



DAVID LAPLANTZ JEWELER PROVOCATEUR

“Always stay naïve, because you can see more, you can hear more, you can explore more. Once you start to think you know what’s going on you tend to ignore things; you turn yourself away from a new experience.”



Leslie Clark



DOS PENS/HEART BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 x 6 centimeters diameter, 2008. All photographs by David LaPlantz. Above left: HAZMET MAD HAT HATTER BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2011. Above: David LaPlantz in his studio.

David LaPlantz likes to strike up a dialogue, mostly in your head. A little mischievous, a lot instigator, he asks questions, about dreams, or curiosity, or

nature. He dwells on love, too; red bright hearts are a favorite motif in his jewelry brooches. He takes aim at complacency, defying the status quo with words like “bailout” etched on recent pieces. In person one morning in his large studio south of Santa Fe, he moves around with an elastic quickness, and his conversation easily leaps and fishtails as he focuses on a train of thought or describes a process. He suffers from tinnitus, the result of a thirty-three year academic teaching career that began back when no one wore any headgear in the metalworking studio to mute the constant pounding of hammers and whine of machinery. “As a teacher, you can’t always wear hearing protection,” the Ohio native says. “I had to listen to the equipment; I had to know what was physically going on, and then people were asking questions.” These days he plays music, mostly jazz, while he works; it blocks the ringing in his ears and he likes how it sets the mood. He stills plays LPs. “It forces me to get up and flip over the record every fifteen minutes,” he says. “I have a huge vinyl collection.”

LaPlantz’s jewelry confines itself to a two-inch diameter brooch, for which he is widely known. The brooches are made from sandwiched slices of flat aluminum, which he saws, drills, layers, rivets, engraves, files, and sands for a beveled edge. Some pieces, like his red hearts, are hydraulically pressed into a small die to create a dimensional form. He keeps stacks of industrially painted aluminum in reserve. LaPlantz has used it since 1981, when he first started making jewelry while teaching at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. Durable and affordable, aluminum lets him experiment more with ideas. Early on he



DRAGON SCALES BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2012.

DRAGON BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2012.



ED-IT-ED BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2008.



BOXES BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2011.



PANTHERS STICKPIN of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 3.5 centimeters square, 2012.



WHITE FRAME/RED HEART STICKPIN of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 3.5 centimeters diameter, 2012.

compositions, and interior views through cutout shapes into other colors below the surface draw you into a different space. The visual panache of the brooches stirs up lots of possibilities for interpreting what you want any one of them to say. “You bring your own message to what they mean,” Lorene comments. Another major appeal of the brooches, she adds, is how lightweight they are. Since the Seattle climate is relatively mild, “It’s an all-season piece of jewelry here. It’s also great summer jewelry for visitors, because it’s easy to wear on cotton clothes.”

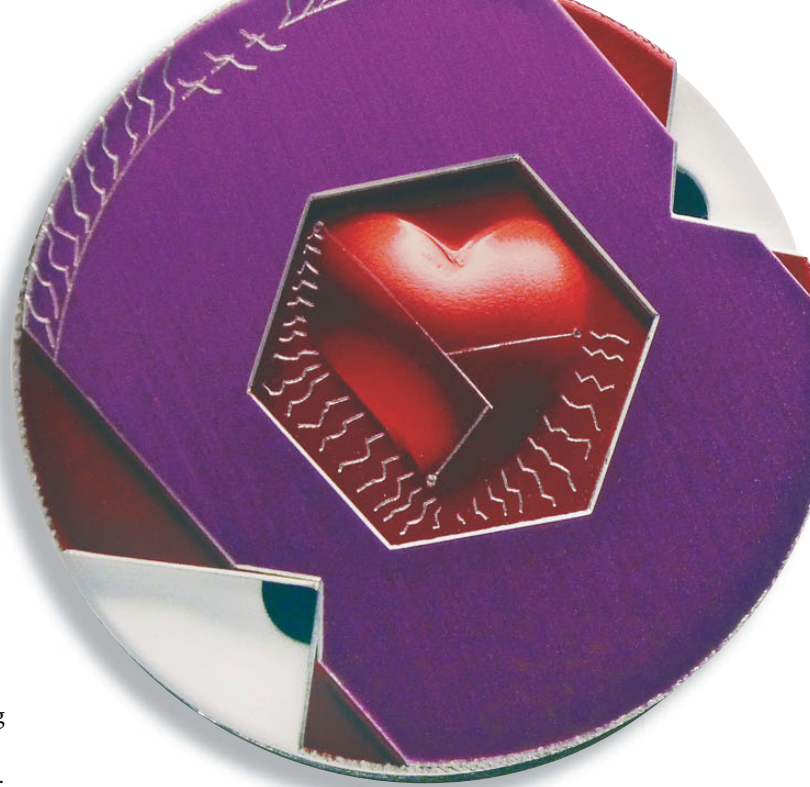
When the ideas flow he works fast: “I can be extremely spontaneous with materials that aren’t that expensive. I live on the theory that I get high off my work and riding my bicycle.”

mixed it with other materials, like egg crate plexiglas or bits of fabric and rubber, and he used many more colors of aluminum. Now decades later and retired, he has intentionally restricted himself to certain colors. “They really speak to me,” LaPlantz says. “For some reason I think there’s a boldness, or a frankness, to my choice of colors now. I think maybe I’ve limited myself because I like the challenge.” He stays mostly with black, red and white, adding shots of yellow, green and magenta. He used to make belt buckles, rings, pendants, and earrings but eliminated all that too. “It seemed like what I really wanted to do was to just concentrate on the disk form. Some of that’s basically set up by my tools. But by narrowing down the parameters to a two-inch brooch or smaller, then I’m free to do anything I want in that round format. It keeps me excited.”

The brooches can take you by surprise. Karen Lorene, owner of Facèrè Jewelry Art Gallery in Seattle, calls his pieces “industrial chic. They work on contrast in their vibrant, strong colors, and the unexpected combinations are appealing. His cold-connections are almost startling,” she says. Deceptively simple-looking at first, the punchy colors, abstract



HEX BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2012.



Assembling, discarding, re-assembling a new design, sawing and etching, his hands fly until a brooch gels. Staying free, both in the sense of staying open to whatever direction your work takes you and of staying open to whatever is going around in the ether, was a refrain in his teaching. “In my other life I used to tell my kids: Try to stay as dumb as you can be,” LaPlantz explains. “What I meant by that was: don’t try so hard to learn everything. Always stay naïve, because you can see more, you can hear more, you can explore more. Once you start to think you know what’s going on you tend to ignore things; you turn yourself away from a new experience. Give it a chance. So with my work, what I try to do is to stay open to all kinds of possibilities.” Within that two-inch diameter anything can happen.

The studio overlooks a panorama of piñon and juniper, the Sandia Mountains in Albuquerque visible in the far distance. Inside, Miles Davis softly meditates over his horn in the background. LaPlantz moved to New Mexico in 2005, following the death of his wife, book artist and author Shereen LaPlantz, from cancer. It was a return trip for him. In 1967-1968 he dropped out of Cranbrook Academy of Art, where he was earning a degree in metalsmithing, to teach at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe for a year.

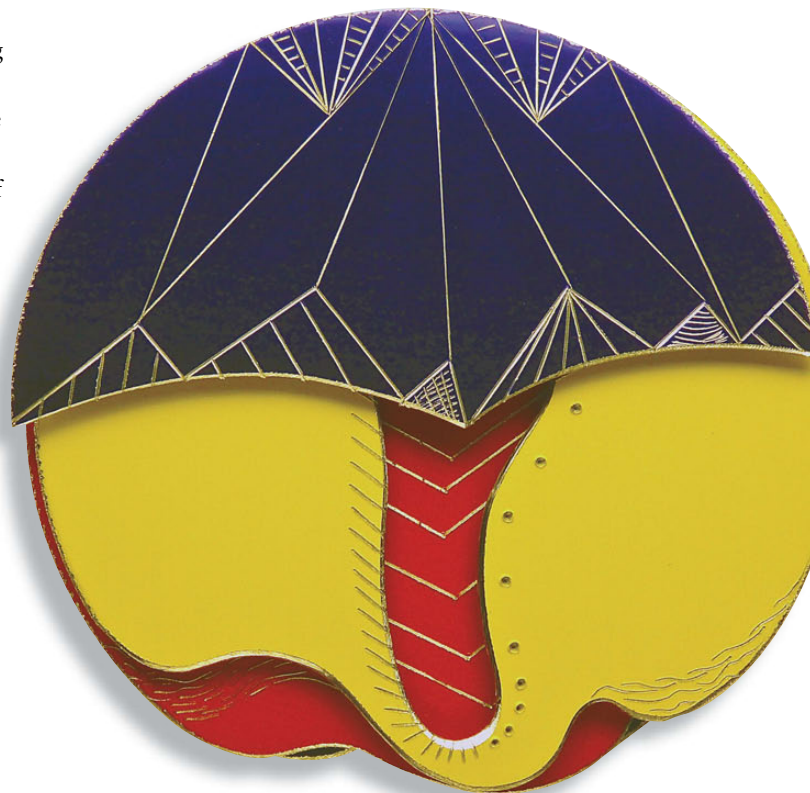
“Everything that I would become was rooted here. The foundation was set here. That’s why it was really important to come back,” LaPlantz recalls. Above his desk hangs an upside-down stars-and-stripes, with a black bowler slung on a pile of papers underneath. Books thick and thin cram high shelves around most of the room. While he talks LaPlantz zips from armchair to computer to large worktables covered with different projects to the jeweler’s bench in the opposite corner and back. “Let’s take a look,” he says. Like all natural-born teachers passionate about what they do, he shows and demonstrates as he explains.

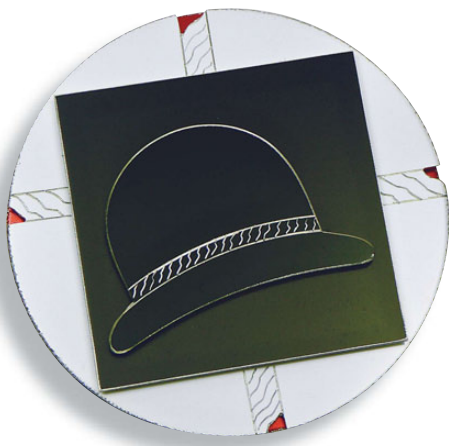
At Cranbrook at the time, the prevailing zeitgeist was for making raised vessels of functional sterling silver. “It was

RED HEART STICKPIN of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 3.5 centimeters diameter, 2012.

Below: PURPLE HAZE UMBRELLA BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2011.

Above left: TWISTING BY THE POOL BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2012.



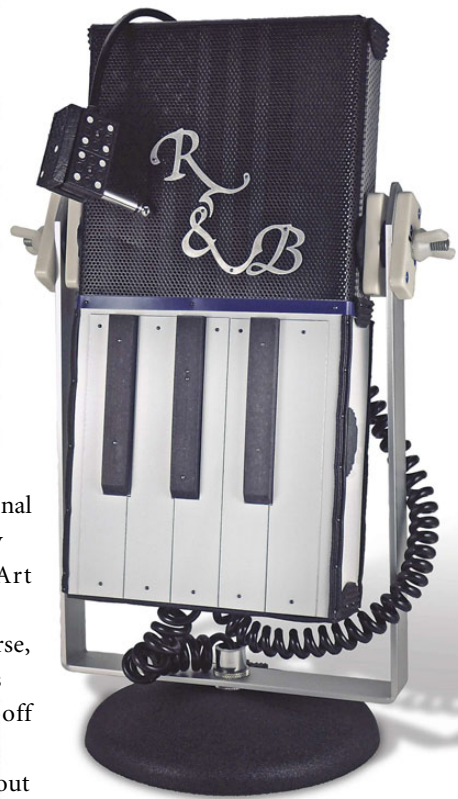


ASSANGE BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2011.

never really me, but I did start doing larger three-dimensional raised forms,” LaPlantz says. In 1996 he diverted away from jewelry for a long stretch and turned to his Art Microphones. He describes them as communicating his thoughts, in the sense of offering a kind of social discourse, about a musician, a politician, or something someone has said. Built with real vintage microphone bases and on-off switches, LaPlantz explains, “That’s the point—it’s to fool the eye. It’s to make you think it could broadcast. It’s about the visual.” Subjects range from Fats Domino to George W. Bush to Gilbert and Sullivan. Always a bit of an agent provocateur in his jewelry, LaPlantz likes to prod and provoke, with humor and outspoken candor. “If you can see and translate something in a fresh way or maybe a different way, that action influences other people to think.

Even if they don’t like it they’re thinking about it, and that’s good.”

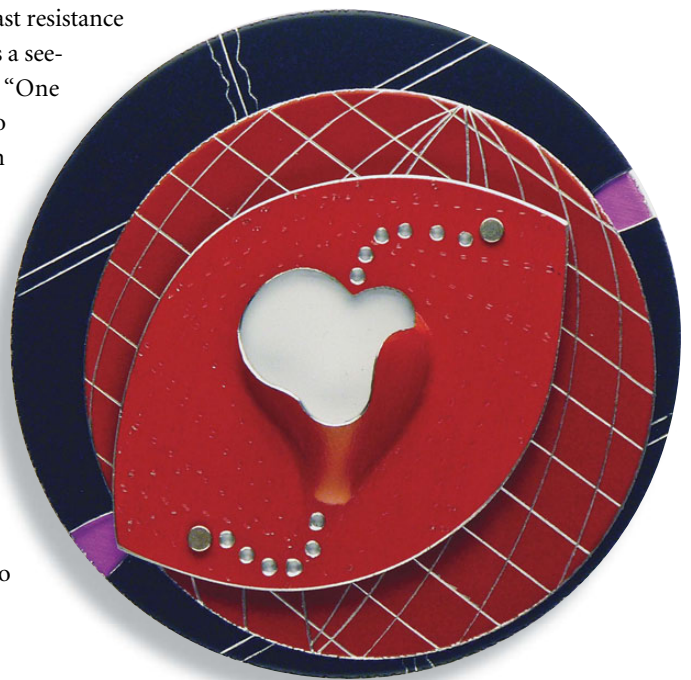
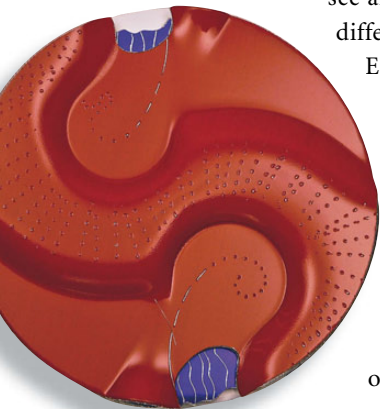
In the studio he crouches on the floor in front of some wood blocks and bangs out aluminum disks with a ball peen hammer. He likes to keep it simple. “If there’s one thing that might be an over-riding thought about how I work, it’s that the least resistance possible is really important.” LaPlantz uses a see-through plastic ruler to make a template. “One of my favorite tools is this ruler. It allows me to see where I am, where I’ve been and where I’m going. I can see what’s beneath. I also use tons of stencils.” He collects stencils for shapes and for doing graphic work on the surface of the aluminum. “I like that graphic approach. When you get a series of lines all moving in the same direction it pulls it off really well.” Dozens of cut aluminum parts and outtakes sit in trays salvaged from dumpsters. “I try to keep a road map of where I’ve been, whether it’s a positive or a negative. This is partly how the ideas develop. If I want to come back to a subject later, I can, but I’m going to



FATS DOMINO/R & B MIKE of fabricated mixed media; 38.1 x 22.9 x 15.2 centimeters, 2002.

Below: PARTA HEARTA BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 3.5 centimeters diameter, 2012.

Left: TURBO BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2012.






start looking through these and see what I want to do with them and where they can fit in the scheme of things for the next series of pieces.”

He just finished a special commission for a client, making several complicated stick pins full of symbolism that took three months to complete. To jot down images and designs as they occurred to him, LaPlantz fashioned a mini-sketchbook out of used white envelopes, folded into pages and stuck in his pocket. “I learned a lot because I was forced to look at my world in a different way. I had to scale down from two inches all the way to one and three-eighths. My fingers were getting tired working with such small shapes,” LaPlantz says, half-mockingly. He plans next to design necklaces, and points to a big, dramatic one made of

handcarved tagua nut and draped steel mesh on dark brown braided leather. The necklace is a departure from all his other work, yet true to his sense of boldness.

He has played with tagua nut for a while, ever since Marcia Lewis, a California metalsmith, first gave him one and remarked that maybe he could do something with it. He was attracted to the natural soft ivory color. The seed of a South American tree, the tagua nut is “essentially cellulose. I’ve used it sporadically,” LaPlantz continues. “What I like about it is that it’s a fabulous ivory substitute; it does have a visible grain; it takes dyes, and it’s environmentally satisfying in all respects.”

On the way out he makes one final detour, to show a wood-frame screen door he is building, painted in candy-cane colors. Stenciled at eye-level on the screen mesh is a perfect red heart. From the outside, the heart is hard to see. On the inside, it glows. 

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SUGGESTED READING

Benesh, Carolyn L.E. “David LaPlantz.” *Ornament*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1982): 28-33.
 —. “David LaPlantz, Collectibles.” *Ornament*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1994): 70-71.

RED FRAME/WHITE BOOK STICKPIN of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 3.5 centimeters diameter, 2012.

Below: MASKARADE BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2012.

Below left: THEENDA/WHITE EDGE BROOCH of fabricated industrially painted aluminum, engraved and cold-connected; 5.1 centimeters diameter, 2011.

