

gem of an idea

Beautifully crafted pieces that you can't resist from Barbara Heath's latest jewellery exhibition



GALLERY
phil brown

Many artists lack balance in their work because they let their pretensions run away with them. It becomes all about theory and what something should suggest, rather than what it actually does, and the theories and aspirations often far exceed the work itself.

Jeweller Barbara Heath has always gloried in the sheer beauty of things, which has kept her grounded. And though there is an intellectual content to her work, her creations have always seemed to be first and foremost about the incarnation of sheer aesthetic pleasure.

In other words, although anthropology, art theory, architecture and all sorts of other influences impinge on the work and inform her approach, it always remains accessible and, well, lovely to look at. And I presume, nice to touch and to wear though on a commercial level the work crept beyond my meagre budget some time ago.

Still, one can always window-shop, which is

rather how it felt to be browsing at the exhibition Barbara Heath: Jeweller to the Lost, now showing at the Queensland Art Gallery. The title is riddled with ambiguity for those not in the know. What does it mean? Does she design jewellery for losers; for those beyond redemption?

It's a fair question and one that's answered when you don one of two pairs of headphones attached to the wall near a video screen showing an interview with Barbara, probably Brisbane's most celebrated jeweller and a fixture of the local art scene. The essence of being a jeweller to the lost is for her "making a unique jewel that you can find yourself with".

She sees her creations as outer reflections of the inner, as beautiful metaphors for inner realities or aspirations which she transmutes through her



Wearable art ... Barbara Heath's exquisite jewellery combines aesthetics with functionality

own form of alchemy. She has been doing so in Brisbane since the late 1980s, and by 1991 her practice was enshrined in a manifesto she drew up to explain her philosophy. In it she said her aim was "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 ... If the jewel is the memento of an idea, the jeweller's role is to enhance the evolution of the client's idea into personal symbol."

All of which might sound a bit airy-fairy until you lay eyes on the work, which always transcends mere functionality.

In this exhibition there are some exquisite

pieces, like the utterly desirable bird brooches, especially *Skylark*. The little totemic figures she fashions into jewellery sculptures echo her interest in primitive art and the influence of the museum-like abode she shares with designer and obsessive collector Mal Enright.

As well as intimate wearables, Barbara has turned her hand to larger sculptural pieces and public art but it is on a personal level she can best be appreciated. A gorgeous gold ring of her own, built around an antique button with an image of a fox head on it, demonstrates her ability to create something totally desirable as an item of jewellery but also as a work of art.

Barbara Heath: Jeweller to the Lost, until March 26, 2006 at the Queensland Art Gallery, Melbourne St, South Brisbane. Open 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat-Sun. Ph: 3840 7333. Web: www.qag.qld.gov.au.