IN THE STUDIO

Shana Kroiz
Problem Solver
BY MARJORIE SIMON


Kroiz is currently the Special Events and Workshop Coordinator and founder of the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) Jewelry Center, where she is also an instructor and studio artist. I first met her when she was the impossibly young director of the famed 92nd Street Y Jewelry Center in New York. She had scopped out the inexpensive, convenient Peter Pan bus, and was commuting from her hometown of Baltimore, carrying her portable pitch board on which were always two or three copper forms in various stages of refinement. She was the first person I ever knew to have a Palm Pilot.

A graduate of Parsons School of Design with an honors major in metals and a minor in clay, Kroiz also spent a year studying with Robert Ebendorf and Jamie Bennett at SUNY New Paltz while an undergraduate. She completed her MFA a few years later closer to home, at Towson State University in Maryland. The combination of media makes her a natural for "sketching" her volumetric, sculptural designs in polymer clay before carving them in wax, then electroforming and enameling them. To me the clay models look like finished pieces, spirited, animate, and complete with pin stems or clasps, but to Kroiz they're a necessary first step. Rather than tiring of the design once she has completed the model, she can't wait to execute it in wax, and ultimately in enamel on the electroformed skin. It's obvious from looking at the array of work in various stages of completion that each phase has its own pleasures and problems to solve, so she's never tempted to omit the clay. Working this way allows her to refine the designs in wax before electroforming, as well as providing her with a means of working "clean" in a space her daughter, now eight, can enter and enjoy.

Modest in size, the "clean room" is flooded with light and festooned with drawings, sketches, models, and personal memorabilia. A "clothesline exhibit" travels along two walls, surrounding the artist with lively images. A seemingly endless variety of Kroiz's signature forms cavort on every surface. Behind this, tucked away in what might have been originally servants' quarters, is a small workroom for fabrication and enameling. With two tall windows on adjoining walls and, in summer at least, a verdant view, it is off-limits to the children, since it contains not only (lead bearing) enamels, but also the electroforming tank (on wheels stacked beneath an old utility sink that came with the house), where she can check on plating progress in the middle of the night if need be. In reality she does much of her enameling in the studio at MICA, where she can safely spread out while students are on vacation. The small rooms have the advantage of walls for shelving, bulletin boards, and postings of all kinds. From her central spot Kroiz can hear all that goes on in the house, even supervise homework, impossible if she had chosen the larger subterranean basement for her workspace.

Kroiz's forms are based loosely on sea creatures, and in fact they seem to be futuristic denizens of a universe as
imagined by Niki de Saint Phalle and Jacques Cousteau. Plump, vivacious, colorful, they float and dance in zero gravity, some deep brown to bronzy green, others pink and blue and girly. Every part of the construction is well thought out: individual elements are threaded and screwed into attachments that have been electroformed into the structure. Much larger brooches might have fabricated backs or prong settings for sculptural elements. Early brooches nestled in constructed boxes and were backed with carved wooden supports. Though she claims to have streamlined her fabrication techniques, the new work is anything but slapdash. A new series of production earrings, exhibited at the Baltimore Craft Show in February 2009, is electroformed for weightlessness and patinaed or plated instead of enameled. A large sculptural cuff studded with a few gemstones snaps satisfyingly in place and, of course, comfortable to wear.

Her iconic forms haven’t changed much over time, except to become more refined, developed, and complex, as she has moved from die-forming, chasing, and repoussé to electroforming, frequently as a basis for covering with painterly enamels.

Still young after 20 years in the studio, she claims to still have that “giddy-falling-in-love-feeling” at her bench.

Electroforming creates a lightweight shell structure capable of emerging with a smooth, not knobby, surface. Though many are subsequently enameled or plated, some are designed to be used direct from the bath with a rich amber finish. Wearability is always a consideration. Though large and definitely noticeable (a waitess can’t help commenting on her necklace), these interactive set pieces are intended for the body, and the forms must move with it and sit comfortably there.

Shana Kroiz personifies some of the best impulses of the field: her dedication as a teacher, her love of making, and her devotion to family compete for her not inconsiderable energies and attention and she is generous with all. She cheerfully accepts that she can no longer work through the night and that whatever has been interrupted for child-centered activities will eventually resume. It’s a dilemma faced by most women, especially women who are artists: pulled, though not always conflicted, by strong creative urges that are not always resolvable. Unfailingly positive, Kroiz may be the embodiment of the hopes and goals for women in the last 40 years: to enjoy, in Freud’s words, love and work. Still young after 20 years in the studio, she claims to still have that “giddy-falling-in-love-feeling” at her bench.

Marjorie Simon is a jeweler and writer living in Philadelphia.