



Barbara Heath, 'Fibber jibber jibber jibber, jibber and Bio' (detail of sack)



Barbara Heath, 'Fibber jibber jibber jibber, jibber and Bio, 2002, (detail of sack)



Barbara Heath, 'Fibber jibber jibber jibber and Bio WMD' (detail of sack), 2003

1979 for the position at Sydney College and, much later, in 1999, being awarded an Australia Council Fellowship together with a three-month residency at the University of Sydney's Paris studio at Cité Internationale des Arts. It was the latter that prompted her to retire from lecturing and become a full-time practitioner, resulting in a broader practice that involved more installation and writing, and a growing interest in the "captured" (and often "manipulated") image. Currently she is juxtaposing these images with her writing in limited edition "artist books".

Her most recent work, *Still Life: natura mortua*, is a perfect example, consisting of 1,249 units of stone, paint, graphite and wax, installed on the floor at the National Gallery of Victoria for the "Clemenger Contemporary Art Award 2003". This six-by-six-metre installation was accompanied by her book *In Lieu of Flowers*.

Since the late 1970s, West has had more than 26 solo exhibitions and her work is held in every major Australian state gallery collection, as well as in the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York.

Brisbane artist Barbara Heath also speaks of liberating life changes and 1983 was very much a turning point. She had left Sydney and a 10-year jewellery enterprise to spend time travelling with her (then) partner aboard the 50-foot steel yacht they had built, eventually mooring it in the Brisbane River. In the same year, she established her jewellery studio in Brisbane, noting in retrospect: 'The early 1980s visual art sub-culture in Brisbane was strong, subversive and inclusive, and I assimilated into the network of artists and makers. This group dynamic enabled a maturation of my work.'

Although at different times and in different disciplines, both Heath and West had studied at the renowned RMIT, Heath also cites three other influences: "Cross Currents", an exhibition she saw in 1984 (that presented Australian

jewellery together with key European practitioners, much of it dramatic body pieces); going to the Parson's School of Design, New York in 1987 (where she worked with Wendy Ramshaw and others who challenged her ideas); and "Beauty is a Story" (a poetic 1991 Dutch exhibition that she didn't see but bought the catalogue).

By the time I moved to Brisbane in late 2002, Heath had been working there for two decades. I had first become familiar with her jewellery in *Craft Arts* (1985) and *Object* (1992) magazines, and had seen her extraordinary solo exhibition "Patron Maker and Jewel" at the Brisbane City Gallery in 1997. She marks this experience as crucial. 'Frank McBride's [curator] visionary brief and coupled with the opportunity to collate the personal stories of 30 commissioned works, was a key event.'

Like Truman, Heath started as a jeweller but has shifted into other ways of seeing and working. Over the past 20 years her practice has developed in three distinct, yet closely linked, ways: a "product" range of jewellery (sold in specialist stores in Australia and now moving into the



Barbara Heath, Necklace, 'Fibber production series WMD', 2003

US); exhibition work about making, craft and media, and commissioned jewellery (that began in 1987 with a signet ring made for Brisbane architect Graham Bligh). This avenue has taken her in two directions: jewellery made specifically for individual clients, and collaborative public art commissions – both of which require a design brief.

Heath has apparently moved seamlessly from her early days as a commercial jeweller to a more solitary craft/art practice, and on to collaborative public art. She still happily merges all three today.

Heath's comments on her two colleagues (in this article) are astute: 'Margaret West's poetic objects, reading and writing are inseparable. Catherine Truman's intensely physical work has led her on a journey into her own body and its healing capacity – with Feldenkrais.'

Their work may look different but their paths intersect. Each speaks of liberating life changes as being keys to their development. All three are engaged in a personal, intense and complex practice, making objects that have developed from body wearables, and are widely exhibited and collected. Each has said that the sector, 20 years on, is so much larger, more "savvy" and articulate, and often involves international projects and marketing. Truman, really speaking for all three, says good practice is born of 'consistency, longevity and integrity.' Not a bad lesson.

**Ian Were**

*Ian Were is Senior Editor at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane.*

#### ENDNOTES

1. *Gray Street Workshop – Celebrating 15 Years: An Anthology*, Gray Street Workshop, Adelaide and Object, Australian Centre for Craft and Design, Sydney, 2000.
2. Sue Rowley [curator], "The Somatic Object: Contemporary Australian Art to Taiwan", University of NSW College of Fine Arts, Sydney, 1997, p.44.
3. Catherine Truman, in Margot Osborne, *The Return of Beauty* [exhibition catalogue], JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design, Adelaide, 2000.