and to participate in an opening reception that had 150+ visitors. I was much relieved that the outcome resulted in two interviews with Jill Ditmire, host of *Curious Mix*, NPR WIFI Indiana.

Exhibitions of notable accomplishments include a solo exhibition in 2011 at the Lahti University of Applied Design, Lahti, Finland; and a four-person traveling exhibition in Sydney and Katoomba, Australia, 2007. Also of significance is that I had five or more pieces displayed in group shows abroad in South Korea, Australia, Germany, and Finland. In addition, one of my works was acquired by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art's permanent collection and was exhibited from August 2016 to July 2017 in the Bloch Building, in an exhibition titled, *Acts of Nature: Contemporary Decorative Arts*. Similarly, another work was recently acquired by the Spencer Museum of Art, at the University of Kansas. This work is currently in the *Healing, Knowing, Seeing the Body* exhibition and will be in the upcoming *Empowerment* exhibition in 2022-27. This exhibition features work in the permanent collection and is in conjunction with the reopening of the newly renovated 405 Gallery. Additionally, I have been invited to participate in a 2021-23 *Paper Alchemy* exhibition that opens at the Radford University Art Museum, Radford, VA.

Research Goals for the Next Five Years

After completing a FY19 General Faculty Research (GRF) grant and FA19 Sabbatical research with cast epoxy resins that broadened my use of color materials and techniques, I started to contemplate the ethical and health ramifications of working with epoxy resin and silicone molds. However dynamic the results may be, these materials are not biodegradable, can't be recycled, and are carcinogenic. I have always admired the natural encaustic medium and its ability to be built up in layers to create surfaces that depict a deep, complex, creamy richness that is completely different from the other color pigments I have worked with in the past. Encaustic is traditionally used by painters; however, I believe that it's a versatile color medium that will offer me new ways to explore in my creative research. Encaustic is a mixture of beeswax and damar resin made from deciduous trees. The natural medium has strong potential for future development and supports my environmental convictions.

With a FY20 GRF grant I am exploring encaustic techniques and its application to three-dimensional metal surfaces. My research is closely tied to our organic farm and being a steward of this land. As a result, I am becoming a beekeeper. Not only are the bees essential for pollinating our farm, it is a way to become more proactive with environmental causes such as colony collapse disorder of bees. My learning about bees through experience will have a stronger impact on the development of future work. It will also be possible to make encaustic from my bee colony and incorporate this reusable natural medium into my creative work. I will also incorporate the bees that have died naturally into memorial work about the loss of our pollinators and threatening complications, such as food insecurity, that are arising from this situation.

Furthermore, I am currently exploring another sculpting material, Aqua Resin, to replace the epoxy sculpting compound I recently used in *An Angel in the Room*. I will use Aqua Resin to create a memorial to the polar bear that addresses climate issues related to the challenges the animal is experiencing. Aqua Resin has the ability to create the desired sculptural effects I seek for this memorial, while also being less toxic than epoxy sculpting compounds. When I expand

my knowledge of materials it results in new ways to develop the narrative in my creative work. My research also finds its way into the classroom and makes me a more knowledgeable and diversified educator.

Because I need a well-equipped metalsmithing studio to create my work, I haven't ventured far from my home studio or the University of Kansas Metalsmithing studio. It's also difficult for me to travel during the summer when the organic farm is in full operation. However, despite the challenges, it's time to apply to artist residencies. I'll apply to residencies abroad such as *Villa Lena Foundation Artist Residencies*, Tuscany, Italy and the *Green Olive Arts*, Tetouan, Morocco. This can lead to new approaches to thinking and making that are unforeseen at the present. Last year I planned to apply to *Ayatana, Artists Research Program, Mortem: For Artists to Study Death*, in Canada, but with so much more time needed for teaching during COVID, and with Canada's borders being closed, I postponed applying. I will apply to next year's call because this directly relates to my current research. In addition, I plan to get more involved with the *Ethical Metalsmiths Organization*. This falls under service but becoming more aware of ethical practices in my field can impact my future creative research.