

Jeweller exhibits a passion for tin

Barbara Heath's interest grew as she researched the history of tinsmithing

ROSEMARY SORENSEN

THOSE fortunate enough to commission a piece of jewellery from Barbara Heath may be invited to fossick through her collection of sapphires and diamonds, opals and pearls, and to talk about which precious metals will best respond to their personal story.

In the future, those personal stories may take shape in Heath and her client's imagining in a surprisingly different medium: tin. Although she hasn't made jewellery out of tin so far, "I think I'm ready to," Heath says.

The jeweller's passion for tin began not with a *coup de foudre* but via a series of nudges towards the metal that used to be called "white gold".

In the Aladdin's cave of her Brisbane studio, surrounded by the tools of her trade and the objects she has created, Heath pieces together the story behind an exhibition she has prepared for Artisan gallery in Brisbane, *Tinsmith: An Ordinary Romance*.

There's the moment she and her husband (and collaborator) Malcolm Enright discovered handmade pegs, held together with tin, under the floor of an old shop they bought as a renovation project in Tasmania.

After asking around, they learned that those pegs were probably sold to the people who lived in the shop by one Ma Brown, a tinker, who scavenged and eked out a living in the mid-20th century by selling household items. The big, crude wooden pegs, with a ring of tin nailed to their waists, are now part of the collection of Heath and Enright, who hoard history with loving care.

There was the moment, too, soon after Heath's research into 17th-century jewellery had taken her to London and St Petersburg a few years back, when fellow artist Madonna Staunton said to her, "Why don't you research something Australian, something relevant to here?"

"That stuck in my head," Heath says, "and I started thinking about materials and work done here."

The trade of the tinsmith, precursor of metalworkers and plumbers, began to resonate with her fine-art practice, which she calls Jeweller to the Lost, with a manifesto to define the deep, spiritual importance of the relationship of the object created to the body that wears it.

Identifying — lightly, playfully, but thoughtfully — with the long-gone tinkers who turned tin into adornments for the house, she began to research this "stretchy, gorgeous" material, its history and the people who worked with it.



LYNDON MECHEISEN

'When [tin] fuses to the copper, there's this painterly surface, like a patina, which is extraordinary,' says Barbara Heath

"It's always hard for me to divorce my imagination from the people story," she says.

Another moment of passionate persuasion came in Heath and Enright's hilltop Queenslander, which dates from 1906.

"You just find yourself noticing things, living in an old Queenslander house," Heath says. On the guttering of the roof where the kitchen used to be, there are fancy acroteria, tin adornments sitting like epaulettes on the shoulders of the building. The shape of a bird is cut out of the metal: "When backlit by the ubiquitous Queensland blue sky," she writes in the pamphlet produced from her research, "the design reveals a bluebird in flight."

Then there's the stuff itself, the pliable base metal that transformed first the manufacture of household objects in the 19th century, then led to a revolution in food preservation. Fossicking among the history of tinsmithing, Heath began to create her memory hymn: the words are her research about who worked with tin and what they made; the music is the little collection of new objects she has fabricated in her studio to accompany an odds-and-ends jumble of old tin things, brought together to show how varied and, often, lovely were the uses to which tin was put.

The old tin things are laid out in an exhibition case, like the ones you still find (but less prominently) in museums, where you can bend and peer into the cabinet filled with what used to be called curiosities.

Some of the newly created objects in the *Ordinary Romance* show are reminders of Heath's fascinations, including several different incarnations of what she calls her "hausgeister" works. For a Heath exhibition at Queensland Art Gallery in 2005, Margie Fraser wrote about the way these house spirits manifested in the jeweller's off-the-body pieces, in the creation of crown guardians, which hang in doorways and other liminal spaces, protecting and comforting those who enter.

Back in 2000, when Heath was creating her "hausgeister suite", she was already referring to the patterns of fancy wood and tinwork common in the old Queenslander house. At that time, she used stainless steel to create what Fraser described as "sophisticated and radiant" objects, "reflecting and shattering light into mesmerising patterns".

"Far removed from a demonic battleground where menacing evil forces bay at the heels of good," Fraser says of Heath's pacific version of the ancient house spirit, "these shimmering beauties

are blithe, benign and empowering." Heath explains that her new tin hausgeists are made from copper, overlaid with the tin she got from a Tasmanian friend, who handed her a chunk and said, "You may want to play with this."

Expecting it to be brittle and to crack, Heath and her long-term collaborator, Juan Luis Gonzalez, were surprised to discover how soft and malleable tin was, perfectly compliant to a jeweller's demands. "On its own it's too weak and, like lead, you can use it as a lump but it has no real tensile strength," Heath says. "But when it fuses to the copper, there's this painterly surface, like a patina, which is extraordinary."

The tinsmiths of the past were skilled at polishing, exploiting the attractions of the shiny surface when they talked householders into buying everything from weathervanes to bathtubs and kettles. Heath hates polishing, calling it the "least interesting surface" because, being reflective, "it talks more about the surface and less about the form, and I'm always interested in the form rather than the surface".

Her hanging crowns and little wall attachments that have a small convex mirror at their heart, as well as a stately pair of candlesticks, all made for this *Ordinary Romance* show, involve ex-

periments with tin, fuzzing surfaces until the cold hardness of the tin becomes warm and almost liquid. She has purchased a small machine for bending the sheets and is keen to do more work on how the tin can be manipulated and, possibly, coloured.

The research side of this project took Heath to places such as the Highfields Pioneer Village near Toowoomba, which houses several collections of rare tinsmithing tools. Heath would love to be able to work with the rollers, cutters and edgers once used by tinsmiths but must settle for adapting her jewellery-making equipment for the various tasks.

The research was partly funded by a grant from Arts Queensland, which is why she has documented it carefully in the pamphlet published in conjunction with the exhibition. But it has fuelled her interest in the material as well as the forms she has discovered.

"I can't help but take a landscape and a building and put things on it, like jewellery on a body," she says. "I've always been interested in pagan things."

Tinsmith: An Ordinary Romance, an exhibition by Barbara Heath's Jeweller to the Lost studio, is at Artisan in Brisbane, until November 13