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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

**THE INTERACTION OF HUMAN FORM
WITH FUNCTIONAL JEWELRY**

By
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May 2003

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THE INTERACTION OF HUMAN FORM WITH FUNCTIONAL JEWELRY

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of my studies in the United States, I have concentrated in studio art. From this I have discovered a deep interest in visual graphic design, metalsmithing and jewelry. Working in these two areas has brought out a particular aesthetic sensibility that was always present, yet dormant within me. I have begun to go deeper into myself, trying to find out who I am and what it is that inspires me to create beautiful objects.

As with other international students, I came to the United States to pursue a dream, which was to become a jewelry designer. I intended to accomplish this goal through taking illustration and jewelry rendering courses at a university. Until I took my first metalsmith and jewelry course, I thought most of the courses were concerned just with the craft. At that time, my first priority was to gain a bachelor's degree, however, I began to move away from studying the pure craft and allowed myself to be creative. As far as I was concerned, this was when "Art" came alive for me.

I am from a modern city in Taiwan. The computer is an everyday entity in my life. Taking computer visual design courses and making creative jewelry is part of my being in this modern technological world. Through studying numerous graphic magazines and looking through thousands of images, I was able to express my ideas on paper or on the computer screen. I studied stereoscopy, which helped me view things in a three-dimensional capacity. My graphic work has depth and always leads the viewers' eyes deep into my creative world.

Studying these two fields of creativity has enabled my embryonic artistic talents to develop. I was unsure what it was or how it came to be; something was driving me

forward; I was being challenged by this “entity.” I had to push myself further. I was fearful, but curious, about coming to Rochester Institute of Technology, a school I had never heard of, about the east coast, which I had never visited.

EVOLUTION OF THE WORK

My first impression of RIT was that it was just another place. It took me a term to become use to the school's structure. To move beyond the past was my first goal. Drawing was my biggest challenge. I was really depressed and angry about my artistic life at that time. I picked up hammers and expressed my anger at my unsatisfying feelings onto scrapes of copper. The action was unplanned, but the characteristic of copper is very soft to hammer and shape; I was setting my mind free by hammering. The metal just gave way to the hammer to become what it came to be. I was doing the same motion for two weeks until I realized I was drawing on the copper with hammers.

This molding, this bringing into form, was a revelation, which changed my previous working approach. I went to the library to look up most of the natural flower books, quickly viewed the images, and began to transfer these forms for possible ideas onto the copper. To realize my ideas I applied basic and fundamental techniques on the metal. I was full of energy and creative ideas. My imagination was stimulated to create abstract forms. After making about thirty copper models, I picked one or two possibilities and used them as designs for silver jewelry. According to Lewis F. Day, the best ornament is, much of it, so far removed from nature as to be what is called "abstract."¹

As things turned out, my projects were quite successful during my first quarter at RIT, but still, there was something missing in my work. I felt that I was thinking too much, which was blocking my creativity. Carl Jung said, "Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside,

¹ Lewis F. Day, Nature and Ornament I (London: B.T. Batsford, 1909), 5.

awakes.”² I decided to go back to my newfound working process again and observe the natural flower forms more carefully in the different sections. *Descendants of the Dragon* (Fig.1) was created after studying biology and deeply researching natural forms in order to discover the “inside.” Each single piece of metal was cut into a flower silhouette with piercing some part of the petals. Then, it was folded and bent into a three dimensional form. I intricately entwined the different sized pieces so that they would move gracefully. As long as I kept linking each of the loops into a longer form, the creative idea grew and developed further inside my mind. From this method, the project developed into nearly 100 individual sterling silver loops, which were laced together to create the serpentine body of a dignified dragon. The work ended with a length of forty-nine inches. In order to have a variety of functions in this one design, the dragon’s head can be a ring with its tail pinned to the wearer’s back.

Descendants of the Dragon was a really challenging project for me. The entire idea of the work was to create a piece of silver jewelry that people could wear in different ways. This work would suggest to the wearer a diversity of expressions, limited only by their imaginations. When this long jewelry piece is applied to the human form, the graceful movement of the work will easily conform to the body shape and movement. The jewelry may suggest a hairpiece, a hand bracelet, or a necklace. Many different functions are combined in this one jewelry form.

With all the exercises and experiments, my working methodology matured. I followed the same formula, which was researching images of natural creatures, making copper models and building the ideas into three-dimensional silver jewelry. *Terrifying*

² James B Simpson, *Gerhard Adler ed Letters Vol I*. 1988, < <http://www.bartleby.com/63/79/2979.html>> {28 April 2003}.

Waves (Fig.2) was created in the last quarter of my first graduate year. This work contained many similar ideas to my earlier projects. The work was a silver bracelet, which interacted with the wrist and hand, using the same previous basic techniques, and was inspired from the shape of natural leaves. The work also suggested a strong movement, a flow of energy. The lines, curve, spirals, and twist gave breath and life to the jewelry.

One year of graduate work saw improvement in my creative skills. Did the year's experiences define who I was? I questioned myself. Had my soul awakened? I looked myself in the mirror. I always looked quite different in the metal studio. Not only was I an international student, but I also dressed in my own style, had a unique personality and was very independent. I felt I did not fit into my current environment. Who was I and where did I belong?

I like to dress nicely and I look pretty. Beauty and fashion constantly surrounded me. I was often intrigued by, and became more conscious and aware of, the aesthetics of modern design and style. This became part of who I am. I dress contemporary, and I read fashion. I care about the detail relating to various clothing and fashion trends. This inspired me to make contemporary, functional jewelry, which represents who I am and my idea of beauty and fashion.

My body is a form, the same as everyone else; thus, I decided to make functional jewelry to augment and ornament the body. I think of the human form as a pedestal, which serves as a vehicle for my creative expression. The human body has so much depth and value. The body has much to offer, such as movement, posture, skin tone, and expression. To make three-dimensional work fit onto another three-dimensional form, to

also emphasize the softness and quality of the body with my jewelry was a challenge. Making functional jewelry that embellished the beauty of the human body, which imparted the simplicity of my visual inspiration and elegance was now my new goal. I was now interested in the interaction of my work with the human form.

To really look inside of myself, I went deep to find my core. Where did I originally come from? In Chinese culture, people were the descendants of the Dragon. The Chinese dragon was a god creature that had the power of transformation and brings life-giving rains. During the Han dynasty the dragon became associated with the emperor's power. By the time of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the dragon had become an exclusively imperial symbol. On numerous Chinese crafts, the dragon was depicted as an emblem of the son of China.³ The title of my work, *Descendants of the Dragon*, was not a pre-thought one, it came naturally; after all I am Chinese. This idea was coming from inside of me. The Chinese culture flowed over my body and was in my blood. The part, which I had never recognized before and which I had not cared about, existed deep within me. The more jewelry pieces I created, the more my Chinese culture showed up in them. It was also true of the project, *Terrifying Wave*; the wave pattern signifies the edge of the human world with the border of the Three Islands of the Immortals, or the watery realm of the Chinese dragon. Often waves appeared on Chinese goods, such as vases and plates.⁴ The Chinese culture had subconsciously influenced me everyday of my life. It was absorbed without any thought on my behalf.

³ Ruth Nesi and Stalberg Roberta H, China's crafts {New York: Eurasia Press, 1980}. 54.

⁴ Nesi, 77.

When I came to United States, I studied the art and craft of metalsmithing in addition to materials, while at the same time challenging myself to be creative. The knowledge, ideas, and images from my culture were also presented within my heart. However, combining traditional Chinese culture and western education to create new contemporary jewelry was not intentional, the fact that it has surfaced in my art makes me very happy and shows who I have become.

The Chinese cultural influence in my work reminds me of my childhood in Taiwan and the place where I grew up. It was a poor, undeveloped country. My grandparents raised me. My grandfather used to teach me how to make origami by using discarded calendar sheets. We folded the papers into little birds, boats, and balls. Alternatively, we cut the papers into long strips and rolled them up to become little beads, which we then strung together to form a necklace. They were my toys. I was growing up in a toy craft-making environment.

Another Chinese culture practice to influence my work was the Chinese folk art of the papercut. Many folk arts were created especially for use during the traditional Chinese festivals. These holidays marked the change of seasons, which were so important in peasant life. At the time of the spring festival, families gathered together to cut delicate and colorful pictures from thin sheets of paper. These papercut designs, also called window flowers, were pasted on the window and walls. When the sun shined on the pictures, they made a striking contrast of light and shadow. They were simply produced using two scissors or knives. Ten or more sheets of paper were cut at a time.

Traditionally, Chinese cuts were made from flat paper, and only recently are symmetrical scissors used to cut from a folded piece of paper.⁵

Usually, the papercut patterns would be handed down from generation to generation, depicting butterflies, peonies, and chrysanthemums. Professional paper cutters generally cut freehand without any drawings. An original pattern was often sketched using ink and a calligraphy brush. The designer had to keep in mind that all parts of the papercut must be connected. Over the years, Chinese cutters have cleverly developed the necessary and vital links, which appear as integral parts of the pictures.⁶

In my work, *Transformation*, the traditional Chinese handcrafts, origami and papercut appeared. *Transformation I* (Fig.3) was created during the fall quarter of my second graduate year at RIT. The neckpiece was designed after carefully observing sea creature forms and followed what has now become my usual working process, as mentioned earlier. The project suggested similar ideas to that of papercut and origami techniques. Each single element was corrugated from a thin, flat sheet of silver or bi-metal, pierced freehand strip patterns between each corrugation and then folded and twisted into the creature form. Linkage was created from the existing strip on each creature, soldering two ends of the strips together to become a jump ring, which links each sea form together. The neckpiece is laid gracefully upon the human form without the aid of any clasp.

I decided to carry the same idea into my next projects. *Transformation V* (Fig.4) is a hairpiece, which was created using only one sheet of silver. It was created through

⁵ Nesi, 172.

⁶ Florence. Temko, *Chinese Paper Cuts* {San Francisco: China Books, 1982}, 21.

applied folding, piercing, and hammering techniques. The design idea was from the same sea creature element, with a more-expanded form. There was more open or negative space. Some other areas were corrugated without piercing. This long, refined piece suggested a sea creature ornamenting one's hair.

Phoenix (Fig.5) was made after figuring *Transformation I and V*. There were several similar elements from the two works. Instead of one long single piece, the project was created out of four branches, which were all linked together by freshwater pearls. The white pearls are hidden inside each hollow branch to function as a joint. This flexible jewelry can sit on the shoulder nobly with each movable branch smoothly adapting to the human figure. On the other hand, the pearl is a symbol of good fortune and genius in Chinese culture. Because of its beautiful rounded shape, the word pearl is also used to describe feminine beauty.

The name *Phoenix* was chosen after the form was created. Its shape suggested the Chinese phoenix, which is an important feature in Chinese art along with the pheasant and the peacock. As the symbol for the empress, the phoenix appeared paired with the majestic imperial dragon. The creature was also said to appear only in time of peace, and thus symbolized order and harmony within the world.⁷ Thus, again, it is obvious that my work is representative of my Chinese culture.

As a further creative challenge, *Transformation VII* (Fig.6) was made. The only difference between this work and the others is that it was fabricated freehand without any preliminary drawings. The work was made out of a thirty-six inch long, flat sheet of metal. I let the material express itself, the characteristic of silver metal allowed it to

⁷ Nesi, 56.

follow the techniques, which I applied during shaping. Finally, it became a wreathed hand piece, which carried similar elements from the *Phoenix*. This project interacts with the fingers, hand, and wrist in a very elegant way.

At this point I was “stuck.” I had been applying the same techniques and ideas on my projects for two quarters. There was a certain sense of refinement missing in my work. I pushed myself again to go and look beyond the past, beyond the established. I asked myself what was important in my work.

I concluded that there are five very important aspects to my work, the first being form; this was my major focus. In the visual arts, form refers to the total organic structure of the work and to the quality of relationships existing among all of its elements. I tried to create unique forms, which resulted from how the subject was constructed; the manner in which the chosen subject matter was employed; the way in which specific visual elements and their unique qualities were configured; and the way that particular medium was used. I considered that I was designing a project, but I was not a craftsman. As far as I was concerned, fundamental techniques were not too important in my work. I came to RIT with limited knowledge about metal skills. Because of my stated goal and challenge, I did not have enough time to learn more advanced techniques. Therefore, basic techniques such as sawing, soldering, hammering and folding were applied to my work. While I carefully thought through my ideas, the fundamental techniques were seamlessly introduced to the process.⁸

Second, as far as I was concerned, no actual lines and no actual surfaces existed in my functional jewelry. I was following the theorem, that two dots created a line and three

⁸ Donald L. Weismann, *Visual Arts as Human Experience* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1997), 290

lines create a surface in order to fabricate my work. Nevertheless those visual elements created a three dimensional form, I wanted the viewers to focus on the entire form but not any single line or single surface. When elements or images are found close to each other in rows or in paths, a direction is established and this is often spoken as a line---an implied line.⁹ These implied lines lead the viewers' eyes through the entire space, looking at both the beautiful body and the form of the jewelry.

Third, since I was creating jewelry, which interacted with the human form, I was sensitive to the visual relationships of positive and negative shapes. Since my designs included openings and piercing holes through the metal sheets, these negative aspects were as functionally important to my work as were the positive ones. Negative and positive relationships had been composed with their combined visual effects in mind.¹⁰ To see through the negative space to the human body in my design suggested that the viewers would observe my work with greater depth. The intensity of the skin tone or cloth color makes the creative work more prominent. Body gestures gave expression to the jewelry, which made it become alive with energy.

Fourth, natural creatures inspired me. There is much to observe from the natural environment. Position, size, color, shape, line, texture, and density, are important elements, which effected my creations drawn from nature. The creatures were full of vitality and movement. Sometimes I coupled visual elements to create the forms, which were drawn out, separated from the concrete, or reduced to a summary of the natural creatures. Lewis F. Day wrote in his book: “ ‘Nature is very seldom right’ --- that is to say: just what the designer wants. The best ornament is, much of it, so far removed from

⁹ Weismann, 32.

¹⁰ Weismann, 37.

nature as to be what is called ‘abstract’.”¹¹ I researched the natural images in books, which were, of course, displayed from a two-dimensional perspective. I was further interested in imagining the depth of the creatures and objects. Since I could not see the reverse side of natural forms in the books; this opened more creative possibility for me. These forms became abstract. They could be organic, geometric or both. At beginning of “*The Arts of Organic Forms*”, J. Evelyn Hutchinson makes the comment:

On the same terms, therefore, as art is attained so, is all knowledge and science acquired; for as art is a habit with reference to things to be done, so is science a habit in respect to things to be known: as that proceed from imitation of type or forms, so this proceeds from the knowledge of natural things. Each has its origin in sense and experience, and it is impossible that there can rightly be either art or science without visible instance or examples.

William Harvey¹²

The final important observation that I concluded had been about the use of precious metals in my projects. Silver and gold give an aura of refinement, status, wealth and beauty to jewelry. On the other hand, these two metals are capable of being worked into a variety of forms and succumb to many different techniques. I always kept my goal of becoming a jewelry designer in mind while in the United States. I considered that my work was not art; it was a piece of jewelry, which combined both artistic and contemporary styles. I wanted my jewelry to represent high social status through the application of gold and silver. This jewelry is not for everyday use, but is intended for ceremonies and special occasions. I worked with the thin metals, which were easier to form and were more cost effective. Often the entire object was created in a distinct three-

¹¹ Day, 5.

¹² Stephen. Kraft, The art of Organic Forms {City of Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968}, vi.

dimensional way. The viewers would not realize the materials were so thin, until they put the jewelry on and felt its lightness. My jewelry is comfortable to wear, conforming to and accentuating the body.

Natural forms, line qualities, positive and negative spaces, natural elements, and materials are the substance of my designs. *Transformation VIII* (Fig.7) was created after carefully reconsidering these design elements. The piece implies the soft qualities of such varied phenomena as the hand weaving of textiles, digital patterns, the structure of shells and evocative natural experiences. The work is beyond doubt a refined piece of jewelry. The work emphasizes the shoulder and the back of the body. The gold symbol at the bottom draws the viewers' eyes to the focal point, which then follows the weaving patterns to define the total form. When the observer looks closer, they discover there is gold concealed inside several of silver units. The entire jewelry is full of information and culminates all the design elements from my previous work. This jewelry form is the final project for my thesis study, but it is also the beginning of my professional journey.

CONCLUSION

One day recently, my professor said he remembered two things, which I said about myself, when I first came to RIT. One, I cannot draw; and two, I do not have much self-confidence. Now, I have gained confidence in my abilities because of the past two years. I found that I could draw; I draw on the copper models. This approach gives me the freedom to express my ideas in three-dimensional forms. I have developed my own unique working methodology.

My will is strong, and for this I am grateful. I always achieve what I set out to do. To make functional jewelry, using precious metals, was my intention. The work implies simplicity and elegance. Jewelry should have specially designated value and to be worn for special occasions.

To create functional jewelry, which interacts with the body form is quite a challenge. I want the observers to look at my pieces, see through the work and “feel” the jewelry. The wearer adds further expression to the jewelry when it is worn; this is the most basic characteristic of my jewelry. I design my work to be worn in many different ways. This method gives different impressions each time the wearer puts on the jewelry.

I was asked what “a good design” means to me. It allows me to express myself in my work by carefully considering all the visual elements. To create an entirely refined form is the most important aspect of my creative work. Techniques are auxiliary to the fabrication of the projects. The organic and geometric shapes from natural creatures, and every detail belonging to various clothing and fashion trends are my infinite resource.

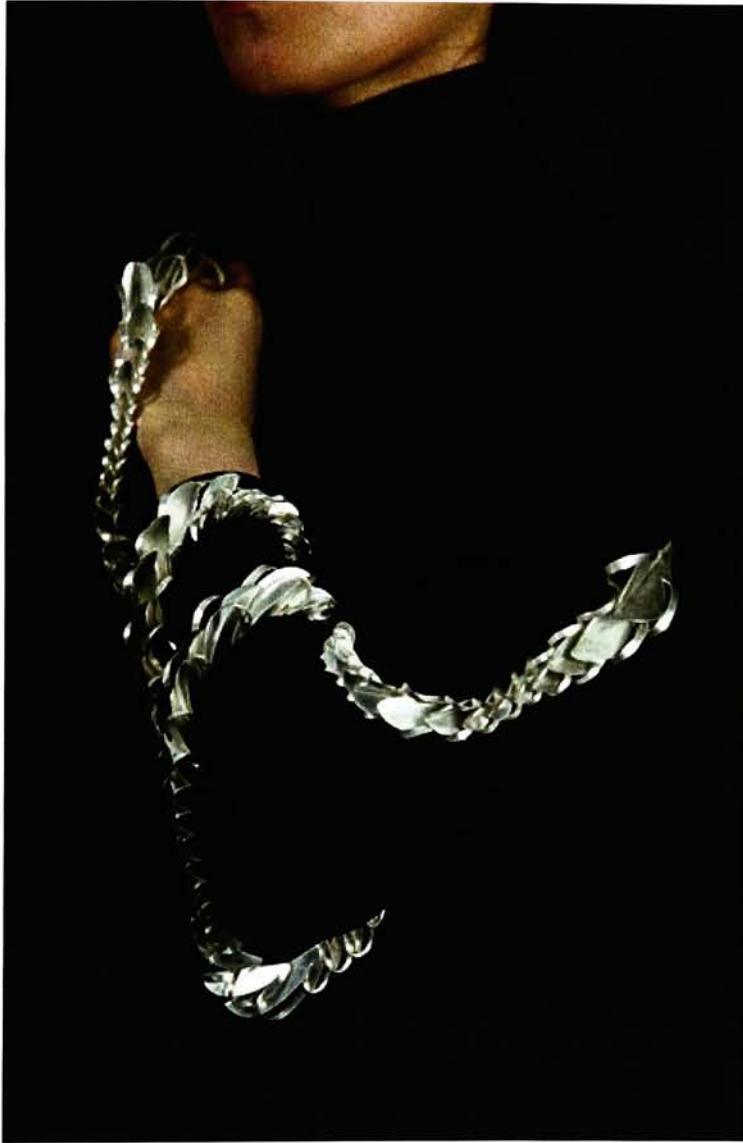
To create this body of work helps me to define who I am. My creative work is greatly influenced by Chinese culture. This experience tells me that there is a part of me that will never be changed, even though I came to America to acquire a western education. Naturally, I am taking parts of Chinese traditions and combining them with modern methods of creating contemporary jewelry. This brings out a unique aesthetic sensibility. I will always follow my ideas for creating beautiful objects. With my newfound self- confidence, my career journey now begins.

Figure 1



Descendants of the Dragon
Sterling silver
2"x1.3"x49"

Figure 1



Descendants of the Dragon
Sterling silver
2"x1.3"x49"

Figure 1



Descendants of the Dragon
Sterling silver
2"x1.3"x49"

Figure 2



Terrifying waves
Fine silver
5"x3.75"x4"

Figure 2



Terrifying waves
Fine silver
5"x3.75"x4"

Figure 3



Transformation I
22k bi-metal, fine silver
25"x2"x2"

Figure 3



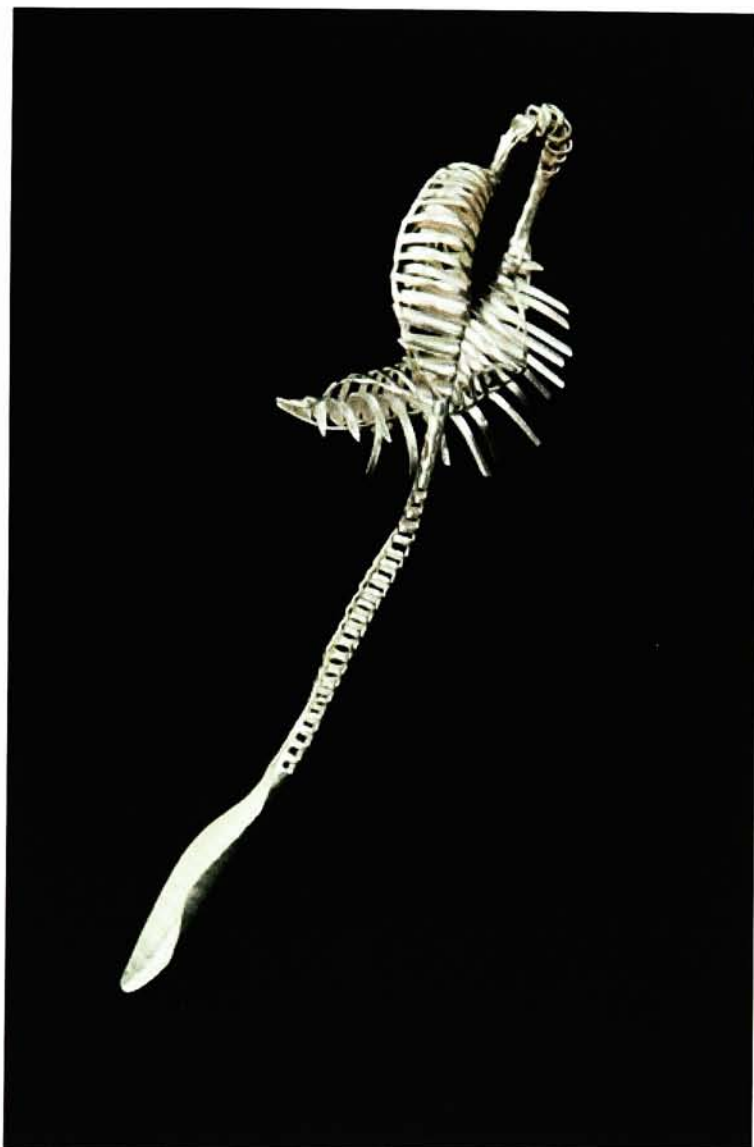
Transformation I
22k bi-metal, fine silver
25"x2"x2"

Figure 3



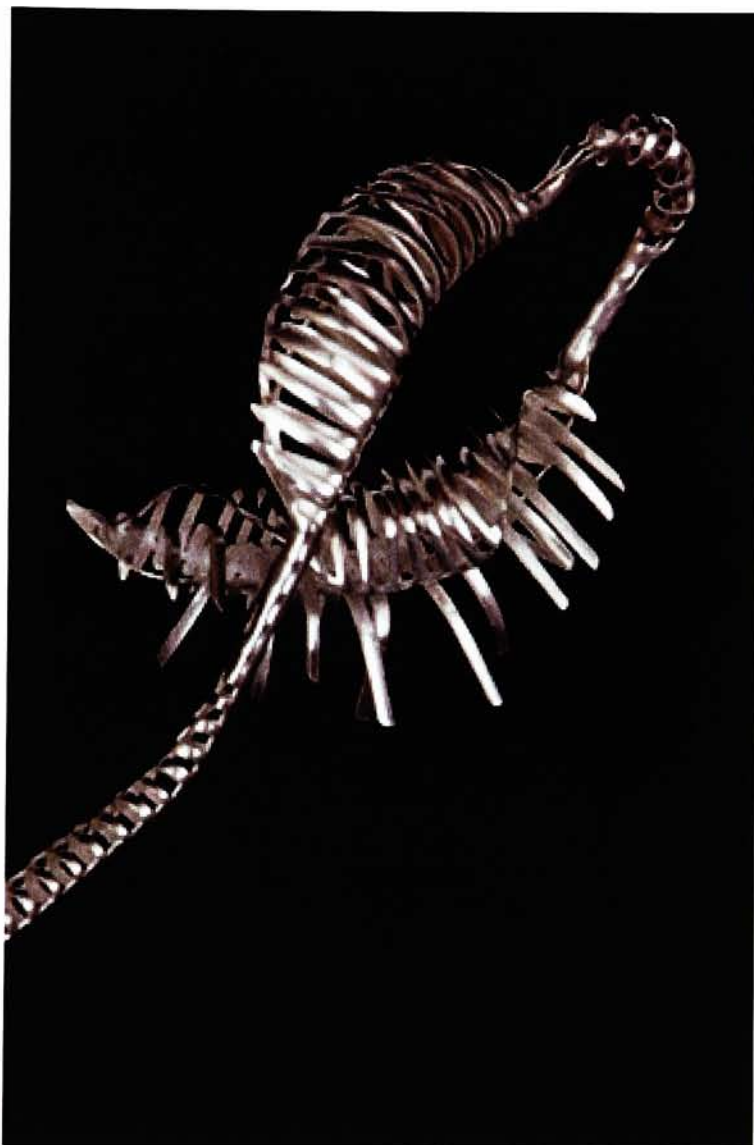
Transformation I
22k bi-metal, fine silver
25"x2"x2"

Figure 4



Transformation V
Sterling silver
7.5"x2.5"x3"

Figure 4



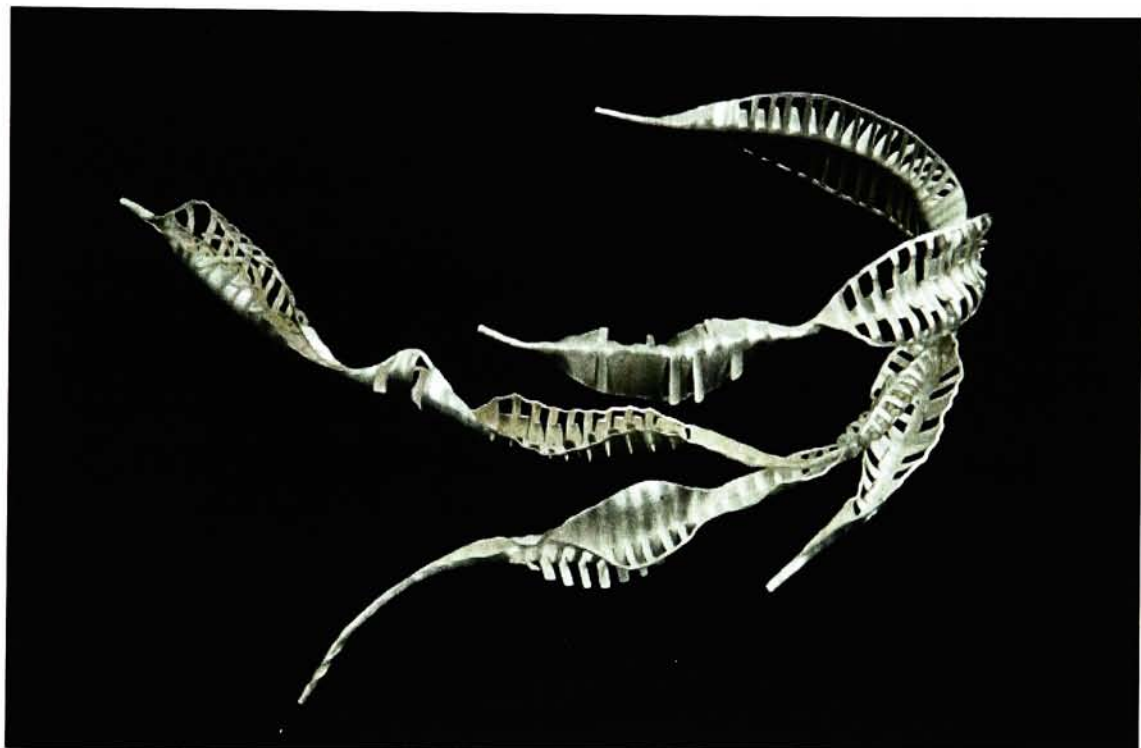
Transformation V
Sterling silver
7.5"x2.5"x3"

Figure 4



Transformation V
Sterling silver
7.5"x2.5"x3"

Figure 5



Phoenix
Sterling silver, freshwater pearl
10.5"x9.5"x3"

Figure 5



Phoenix
Sterling silver, freshwater pearl
10.5"x9.5"x3"

Figure 6



Transformation VII
Sterling silver
6.5"x5.5"x4"

Figure 6



Transformation VII
Sterling silver
6.5"x5.5"x4"

Figure 7



Transformation VIII
Sterling silver, 22k bi-metal
38"x2"x2"

Figure 7



Transformation VIII
Sterling silver, 22k bi-metal
38"x2"x2"

Figure 7



Transformation VIII
Sterling silver, 22k bi-metal
38"x2"x2"

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