

Prime

Fidelity

Trudee Hill



Unambiguously Communicative



PRIME brooch in sterling silver and stainless steel, 2009. FIDELITY pendant in sterling silver and stainless steel, 2007. CHECK YES! necklace in sterling silver, 2007. ART SAVES LIVES brooch in sterling silver, garnet, and stainless steel, 2008. WIT brooch in sterling silver and stainless steel, 2007. VITAL brooch in sterling silver and stainless steel, 2009. ASHES TO ASHES brooch/pendant in sterling silver and nickel silver, 2009. *Photographs by Doug Yaple.*

"One of the things I like about jewelry is that when you wear it, it's a conversation starter. If you're wearing an interesting piece someone will reach out and touch you to touch it and want to talk about it. It's not something we do much in our society."

Robin Updike

In 2005 Trudee Hill was finishing her degree in jewelry and metals at The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, when a professor encouraged her to apply for a Fulbright Fellowship. Hill, a native of Washington state with a taste for adventure, had already traveled in Spain and backpacked through Central America, where she had collected the jewelry and textiles she could afford on her student budget. But as she worked her way through the Fulbright application, she decided to go for broke. "I thought, what place in the world is so beyond my comfort zone, so unusual, that if I was going to take a big leap funded by the U.S. government, where would that place be?"

Having just learned about the Seto, an indigenous people living in what is now Estonia, and the highly-decorated, large silver breast plates traditionally worn by Seto women, Hill set her sights on research and study in Estonia. "The breast plates originally were smaller and were meant to hold women's blouses together," says Hill. "But over the centuries they'd evolved into silver domes about a foot across and decorated with long chains of coins and symbols describing who the women were, where they lived, all kinds of information. I was fascinated."

Hill won the fellowship and spent 2005-2006 in Estonia—a small Baltic nation located just south of Finland—reinterpreting the traditional breastplates. But instead of reflecting a single woman's history and identity, Hill's breastplates eloquently described Estonia's turbulent twentieth-century history. At about seven inches across, Hill's hard-to-miss pendants offer vignettes of three dramatic moments in Estonia's modern history. The breastplates are see-through pendants made of a magnifying glass and aluminum, surrounded at the edges by a fluffy nimbus of unshorn sheepskin. Each pendant hangs like a giant Olympic medal from a colorful traditional Estonian textile braid. One pendant encloses a Nazi armband, a jarring reminder of the Nazi occupation of Estonia during WWII. Another houses the crest of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was the name of the nation under the Russian occupation after WWII. The third encases an aerial photograph of the crowd of three hundred thousand—nearly a third of Estonia's entire population at the time—gathered at a music festival in 1988 to sing Estonian folk songs and hymns banned under Soviet occupation. The event was the largest of the freedom movement known

as the Singing Revolution of the late 1980s and it helped birth Estonia's independence in the early 1990s.

As graphic symbols of cultural and political identity, Hill's Estonian-inspired pieces are extraordinary. And though the twenty-seven-year-old artist, who now makes her home in Seattle, has barely begun her career in jewelry and metalsmithing, the breastplates signal that even in her first post-college projects Hill wanted to communicate as directly as possible. More recent work has included an anatomically-correct human heart pendant—a piece meant to express her desire to fully live life—and brooches made of silver wire that spell out words such as "fidelity" and "candor," qualities she was looking for in a mate. Neither abstract nor narrative in the pictorial sense, Hill's jewelry might best be described as unambiguously communicative. She prefers the direct and sometimes graphic approach to the poetically suggestive. Nevertheless, Hill's most recent work—with its clean lines, spare use of materials, and emphasis on distilled language—feels like minimalist haiku in sixteen-gauge silver wire.

"Working with words is so direct," states Hill. "You look at a piece like *Ashes to Ashes* and you know what it's about. I like being a little more direct and think really that's part of what I loved about the Estonian breastplates. I never want to make work that's so specific to me that other people can't relate. I didn't want to make a piece that says 'my sister is dead.' But everyone understands that the words 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' are about death."

Hill made the brooch *Ashes to Ashes* in 2008 after the death of her sister Rose at age thirty-one to breast cancer. As Rose was losing her battle with the disease, much of Hill's work was about illness and the graphic measurements of health. Hill made earrings, bracelets and brooches out of silver wire that are literal representations of a heartbeat on an electrocardiogram. The wire charts a straight line then zigs up and zags down at the two-beat throbbing of a living heart. In the brooch *Ashes to Ashes* she used square silver wire—her current favorite material—to spell the funereal phrase in script in a closed loop. The word "dust" is spelled out on a pin that pierces the loop to attach the brooch to a garment.

Some of Hill's first projects using words as design elements came in 2007, when she decided to find herself a life partner. It does not take spending much time with Hill before you are infected with her enthusiasm and can-do attitude, and it is



VABASTUS/LIBERATION neckpiece in sheep skin, Estonian textile, magnifying glass, plastic, aluminum, and Singing Revolution photograph, 2006. Photograph by Graham Mitchell. Modeled by the artist.

no surprise that she applied those qualities to her search for a mate. “I had a job, I was making jewelry but I wasn’t dating anyone. I knew I wanted a family and children some day.” Hill went to the online personals of a Seattle alternative newspaper and after dozens of unsuccessful meetings with single young men over coffee, she eventually met the man who is now her fiancé. They are getting married in July. But before she found the man of her dreams she made a series of jewelry that literally spelled out the qualities she was looking for in the father of her future children, including “fidelity,” “ardor,” and “wit.”

Hill’s work is direct, but that does not mean it is simple. And though her word jewelry can appear to have a playful, teasing quality, the words are carefully selected. Like some artists in other media, such as video art and installation art, Hill enjoys working out intellectual challenges that she sets up for herself in the process of making art. In 2009 she tasked herself with a kind of linguistic Sudoku problem in order to decide what to make for a show at the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston called From Minimal to Bling: Contemporary Studio Jewelry. She wanted to use words as the basis for a series of brooches, but she wanted the words to reflect both the spirit of the show and the particular nature of her work. “On the minimal-to-bling spectrum, my work is most definitely on the minimal end,” Hill says. “In order to choose words for

this show, I began with the word ‘minimal’ to create a web of synonyms that produced seventy-five words which all have this root connection. I wanted the words to be succinct, compact and approachable. I wanted them to be unisex. Prime, Exact and Vital fit my requirements. For this series I also moved away from the script I had been working with since 2007. Minimal implies simple and neat, so working with print felt right. In order to connect the individual letters, I underlined each word which I also felt added emphasis to each word.”

Words are just only one part of Hill’s artistic vocabulary, however. Certainly Hill’s most visceral work to date is *My Heart is in Your Hands*, a realistically rendered wooden heart that hangs on a sturdy chain. Hill carved the heart out of an exotic Brazilian wood called purpleheart wood, which is a deep rose color. “I bought a model of a human heart from a scientific supply business. The wooden heart I made is life-sized and as anatomically correct as I wanted it to be.” The idea for the heart pendant came from a dream and from the aftermath of her sister’s death. A heart is the most basic symbol of life and in her dream, Hill saw her own heart outside of her body. “In my dream, my reaction was, ‘I want to live!’ I think it was related to the death of my sister, and my own plans for my future, to live, get married, have a family.” She has also made other work based on anatomy, including quarter-sized, flattish earrings made of rubber casts of her own nipples.

Curiosity about the world around her and an enthusiasm for exploring it are qualities Hill has had since childhood. Born in Washington, Hill comes from a creative family and is the youngest of four children. Her mother sewed clothing for the children and Hill’s older siblings went on to lives in the arts and literature. Her brother is a classical guitarist. A sister is a librarian and writer. Her sister Rose was a performance artist and sculptor who took Hill along on her trip to Central America. Hill loved academics, and in grade school decided to be a math teacher. But when she was eleven her family moved to Honolulu where the beauty of the natural world inspired

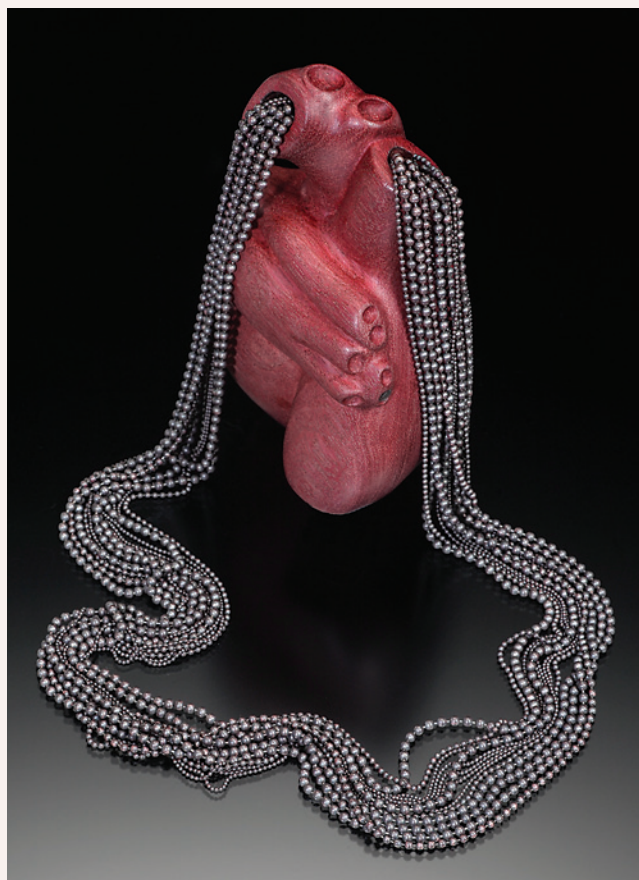


NIPPLE earrings in sterling silver and rubber; cast rubber, fabricated silver, 2008. Photograph by Doug Yapple.

her to document it through writing, drawing and photography. She also liked making things, wrapping and twisting wire to make small sculptures, using wire, beads and found objects to make jewelry and picture frames, and sewing and crocheting clothes. “I even made my own backpack in the eighth grade. In hindsight I was destined to be a crafts major.”

In high school Hill studied all the arts and crafts she could fit into her class schedule, from ceramics and woodshop to drama. Eventually she focused on photography, shooting landscapes and portraits. She won a national photography award for an intimate and tender portrait of her sister Rose, her head bald from her rounds of chemotherapy. Convinced that her future was in photography, Hill went to The University of the Arts after graduation. But an elective course in jewelrymaking changed her ideas about her future. Learning to pierce and solder metal opened up the possibilities. “Now I could set stones, connect two different types of metal, texture and patina surfaces. At first I was simply enjoying myself, it was just an elective course after all. Then to learn about the history of crafts, to see the work of Lalique for the first time, to hear Sharon Church lecture about our field—I was hooked.”

She also took a sculpture class, but found that once she finished a large work, she no longer cared much about it. But she loved the idea that jewelry is sculpture that is wearable.



MY HEART IS IN YOUR HANDS neckpiece in purpleheart wood, sterling silver and stainless steel; hand carved, 2009. *Photograph by Doug Yaple.*



Portrait of the artist in her studio. *Photograph by Aaron Briggs.*

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Hill says she enjoys learning about new materials, tools and techniques. For instance, while in Estonia, she met a young Estonian fashion designer who asked her to make metal sculpture for one of his models to wear as a headdress during a runway show. The result was Mother Nature’s Hood, an aluminum, sterling and thread armature that rested like a huge and elegant praying mantis on the model’s back. For the same fashion show she made a big rope of beads out of soil rolled into little balls then fixed with a glue-like binding agent and strung like pearls.

Nevertheless, at the moment Hill’s work is, technically speaking, limited by what she can make with a butane torch about the size you might use to ignite a Crème Brûlée. In the charming bungalow she and her fiancé recently bought, she uses a tidy corner of the garage for a studio. Aside from the usual jewelrymaker’s hand tools, the only piece of jewelrymaking equipment she owns is a butane micro torch. Once she can afford a larger torch—which will give her the ability to heat metal to much higher temperatures—she expects to create work that is larger and denser.

Perhaps because she is so open to new ideas and loves to observe the world, Hill does not seem to worry much about where her next art ideas might come from. She says her inspirations come naturally. One jewelry design option that does not much interest her is using gemstones. “I see them as being somewhat unnecessary. They’re beautiful, and decorative. But they don’t necessarily add to the story.”

SUGGESTED READING

Nancy Megan Corwin. *Chasing and Repoussé*. Brunswick, Maine: Brynmorgen Press, 2009. *Artifact*, the publication accompanying the exhibition of the same name sponsored by The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, 2005.