

Every piece tells a story



Barbara Heath's jewellery is less about showing off and more about showing who you are, writes Nick Bray



EMOTIVE
... jeweller
Barbara
Heath, above,
and her 'love
tokens', left.

"We went through her collection, dispersed the finer pieces to some of her younger relatives, and the rest was turned into this contemplative sphere that she felt comfortable living with."

"It's an object of beauty that she can hold and reflect on."

This intense drive and dedication to discover and interpret the true needs of her clients is part of the reason Heath is regarded as much an artist as a master craftsman by both her customers and the curators at the QAG.

"I'm working in those spaces between art, design, craft and business, I suppose," she says.

In a manifesto devised in 1987, a few years after she arrived in Brisbane on a home-built yacht, Heath writes:

"My role is to stimulate the client to express themselves non-visually – to shift the focus of their description away from the end product, the jewel and the external – one step back to the interior, to the function and to the client's own muses and symbols ... we

both throw ideas into the pool. If the jewel is a memento of the idea, the jeweller's role is to enhance the evolution of the client's idea into personal symbol."

Such earnestness devoted to jewellery may be misconstrued by some, but not by anyone who has the good fortune to see Heath's work.

The title of the exhibition itself, Jeweller to the Lost, is a good starting point.

"It started out in 1990 as a nom de plume coined by my then partner, now husband (Malcolm Enright), based in a jokey way on 'jeweller to the stars,'" smiles Heath.

"I suppose that's partly what this exhibition is about, teasing out what that title means."

In some examples of her work, the meaning is quite literal and obvious.

Commemorative gem cluster ring, 2000, for instance, was created for a client who had lost her young daughter, Alexandra. Grieving and frus-

trated by modern society's failure to provide formal accoutrements of bereavement, she turned to Heath to create a tribute to her daughter, designed exclusively in memory of her.

Heath's commissioning process involves an interview with the client at her studio under her old Queenslander home in suburban Brisbane.

"I negotiate to find out exactly what it is that they really want," Heath says.

Her notes from this particular interview are as follows:

*Commemorative ring
happy – Alexandra – bright 21/9 b'day
colourful – red hair – 4 years – princess ring*

girlie – pink – fun – exuberance

A few weeks later, they met to choose the jewels – sapphires, as they were Alexandra's birthstone, aquamarine for the colour of her eyes and diamonds to reflect her precocious taste for expensive things.

At this time, Alexandra's young brother was diagnosed with a

terminally illness and a secret token for him was included in the ring, a tiny emerald on the underside of the ring, next to the skin.

The resulting ring is beautiful, a work of art with an intensely emotional dimension for its wearer that observers can easily sense once they know its story.

Not all of Heath's work is of such a melancholy nature.

In the exhibition of more than 60 pieces you also will find modern interpretations of charm bracelets, magician's wands, love tokens, fertility charms as well as more prosaic pieces that span her 30-plus-year career in jewellery making.

Some have served as inspiration for her architectural jewellery.

Multilink bracelets are an obvious cue for Heath's controversial *Net*, which hangs on the side of the Neville Bonner building in Brisbane's CBD.

Her fascination with convex mirrors, used to dramatic effect in an outsized brooch from the '80s, finds new expression in an outdoor piece that serves as an entrance light to a client's home, doubling as an "evil eye" and playing on the traditional notion of an entry hall mirror.

Heath's work is informed by an intense curiosity about the role played by jewels throughout history.

She draws inspiration from diverse sources ranging from ancient Egypt and Japan to tribal fetishes to high Victorian and beyond.

In some cases, she reinterprets old

pieces into contemporary designs. "A client came to me with a 17th-century agate ring that they wanted restored, but it was too delicate to be worn as a ring again," Heath says.

"So I incorporated it into a pair of earrings."

The ring itself can still be seen quite clearly, hanging within a framework of rose gold and shakudo, an ancient Japanese blend of 5 per cent pure gold and 95 per cent copper.

"That tiny quantity of gold changes the quality of the metal significantly," Heath says.

"It will weather eventually to a lovely brown."

It's this depth of knowledge and skill base, acquired over decades of study and practice in Australia and overseas, that draws people to Heath as much as her artistic sensibilities.

All of which might well create the impression that Heath's work is the preserve of the rich and famous.

Not so.

"Commissions start at about \$2000 for a plain gold ring and then up it goes, but I think it represents very good value," she says.

"You could spend a lot more at Tiffany's and walk out wearing something that someone else has, too."

"My clients aren't necessarily wealthy, but they do appreciate quality design."

"Many of them are Brisbane people who hear about me through word of mouth, but the ripples have spread across Australia and the world."

It would appear the Jeweller to the Lost has been well and truly found.

Barbara Heath: Jeweller to the Lost, Queensland Art Gallery, opens today and runs until March 26