

Ken Loeber

Complexity to Simplicity



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Glen R. Brown

Artist Ken Loeber exemplifies a modern tendency to seek continuity between apparently opposite conditions, above all those of simplicity and complexity. In the twentieth century, fields of inquiry from the arts to the sciences found common ground in the realization that simplicity and complexity were in fact intimately linked to one another. The tremendous variety of life forms that have arisen from the sequencing of four relatively simple nucleotides and the long history of sculpture and painting that, from a formalist perspective, has its roots in a few basic human responses to structure and expression, suggest that complexity and simplicity are not the black and white terms of a binary opposition but rather are more like indistinctly differentiated complements in a gray scale. For Loeber, this realization has not only profoundly affected the development of work in the studio but has also generated and refined the philosophy that he has long brought to bear on experience of the world at large.

In the 1970s, as an art student at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Loeber had the opportunity to attend a lecture on chance and the reconciliation of opposites. The speaker was the experimental composer and modern art theorist John

Cage, who in the early 1950s had encouraged Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg to dissolve the boundaries between ostensibly contrary concepts such as self and other and art and life. Loeber found in Cage's ideas a stimulating reinforcement of his own thoughts, but what made the greatest impression on the young student was Cage's discussion of yin yang in the I Ching, the ancient Chinese Book of Changes. "I didn't know what that was," Loeber confesses, "but I somehow knew that it would be a good thing to investigate." He discovered in the Taoist underpinnings and Confucian nuances of the I Ching some important parallels to his own perspectives, which were no doubt sharpened by engagement with the text. Never one to privilege outside influences over his inner voice however, he ultimately chose not to mine the ancient writings as a source for his art. Rather, the I Ching has remained a subtle inspiration, mingling its wisdom with numerous other lessons drawn from life.

It is characteristic of Loeber's art that content is never considered in isolation from material properties. His principle impetus has always been a sculptural exploration of mass and space, and even today he prefers to describe himself as a

sculptor rather than a jeweler. From his point of view, the distinction between a good brooch and an effective pedestal piece is merely a matter of scale. What accounts for the success of the former is precisely what determines the value of the latter: a pleasing dynamic between contour and volume, a skillful handling of materials, and, most important, a consistent inventiveness in pursuit of a particular goal. For Loeber, that goal has been to develop harmony from initially undefined, even chaotic conditions, or, conversely, to raise complexity from relatively simple states. Twenty years ago (see *Ornament* Vol. 14, No. 4, 1991) he fashioned his works primarily from thin sheets of fourteen karat gold, crumpling, folding and unfolding them to create patterns of creases, or hammering textures into their surfaces—transforming them from simple, flat shapes into complex asymmetrical compositions of bends and crevices. More recently he has tended to approach the relationship of complexity and simplicity from the opposite direction, moving from conditions of plurality to unity and from disorder to order.

The change in direction from complex relationships to simpler states was in some respects imperative, a development made necessary by unforeseen and potentially catastrophic circumstances. In February of 2002 Loeber suffered a severe stroke that left him without the use of his right hand. Though naturally left-handed—a fact from which he drew optimism despite the daunting obstacles that he faced—there was initially some doubt as to whether he would ever be able to return to the studio. If adversity and prosperity are regions of a continuum then the transition between them is defined by a great deal of determination and hard work. No one is likely to understand this better than Loeber. Nor would anyone be quicker to credit his triumph over misfortune to the help of others. Partner and celebrated fiber artist Dona Look, who had collaborated with him on aspects of the jewelry business in the past, was invaluable to the process of reviving his productivity in the studio, but Loeber fairly brims with stories of caring that have filled him with obvious gratitude and, beyond that, admiration for the selfless concern for the welfare of others that the best of humanity harbors.

The Craft Emergency Relief Fund (CERF+) played a crucial role in assuring that Loeber and Look could maintain their livelihood in the difficult months following the stroke. Numerous individuals in the craft fields offered their personal support as well. Consequently, when the PBS series *Craft in America* produced a segment about the artists in 2007 it was natural to air it under the



Opposite page: SILVER BRANCH PIN of eighteen karat gold and sterling silver; forged and fabricated, 3.8 centimeters, 2010. Photographs by Ralph Gabriner, except where noted.

ROSE PIN #1 of sterling silver and eighteen karat gold; forged and fabricated, 5.7 centimeters high, 2006.

BLACK CORAL PIN of black coral, eighteen karat gold, Tahitian pearl; forged and fabricated, 9.2 centimeters high, 2007.



DEVTA PIN of sterling silver; forged and fabricated, 3.8 centimeters high, 2008.

KEN LOEBER, DONA LOOK AND REID LOOK-LOEBER. *Photograph by Reid Look-Loeber.*

heading “community.” Some of the most admirable acts of kindness came from strangers. “After the stroke,” Loeber recalls, “I had no more speech, only one word: ‘ohm.’” Though struggling to regain the communication skills that he had once taken for granted, he could not afford to leave off making jewelry or to neglect the promotion of it at one of the most important annual venues, the Smithsonian Craft Show. There, while minding the booth where he and Look were displaying their work, he met Rosalyn Singer, a retired speech therapist. From this random encounter grew a weekly routine in which Singer in the Washington area and Loeber in Wisconsin, both armed with aphasia workbooks and undaunted by the distance between them, struggled by phone to restore the lost faculty of speech. Though an uphill battle is still the norm, little by little Loeber has made impressive accomplishments toward regaining command of expression, both through his words and through his art.

That art has long been intimately tied to the home that Loeber, Look and their son Reid share on a wooded former farm near Baileys Harbor in peninsular Wisconsin. An 1870s homestead converted to a granary in the 1950s, the house was half choked with wild grasses that rustled with the sloughed skins of garter snakes when Loeber first set eyes on it. The restoration of the structure, still bearing intact the vertical logs hewn from trees that were saplings in the 1650s, was a labor of love that came to complement Loeber’s work in the studio to such a degree that he took to using the same simple claw hammer for both endeavors. This hammer remains his principal tool today, a tangible reminder that simplicity has long been the attendant of complexity in his life. The house, the attached

studio and particularly the one hundred twenty acres of low woods and fields that surround them, likewise, have anchored a perspective that values simplicity.

In part this perspective encourages making do with what fortune provides around you. Some years ago, the naturalness and beauty of this practice were brought home to Loeber when, in taking a turn one day through the trees near the house, he came across an oriole nest that contained an unusual thread. Woven into the suspended bowl was a filament of gold, pilfered by an enterprising bird from Loeber’s own supply, doubtless on a day when the clear spring air warranted open windows. He still thinks of that melding of necessity with chance, a willingness to improvise and an eye for beauty whenever he explores new forms in the studio. Like the garter snake skins, the flexibility and fragility of which he still finds fascinating, the resplendent oriole nest informs his jewelry in a way that he cannot fully articulate but that nevertheless could be called foundational. Form for Loeber, even when others’ eyes might perceive it as purely non-objective, seems always to carry intimations of past experiences and, above all, implications of continuity that can be traced back to the broad spectrum of nature.

Even when inspiration comes from an internal and highly personal context, Loeber’s inclination is not to imitate form so much as to learn by analogy. A good example can be found in the first tentative works that he attempted following his stroke. For weeks after the event he experienced hallucinations, the most vivid of which he took to sketching with colored pencils. Mysterious, even mystical, the drawings record a curious

dance of colored lights—like bees swarming around a hive or electrons orbiting a nucleus—that appeared before Loeber’s eyes as if to compensate through beauty for what had been lost in mobility. The drawings, in particular one depicting a bar of gold enveloped in red light, could have served as guides for a dramatically new direction in Loeber’s jewelry. He chose instead to absorb their nuances and to allow these slowly to infiltrate his compositional sense






SHADOW PIN #1 of sterling silver, Alaskan white coral, freshwater pearl; forged and fabricated, 7.6 centimeters, 2009.

so that his new work would be both necessarily connected to his recent experiences and illustrative of the larger concerns that he had always addressed.

Prior to the stroke, Loeber had focused through his one-of-a-kind pieces primarily on brooches of eighteen karat gold or sterling silver and occasionally bits of crystal or coral. Raised into hollow forms the brooches were decidedly sculptural. With new challenges imposed upon his skills, he began seeking alternative and simpler methods of achieving forms that would surrender nothing of the spatial dynamic so important to his aesthetic. In 2004, back in the studio and already once more proficient with many of the traditional metalworking techniques, he began experimenting. Some of his new work consisted of sheets of gold with asymmetrical repoussé ring patterns. He also produced a brooch composed of short lengths of silver wire hammered into flat, loose spirals and accented with small squares of eighteen karat gold sheet. By arranging the spirals in three stacked layers, Loeber was able to move from simple, flat units to an overall composition with sculptural depth. By 2006 he was utilizing the same basic strategy to produce the first of his Devta brooches, forms composed of dozens of small, textured sheets of silver or gold stacked to create oval reliefs.

By the end of 2006, a fruitful year, Loeber had begun once more wedding coral—in this case a black variety gathered on the beaches of St. Croix after a hurricane—with precious metals. The gleaming, branch-like coral sprouted a leaf or two of textured gold, and often a pearl nestled against its contours like a lustrous berry. From these simple but effective emblems of life and growth a slightly more elaborate series of brooches arose: the Shadow Pins. Inspired by the visual contrast between segments of Alaskan white coral and their crisp, dark shades cast against a sheet of paper, Loeber traced the silhouettes, cut them out as templates and produced textured, sheet-sterling backings, darkened by liver of sulfur, to fit his brooches with illusionistic shadows. Some of the simplest of the Shadow

Pins—perfectly balanced between darkness and light, planarity and roundedness, texture and smoothness—are masterful evocations of poignancy, fragility, solitude, and the slow and persistent vitality that is organic nature’s greatest attribute.

Concurrent with his creation of one-of-a-kind brooches, Loeber has always produced lines of jewelry as mainstays of his and Look’s business. Primarily necklaces, bracelets and earrings, the production pieces are composed of the same precious metals employed in the brooches and—as titles such as DNA and Orbit attest—share the same intuition of natural continuity between ostensible poles such as simplicity and complexity. The orbits of planets in the dark expanse of the universe and the double helices of DNA strands at the molecular level can only be grasped through analogies of form and motion, but for a mind attuned to continuity these abstractions are sufficient to overcome the obstacles of distance and scale. For Loeber such attunement has long been a means of arbitration between sculpture and jewelry, simplicity of materials and complexity of composition, adversity of unforeseen tragedy and the prosperity that can be won through persistence and hard work. At its heart, Loeber’s art is a reconciliation of such ostensibly binary oppositions: a model of continuity, an ever more refined philosophy of the gray scale. 

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ken Loeber wishes to express his gratitude to the many individuals and organizations who have lent their generous support, including, though not limited to Dona Look, Reid Look-Loeber, Carol Saunders, Rosalyn Singer, Carol Sauvion, Karen Boyd Johnson, Karen Keland, Ginny and Dick Wickman, Nina Look, Fred Derr, Fred Loeber, Nancy Larson, the Racine Art Museum, the Perimeter Gallery, and the Craft Emergency Relief Fund.

SUGGESTED READING

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