

exhibition



## SIGNS OF LIFE



by Robin Updike

Nestled in a glass vitrine like a scientific specimen on display, the dusky rose-colored object is at first hard to decipher. It has roughly the shape and dimensions of a medium-sized human fist, but its sleek surfaces and gently rounded, organic form suggest something worn smooth through long use. Small valve openings on one side hint that fluids are involved and its unusual color—a tender, slightly mottled, dark rose—is disconcertingly visceral.

Lift it up and turn it in your hands and you immediately understand. And if not, a glance at the name of the necklace erases any uncertainty. The extraordinary necklace is called *My Heart is in Your Hands* and the pendant is a piece of purpleheart wood skillfully carved to represent the anatomically correct shape and size of the human heart. A 63.5 centimeters stream of silver and stainless steel chains flows through two of the heart's valves to represent blood pumping in and out. The piece is by Trudee Hill and the necklace is part of the *Signs of Life* group show exhibited at Facère Jewelry Art Gallery in Seattle, Washington.

Hill, who lives in Seattle, says she was inspired to make *My Heart is in Your Hands* as a response to two life changing events: the death of her sister to cancer and, at about the same time, falling in love with the man who is now her fiancé. The piece “is about the moments in life when you have to give yourself away, to let go and give your heart away.”

The necklace and the sterling silver bracelets, brooches and earrings Hill made to accompany the necklace are among the exhibition's most resonant and powerful pieces. Now in its fifth year, Facère's annual *Signs of Life* show is a unique pairing of jewelry artists and writers. Karen Lorene, Facère's founder and owner, each year asks eight to ten jewelry artists to make

narrative jewelry reflecting their interpretation of signs of life. After each artist has created a major piece, Lorene matches the pieces with writers who use the jewelry as inspiration for short stories, poems or essays. Lorene says the catalog she publishes each year for the show is meant to “celebrate contemporary metal art and creative writing.”

Hill's silver bracelets and brooches are deceptively simple. Though they look like minimalist sterling bangles the jagged peaks and dips in the bangles represent heartbeats viewed on electrocardiograms.

Equally remarkable work is by Thomas Hill, who is no relation to Trudee Hill. Thomas Hill's contribution to the show includes *Bird With Two Heads*, a 73.66 centimeters tall steel, cow bone and mahogany sculpture of a knobby-kneed, boney-beaked bird in mid-stride. The bird comes with two detachable heads—one is really a skull—that can be worn on chains as pendants. Hill, who lives and works in London and San Francisco, has given his wary-eyed creature a magical, mythic look. This bird is a trickster who takes on different forms and navigates effortlessly between the living and the dead. He might be the pre-historical ancestor of the sly cartoon character of the 1960s-1970s, the Road Runner.

Rika Mouw lives in a small, coastal community in Alaska and her work reflects her intimate relationship with the natural world. Her jewelry is a grateful homage to the beauty of the earth, sky and sea. Mouw's work also alludes to the fragility of our natural world and our obligation, as humans, to treat the earth with care. She incorporates found, natural materials such as the eggs of wild birds and crustacean shells into her work. Mussel shells become miniature birdbaths for gatherings of tiny golden birds. The birdbaths in turn become



TRUDEE HILL, *My Heart Is in Your Hands* necklace of purpleheart wood, sterling silver and stainless steel; 12.07 centimeters long pendant, 2009. Photograph by Doug Yaple. RIKA MOUW, *Bird Bath Ring* (Trees of Life Series) of sterling silver, twenty-two karat gold, gold leaf, and mussel shell; 5.08 centimeters high, 2008. Photograph by Chris Arend. Inset: ALIYAH GOLD, *Forbidden Fruit* necklace of stainless steel, leather, sterling silver, and acrylic; 7.62 centimeters high pendant, 2008. Photograph by Aliyah Gold.



DIANE FALKENHAGEN, Double Hidden Portrait brooch of sterling silver, twenty-four karat gold plate, mixed media image on silver; 6.99 centimeters square, 2007. *Photograph by Bill Pogue.*

SARAH WILBANKS, Morning Grackle necklace of sterling silver, image transfer on polymer clay, and gold leaf; 11.43 centimeters long, 2009. *Photograph by Doug Yaple.*

LAURIE J. HALL, SPECIAL bracelet of sterling silver and found steel tool handle; 7.62 centimeters wide, 2008. *Photograph by Bill Bachhuber.*

GAIL RAPPA, Perhaps True Freedom Is Having a Home (Within) To Return To bracelet of sterling silver, fourteen karat gold, carved jet, moonstone, iolite, drusy quartz, and black coral; 19.05 centimeters long, 2008. *Photograph by Hap Sakwa.*

JULIA HARRISON, Choros necklace of holly, sterling silver and wax; 45.72 centimeters long, 2009. *Photograph by Julia Harrison.*

TOM HILL, Bird with Two Heads (bird body with two detachable heads that may be worn as pendants). Body of mild steel, cow bone and solder; Skull Head of mahogany, mild steel, gesso, and paint; 'Living' Head of wood, copper, gesso, enamel, paint, mild steel, and solder; 73.66 centimeters wide, 2009. *Photograph by Gene Lee.*



rings. The most memorable piece of Mouw's work in this exhibition is a necklace made of a speckled brown bird's egg hung like a precious jewel on a chain of golden twigs. It is a necklace fit for Tatiana, queen of the fairies and the forest.

One of the pleasures of Signs of Life is to see how artists in various regions of the country make work that reflects their physical and cultural surroundings. Gail Rappa, who lives in the remote town of Tuscarora, Nevada, created a belt that is inspired by the concho belts of the native cultures of the Southwest. Rappa's belt, called Raven Finds a Home, is made of seven removable square "conchos" that can be worn individually as pendants. The beautifully crafted "conchos," which are 5.08 centimeters square shadow boxes made of sterling silver, fourteen karat gold, jet, and other semiprecious stones, illustrate the journey of a raven as he flies over mountains and towns to find a home. The belt, and a bracelet made with a similar aesthetic, seems to be a retelling of a Native American story of journey, discovery and the joyful return to home. Like most of the other jewelry in the show, Rappa's belt is a heartfelt, exquisitely crafted, highly personal vision of life. 

