

Micki Lippe: Layers

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by Judith Wagonfeld

In the Pacific Northwest Mother Nature sows the seeds of a fertile and messy world. Vegetation knows no bounds. Leaves and pine cones fall. Plants and mushrooms sprout from decaying wood and crowd the forest floor. Creeping foliage entangles tree trunks. Rain and mist nurture this prolific and dense terrain, a haven so loved by jewelry artist Micki Lippe that she visits weekly to hike or cross-country ski. She's done so year-round for the past eleven years, gathering imagery and solace.

Lippe's immersion inspires jewelry suffused with nature's essence. "Layers," her exhibit at the Curtis Steiner Gallery in Seattle, deserves kudos for its *joie de vivre* and luxuriant installation. Rather than constrain the free-form neckpieces and earrings beneath glass, Steiner drapes them over vintage prints of seashells, fossils and botanical images. Others nestle atop crinkled brown wrapping paper and wood blocks; all inviting touch. Burgeoning with myriad ornaments, the jewelry summons meditative fingering, as would a rosary or a string of Buddhist prayer beads. Holding and caressing this work feels as soothing as running fingers through warm sand.

But unlike religious beads, Lippe's talismans aim to foster personal interpretation and reflection. Mirroring nature's randomness, Lippe embellishes pieces with an eclectic array of found and fabricated miniature objects. Fingernail sized aqua and sky-blue beach glass, a flat polished

bisque-hued stone, a red disk and ice-blue glass beads commune with skillfully soldered sterling pine cones, leaves, acorn tops, seed pods and flower petals, keepsakes symbolic of her environment. Deep-violet pearls perch on brass branches, huckleberries waiting to be plucked. Iridescent pink and gentian pearls shimmer like raindrops. Silky red ribbons spill from cage-like reliquaries, harbingers of new life. Wispy threads propagate like aerial roots. Whether Lippe's curios dangle helter-skelter along her chains or nest in cascading layers, harmony prevails.

Quirkier charms evolve from nature's shapes and patterns and their industrial replication. The repeating circular motif alludes to tree rings and wheels. Swirls mimic fiddlehead ferns and architecturally suggest the Guggenheim's spiral walkway. In the yard-length neckpiece *Jules Verne* interlocked metal rims bring to mind pasta rotelles, crop circles or animal foot traps. Fascinated by the infinite variation and layers in nature, Lippe incorporates flexibility, allowing the necklaces to hook or wrap in multiple ways. *Structures* skips the chain altogether: a garland is formed of linked gold leaves; a welded coil resembles a spider's web dappled with dew; and a fish vertebra is honed from metal strands and rings.

Lippe favors imperfection and age. A twig bearing fruit leaves one stamen empty. Another small branch holds a berry gone bad. Surfaces appear worn and irregular, a departure from her earlier precision and elegant polished silver surfaces. To achieve a shadowed matte patina Lippe mastered *niello*, an ancient technique of forming and fusing a black metallic alloy to a metal base. Leaving elements uncleaned and unoxidized, she files into the variegated overlay, bestowing a lush sense of antiquity. Each element

appears as a memento just rescued from a forgotten drawer. Cunningly, these objects imply an imaginary past brimming with promise.

Unstructured and featherweight, Lippe's constructions meld to the body like moss on a rock. Rather than a minimalist rigidity, her organic motif reads more counter-culture than haute couture. Its earthy, ephemeral cachet evokes the cycles of life; the somnolence of autumn and vitality of spring. Its fluidity imparts holistic contentment.

Over 30 years of making one-of-a-kind and production jewelry, Lippe remains a people person. Sharing a studio with three women enables dialogue that influences and affirms

her thoughts. A dedicated community networker, she's enhanced the careers of fellow artists by founding the Seattle Metals Guild, running the Seattle Women's Shelter Jewelry Project, teaching, and serving on local and national arts boards.

Lippe emphasizes she cannot copy Mother Nature; that she merely suggests, leaving the wearer to ruminate on meaning. Nevertheless, her awe of unrestrained wilderness emanates from the jewelry. Without lecturing or eliciting guilt, Lippe's subtle message celebrates the natural world, a reminder to cherish and protect it.

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Random (earrings), 2011
sterling silver, 22k bimetals,
14k, hematite, silk
height 3"
PHOTO: MICKI LIPPE

Hiking, 2011
Sterling silver, copper, 22k bimetals,
silk, pearls, jasper, carnelian, crystal,
smoky quartz, glass, onyx
length 18"
PHOTO: MICKI LIPPE

