

**"BARBARA STUTMAN:  
EXCESSITY"**

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by SHELLEY POMERANCE

What's happened to Barbara Stutman the social critic, who specialized in biting commentary on all that is female and feminine, whose powerful pieces include the sensual flowerlike brooches that doubled as tampon holders (*On Being Female*), the *Power Accessory* bracelet that bristled with spikes, the brooch in the guise of a red tongue protruding from hot pink lips, called *Sugar and Spice: Must We Be Nice?* Has she abandoned her political rhetoric, buried it, or simply become more subtle and sophisticated in handling her powerful message?

At first glance, "Excessity," a collection of 29 pieces, seems to be all aesthetics, no message, with its vibrant palettes of purple, gold, and emerald; shimmering pastel pinks, oranges, mauves; and a spectrum of pearly greys. Stutman still uses the textile techniques of spool-knitting and crocheting silver and colored wire to make her lacy jewelry; what's new are the seedbeads and miniature pearls that add sparkle, and the vinyl lacing she's incorporated into some pieces.

This series is finely crafted—with more delicacy and precision than in any of her earlier work. Despite the absence of gold and precious gems, Stutman has created something just as rich: she's invented her own precious metals, her own rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. But why, in our age of technology and virtuality, spend countless hours hand-crafting complex ornaments? This is excess in all its manifestations: the oversized pieces, the eye-popping colors, the obsessively meticulous workmanship. Years ago, Stutman visited India; the imagery she saw there, of sultans and maharajahs in their royal finery, has now surfaced in her work.

*Maharajah's Madness* is a king-sized bracelet, a mesh sleeve with a border of crocheted silver wire, a floppier middle section resembling a piece of folded fabric, and nesting in the center, a giant sparkling "stone" of silver wire glinting with



transparent seedbeads. *Maharajah's Madness* doesn't conform to the norms of jewelry as we know it. It's bigger, baggier, more extravagant, an inherent contradiction: an obtruding, nearly grotesque object made of the tiniest pearls and finest intertwining of silver threads. This is no *Power Accessory*. This is power itself, and power gone awry. Pair it with the *Maharajah's Medallion*, another large "gem" in tones of gray, silver, and white suspended from a necklace of transparent vinyl tubing; imagine an oversize coiled telephone cord hanging around your neck, springing up and down as you walk, clamoring for attention.

Less kinetic in that it lies flat on your neck, and doesn't bounce up and down as you move, but positively eye-catching, is a necklace of luscious "gemstones"—ruby reds, fruity oranges and pinks, all crocheted wire and seedbeads set in a lacy silver border. This piece is eminently wearable: large yet light, it shapes itself to the body, and fastens with ingenious magnet clasps concealed in the crocheted discs. Jewels fit for an Elizabethan royal.

Distinctly papal is a sober pendant of crocheted wire suspended from a spool-knit rope of black vinyl lacing. A large green oval "gem" is offset by six smaller ovals in red, purple, blue, mauve, and bronze, while at the other end of the vinyl rope hangs a single silver egg. In its sobriety and massiveness, this piece evokes power, grandeur, wealth. Yet these are just bits of wire and vinyl meticulously, laboriously strung together to create the illusion of opulence.

Stutman is not spelling out her message the way she has in the past; most of these works aren't even titled, she's letting you analyze the

work, and come to your own conclusions.

We associate wealth with weight: the heft of gold, the density of precious stones. Yet these imposing jewels are as light as lace to wear. Is the artist mocking ostentatious wealth, daring modern men and women to wear these big, bright ornaments, to hang their riches around their necks? (Even if they cost a fraction of real rubies and emeralds, these works are pricey all the same.) And if wearing jewelry is a way of displaying your riches, then Stutman is making a double entendre: If you dare to wear these jewels, you are also willing to let people see that it is all artifice, simply wire, vinyl, and colored glass.

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**clockwise from top**  
*Royal Neckpiece*, 2003  
fine silver, sterling silver, artistic wire, seedbeads, magnet  
8 7/8 x 7 x 1 1/8"  
Photo: Anthony McLean

*Royal Pendant*, 2002  
artistic wire, nickel silver, vinyl lacing  
5 3/4 x 5 x 1 1/4"

*Maharajah's Madness* (bracelet), 2003  
fine silver, iron wire, artistic wire, pearls, seedbeads  
5 1/4 x 3 3/4 x 5 1/4"