



Art professor Anika Smulovitz uses a specialized hammer to form a sheet of brass. At right is Smulovitz's "Loss and Longing," a sterling silver bracelet and keys.



THE ART OF ADORNMENT

Anika Smulovitz explores relationships between objects and wearers in her exquisite work

Story by JULIE HAHN

Photography by CARRIE QUINNEY

Anika Smulovitz sees as much opportunity in a hunk of dull lead as she does in a block of burnished gold. It is her unique understanding of the potential of each metal that sets her apart as an artist.

Smulovitz, an associate professor of art metals at Boise State, explores issues of adornment and beauty, taboo and culture in her work in the medium of jewelry. In large part, her approach to her art relies on perceptions about the materials she uses to shape her pieces, which include necklaces, rings and a variety of other ornamental items designed to be worn.

Smulovitz chooses the raw materials for her art very carefully, exploring the “non-neutrality of materials” as part of her work. “All associations with these metals come into play if you choose to use them,” she explained.

For example, gold represents love and affluence, while lead is commonly associated with more mundane objects,

Smulovitz stands inside Boise State's art metals studio, holding a sterling silver cup raised out of a flat sheet of metal.



CARRIE QUINNEY PHOTO



like fishing weights and the shields used during X-rays.

These associations allow the artist to experiment, to add more meaning or context to a particular piece, Smulovitz said.

She also is interested in how an adornment interacts with the body – how a necklace with a delicate chain will feel against the skin, or how a ring's heft will affect the way a hand moves.

"One of the things that excites me the most is the personal and physical interaction people have with objects," Smulovitz said. "Rarely are you allowed to touch the art, but in this field it's all about touching. It's meant to be touched."

The Art of Metalsmithing

The traditional craft aspect of art metals, or metalsmithing, often is misunderstood by the broader art world, Smulovitz said. Metalsmithing is a field based in traditional craft, a word often associated with the everyday items and kitchen-table art projects.

While the historic roots of metalsmithing go back to the blacksmith's shop with its roaring fires, bellows and heavy-handed hammering, the work Smulovitz and her colleagues are engaged in is based on artistic vision and physical precision. She explores ideas and concepts to create pieces that are sophisticated, visually stunning and highly original. It is artistry, rather than craft, that defines her work.

The physicality of the metalsmithing process appeals to what Smulovitz describes as "the need and desire to work with my hands." When she is at her workbench, she is finessing the metal. She meticulously cuts, files, solders, measures and sands her materials to create earrings, necklaces, brooches, key rings

and other decorative pieces.

She is fascinated by the potential her pieces have to inspire a new sense of understanding of the objects and topics her work explores. "That has power, and I find that very exciting," she said.

"Anika is an incredibly gifted metalworker," said Richard Young, chair of the Department of Art. "She's very focused, and that lends itself to the complicated work that she does."

Experimenting with Materials

In Smulovitz's 2002 "Chocolate" series, including a choker made out of more than 400 Ferrero Rocher gold-colored candy wrappers, the materials play a pivotal role in how the art is perceived. The wrappers are used to envelop chocolate, "an indulgent, delicious and sensual experience," Smulovitz noted. And yet this "luxury" that often is given as a Valentine's Day gift is mass-produced and costs less than \$5.

"That series uses the quality of materials to make the piece what it is," she said. In another work, Smulovitz added gold accents to small, plastic white doves that are "kind of ubiquitous symbols of weddings or peace."

"To some degree, I was either bringing attention to that and poking fun at it, or raising the value by pairing them [the doves] with gold and saying that, well, it might be mass-produced in China, but the symbols still have a lot of power," Smulovitz said.

Smulovitz explores issues of adornment and beauty, taboo and culture.



ANIKA SMULOVITZ PHOTO

Glass, botanical specimens and sterling silver were used by Smulovitz to create her “Herbarium Specimen” rings.



TOM McHIVILLE PHOTO

This pendant is from the “Body in Motion: Gravity” series. It releases tiny streams of watercolor as it moves.



ANIKA SMULOVITZ PHOTO

Smulovitz’s “Chocolate Series” includes a choker created from Ferrero Rocher chocolate wrappers.



ANIKA SMULOVITZ PHOTO

The “Love Token” is another piece from the “Chocolate Series.”

For Smulovitz, artistic expression doesn’t end when she’s completed each piece. What interests her most is what happens after her creations have left the studio. Her “Body in Motion: Gravity” series focuses on pieces that mark or record the wearer’s movements. The pieces, made of sterling silver and 18-karat gold, are pendulum-like objects that move with the wearer and release tiny streams of watercolor that remain on clothing or skin, recording the object’s trajectory.

Her jewelry can be challenging for some wearers, she said, but many people are immediately attracted to the pieces and collect them. “You have to be a particular kind of person to wear these pieces because they are very large and make a statement,” she said. “A few years ago, I decided that I had to be able to wear them myself – which is an interesting standard, because I am not an extrovert.”

Smulovitz also finds enormous meaning in the everyday. While she was still studying she became very interested in Judaica, the ritual objects used by Jewish people. “These objects, for me, feel like they have more power because people interact with them on a physical level,” she said.

Working with Students

Smulovitz brings her personal artistic explorations into the classroom on a number of fronts. For example, she challenges students to think carefully about the materials they choose to use.

“She asks, ‘What do things mean?’” said Carrie Gibson, a senior art history major who has taken several classes from Smulovitz and serves on the student Art Metals Club. “Rather than just making things for the sake of making them, we’re making them for a reason.”

Smulovitz is an organized and demanding instructor, said Young. “She is really invested in the area and has integrated theory and practice in highly innovative ways,” he said.

Among the outreach efforts Smulovitz and her students

have pursued are service-learning projects to create site-specific art for the Deer Flat Wildlife Refuge; the wall-mounted, hammered pieces are renderings of the insects and animals found at the refuge. She also has brought a number of influential metalsmiths to Boise to lecture and give workshops. And her students annually hold a silent auction of their work at a local jewelry gallery, donating the proceeds to help buy new equipment for the art metals studio.

Smulovitz also contributes to the art metals field on a national level. Many of her pieces have been included in books published by Lark Books and in *Metalsmith* magazine, and she has appeared around the country as a lecturer and as a judge for the Society of North American Goldsmiths Awards 2008 Educational Endowment Scholarships.

The Role of Creative Activity

The work that Smulovitz and other Boise State professors in the arts and humanities pursue is integral to the university’s progress as an emerging metropolitan research university, said Vice President for Research Mark Rudin. “Creative activity is to the arts what research is to the sciences. Both contribute to the overall strength of the university,” he said.

According to Lisa Gralnick, an art professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Smulovitz is part of a “very, very small crop” of educators who will determine how art metals will be taught and perceived in the future.

“My own feeling is that she will have a truly world-class metalsmithing program at Boise State and that people will flock to the university to study with her,” said Gralnick, one of Smulovitz’s former professors. Smulovitz earned an MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2003.

“Anika is able to successfully wear a lot of hats,” Gralnick said. “She helps keep our metalsmithing field functioning in a more traditional way. At the same time, her work is stretching the boundaries of the field.” ◆