



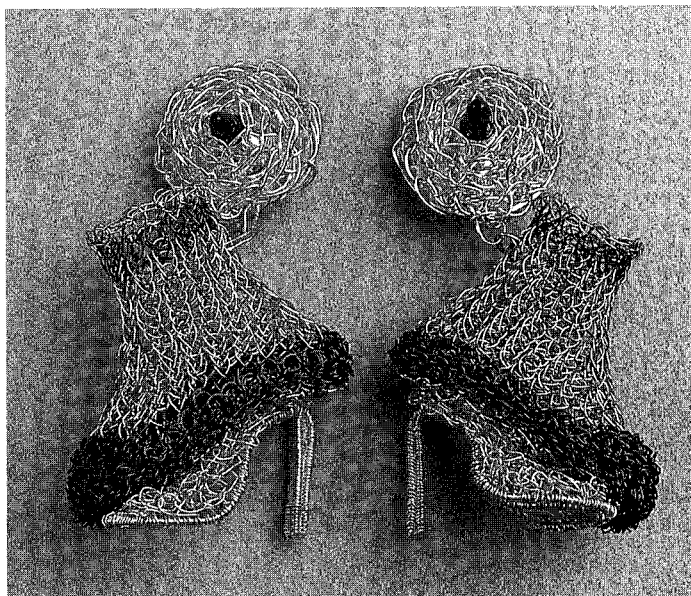
## Barbara Stutman: *Plotting Our Progress*

Galerie Elana Lee, Verre D'Art  
Montreal, Quebec  
April 27 – May 18, 1993

by Jennifer Salahub

The press release stated that the exhibition was "... one woman's look at being female in today's world" and if I was prepared for the anger, the introspection, and even the humour of the theme, I was not at all prepared for the strong emotional response that the techniques themselves evoked. Nor was I ready for the confusion I felt as I contemplated wearing the highly charged objects that make up *Plotting our Progress*, an exhibition of sculptural jewellery by Barbara Stutman.

Stutman is an established Montreal metalsmith and her long fascination with applying textile techniques to metals has become a trademark. While she is quick to acknowledge the debt she owes to artists Arline Fisch and Mary Lee Hu (she studied with the latter) she also points out that knitting and crochet were an integral part of her upbringing and therefore the use of wire, rather than yarn, was not a totally foreign experience. This acceptance of a familiarity with traditional women's hand work becomes even more appropriate given the theme of this exhibition. She chooses techniques long associated with domesticity and the inculcation of feminine values in Western society; using these techniques to illustrate such controversial subject matter is brilliant. Stutman presents a veritable sampler of wearable social issues and every element – each bracelet, each necklace, and each brooch – exemplifies a multifaceted approach. The artist incorporates a variety of materials (silver, copper, bronze, magnetic wire, fossils, jade, etceteras), treatments (patinas and enamel paint), and techniques (knitting, crochet, spool-knitting and twining) in her works.



ABOVE LEFT  
Bracelet: *Power Accessory*, 1992-93  
copper, patinas, enamel, paint, knitting, 3.5 x 6"

ABOVE RIGHT  
Earrings: *Maintaining the Status Quo*, 1993  
fine silver, sterling silver, copper, magnet, wire, jade, crochet, twining, 2 x 3/4"

In *Plotting our Progress* Stutman has added a new twist, asking us to unravel the tangled web of information. In *Power Accessory*, a formidable studded copper bracelet, the physical strength of the medium is symbolically undermined by the hook and eye closure and the lacy quality of the knitted structure. The delicate appearance of the technique and its association with women's role within a domestic sphere is at odds with the notion of power, a traditional male attribute. Is this an accoutrement of Wonder Woman or a controlling /constraining dog collar?

Stutman's works provoke a mixed response in the viewer. In *Portrait of a Rape Victim* and *Dark Cloud from the Past* the aesthetically beautiful and finely crafted works are in disarming incongruity with the harrowing subject matter. However, rage is displaced by wry humour in her series of witty tampon holders. Each vibrantly coloured and exotic spool-knitted container could easily be misread as a prom night corsage holder/vial symbolizing a young woman's coming of age. Nonetheless, in these brooches societal recognition is replaced by the actual event that marks a woman's entrance into puberty.

The whimsical composition of a pair of earrings, *Maintaining the Status Quo*, also invites a multivalent reading. Here the combination of familiar objects worked in an unexpected manner is reminiscent of the Pop Art aesthetic, however the subject matter is topical. In each earring a high heeled shoe is being engulfed (trampled?) by a boot. While I would like to read this image as a sign of progress (a rejection of the North American cult of beauty), the label belies this interpretation. Following a tangled path we return, once more, to the title of the exhibition. Indeed, how far have we progressed?

*Jennifer Salahub is a textile historian and critic living in Montreal.*