

Hanna Hedman



Voyage to a New World

BY BELLA NEYMAN

North, 2014
reindeer fur, tree burl, birch,
leather, textile, paint
38 1/2 x 5 x 13"



North, 2014
reindeer fur, reindeer antler,
leather, brass, paint
22 x 16 1/2 x 2 3/8"

HANNA HEDMAN HAS lived many lives. For someone as young as she is, this spiritual artist thinks a lot about death. Even her jewelry, at first glance beautiful and rich, can seem eerie and morbid. This unusual juxtaposition is what makes this Swedish artist so interesting. Her work is an examination of her culture and the ensuing acknowledgment that there is more to the world than what she knows and what exists in her comfort zone. It is about opening the mind to the unfamiliar through conscious observation of other cultures and human behavior. It is about life and death. Like the work itself, there is more to Hedman than meets the eye.

Hedman's website opens with an image of a mask with hollow eyes and a large bloom placed strategically over its mouth. Several other blooms grow around the sides, with strands of leather flowing from the neck area. This copper and leather mask is from Hedman's "Black Bile" series (2013). Of this work, Hedman wrote, "Blossoming sentimental flowers that imitate still life paintings become preserved into metal. Desiccated leaves form a hand that wants to hold on to you or a mask to hide behind. The work represents a frozen moment of decay; a preserved dark beauty that derives from the struggle of good and evil. Light and darkness are contesting one another. The jewellery wants to be beautiful on one hand, but on the other hand haunting

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and not even jewellery at all." This description, although written about a particular body of work, is applicable to most of Hedman's art. Romantic, dark, and

deep, Hedman's work is all about dichotomies: beauty and ugliness, sorrow and happiness, faith and faithlessness, light and dark, good and evil.

Hedman has been on a metaphorical and literal voyage from a young age, constantly searching for new inspiration. Her studies have taken her to North America as well as Latin and Central America and New Zealand. The experience of making her first piece of jewelry while on a skiing scholarship at the University of Colorado was more significant than the piece itself, as it sparked a persistent desire to create, propelling Hedman to become a significant figure in the world of art jewelry.

From the beginning of her artistic career, Hedman has been guided by instructors who have encouraged her to experiment and find her own way. Al Carniff at the University of Colorado was her first metals instructor and let her "explore without many limitations or dos and



Human Tree, 2010
silver, copper, paint
19 5/8 x 13 x 2 3/8"



Human Tree, 2010
silver, copper, paint
21 5/8 x 3 3/8 x 6 1/2"



Human Tree, 2010
PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLABORATION WITH SANNA LINDBERG

don'ts," she says. After returning to Stockholm, where she was born and raised, Hedman enrolled at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design and received her BA and MFA at Ådellab, the Department of Jewelry + Corpus (metalsmithing). Frederik Ingemansson, her first technical teacher at Konstfack, had a similar approach to Carniff's; although he was formally trained, he was not opposed to his students learning new techniques. Hedman spent her spare time in the Konstfack workshop. "I had little experience when I started at Konstfack, and I wanted to learn and had a lot of inspiration and energy," she says. For all the technical skill that she gained from Ingemansson, her appreciation for jewelry as art came from Ruudt Peters, the founder of Ådellab. According to Hedman, Peters "put much more emphasis on jewelry and experimenting with materials."

When the Dutch Peters joined the mainly Swedish Konstfack faculty, students were immersed in traditional coursework. "The rare request of all of my students to become more personal and emotional was a strange invitation in the formal and cold Swedish society," Peters says. "Hanna saw her chance to break through." For Hedman, this was a welcome challenge, as she questioned Swedish societal norms and the way that people suppressed their feelings and emotions.



Black Bile, 2013
silver, leather,
copper, paint
17 x 10 1/4 x 4 3/4"

Distraught over a painful personal experience, Hedman was encouraged by her professors to pour those feelings into her final project. According to Peters, "her examination work was her complete breakthrough." The series featured floor-length necklaces, some with claw pendants, which appeared to take a physical toll on wearers, along with open envelope-like brooches that could not contain their thorny contents. The ability to turn raw emotions, primarily sadness, into art is Hedman's signature. Peters asserts, "The great thing is that Hanna was/is always able to make her work universal and understood by others. ... Hanna has a great quality to transform her personal life into art." Hedman once said that her final project, *Enough tears to cry for two* (2008), is one of her most satisfying because of "the strength that it took from me to create that work."

Hedman was still a student when she began exhibiting at Ornamentum Gallery in Hudson, New York; she was introduced to the gallerists Stefan and Laura Friedman by Peters. "A number of artists during that period, mainly from Scandinavia, were using natural, almost tribal materials, and were approaching it in a very similar manner (including in some of Hanna's earlier student work)," says Stefan Freidman. "Hanna was able to leave the natural, tribal feeling behind and refine the work just enough to keep it raw but balanced with a delicacy in silver or other materials like fabric." Hedman spent an exchange semester in New Zealand and worked with fish scales native to the area, creating works with a rhythmic surface like the Norwegian artist Tone Vigeland, but in a completely different manner.

Hedman enjoys working with her hands and is drawn to metal. She talks about being "aggressive" with it, holding the metal in her hands and cutting or drilling into it. Her current studio on the island of Södermalm in Stockholm belonged to a retired 80-year-old metalsmith who left behind his tools. Knowing that the tools she now handles have lived a long life is of great importance to Hedman. The artist's work is inspired by traditional jewelrymaking techniques that she does not always use in a conventional way. Instead of making filigree, Hedman drills numerous holes into the metal or solders together wires that resemble small filigree. The jewelry is full of repetitive decorative elements such as overlapping flowers, scales, and, sometimes, body parts. Hedman finds that the repetition in her work puts her in a "meditative state." A perfectionist, she prefers to work in series, often making more than one piece at a time, crafting fragments and then revisiting the composition.

Hedman's most recent body of work, "North" (2015), signals an expansion of her vocabulary of materials. She opts for materials that have a "real identity" and a known origin. The pieces in this series include reindeer fur, antlers, and tree burl. Introducing new materials also means learning to use new tools. "I am trying to find materials that relocate to the beginning of their creation. With the fur, I know where it came from and how the reindeer used to live. It is the same with the antlers. [I am] thinking about different



While They Await Extinction, 2011
"Manis tricuspis" (brooch/object)
silver, copper, paint
6 3/8 x 3 1/2 x 6 1/4"



While They Await Extinction, 2011
"Atelopus varius" (necklace)
silver, copper, paint
11 3/4 x 2 3/4 x 5 7/8"

materials and going to the north and finding materials that come from my own country. These transitions are necessary but scary," the artist confides. "North" took the artist to northern Scandinavia, where she found inspiration in her own homeland. This has not always been the case and for the last five years, beginning with her 2010 "Human Tree" series, Hedman has sought creative impetus in other lands.

The "Human Tree" series, comprised of nine pieces of jewelry, grew out of Hedman's travels to Mexico City through the "Walking the Grey Area" symposium, organized by the Otro Diseño Foundation for Cultural Cooperation and Development. It was during this trip that Hedman became interested in amulets and *milagros*, small folk charms found in churches that are believed to have healing powers. An intense fascination with Mexico grew out of the artist's desire to understand a culture so dissimilar to her own.

Hedman was surprised by the region's graphic representation of Christ's bloody body on the cross, the complete opposite of his sterile depiction within Swedish Lutheran churches.

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Guided by an interest in syncretism (the merging of different religions and cultures into one), Hedman visited several churches

and spoke with numerous individuals about the cultures of the indigenous Mesoamericans and the Spanish Catholics. Hedman immortalized her trip by creating her own *milagros* in metal, which found their way into the nine neckpieces. Each is a panoply of forms; strung together by perforated metal links are dismembered arms, legs, lungs, and kidneys, akin to *milagros* seen in the Mexican churches. The work is also predominantly red. Hedman tried to "mimic the red colors of the volcanic city, as well as the fleshy colors of the representation of Jesus," she says. Red symbolizes Mexico in the artist's mind, and has since become her favorite color.

"While they Await Extinction" (2011), the body of work that followed "Human Tree," once again explores the life and death cycle, this time within the confines of the animal kingdom. "Humans often have a romantic idea of the natural world and the relationship we have with it, but in reality we are in conflict with nature by having a major negative impact on biodiversity. Our destructive behavior negatively affects the environment and ultimately ourselves," Hedman says. Using the same formal language, birds and fish are born from thin perforated sheets of copper and are melded together to become unified. It is often hard to decipher where one species begins and the other ends. Sometimes they are tangled in leaves. The flora and fauna represented in Hedman's version of *memento mori* jewelry are extinct, or close to it. Wearing these



Black Bile, 2013
silver, copper
and paint
13 x 11 x 2"



Calavera, 2013
leather, silver, paint
20 x 9 x 1 1/8"

An artist obsessed with ancient talismans, Hedman has mastered the talisman for the 21st century.

pieces on the body is a constant reminder of the harm that we are causing the Earth. In 2013, Hedman debuted "Black Bile" at Platina gallery

in Stockholm. This series was the culmination of years of research. The title "black bile" is the literal translation of the Greek word for "melancholy," which she experienced while making this jewelry. Hedman explains the series: "All around is beauty, but a lingering bleakness is pulling downward." Characteristically, Hedman is enthralled by life and death, beauty and ugliness. Skulls and flowers make up a large part of this work. Hedman explains that these symbols "are a nod to traditional *vanitas* still life paintings." She encourages us to behold the surface beauty in her work, and upon closer inspection become aware of a lurking darkness; skulls with hollow gazes mixing with the blooms, or dismembered fingers poking out from a blanket of leaves.

Hedman's jewelry is at once colorful and devoid of color. The work is usually monochrome: either green, red, or brown with blackish-brown patina. Each piece is powdercoated and handpainted using spray paint and paint applied by hand with a brush, and the silver is oxidized. The layers are applied in stages because it helps the artist create shadows. "I prefer surfaces that are not shiny, as I want to create 'timeless' objects that are a dialogue between past, present and parallel worlds," she says.

In 2013 Hedman was invited back to Latin America, and completed a series of three necklaces called "Calavera." Once more, the artist enlisted contemporary techniques while pursuing her interests in syncretism, indigenous objects, and in 18th-century *momento mori* jewelry. The title *Calavera* refers to the skull's prominent role in Latin American history since the pre-Columbian era. Not coincidentally, Hedman's skulls with flowers are similar to the colorful, floral *calaveras* that are gifted to children on the *Dia de los muertos*. The three necklaces, some in red, borrow from the same formal language as "Black Bile": large skulls are decorated with oxidized flowers and leather strands hang from thick, worn leather strap.

An artist obsessed with ancient talismans, Hedman has mastered the talisman for the 21st century. Like the historical pieces that inspire her, Hedman's large jewelry has the ability to give the wearer power. She seeks to expand the public's understanding of jewelry and considers each piece's wearability, with the body as her starting point. Hedman also says that she uses materials that merge with the body's shape and contours. But she concedes that her large pieces, in between a necklace and armor, may be reserved for special occasions.

In the upcoming year, Hedman will bring to fruition a number of diverse projects. The artist will publish a book titled *Murmuring* with Sanna Lindeberg, her photographer since 2008. Lindeberg's photographs are much more than



Black Bile (brooch), 2013
silver, leather, copper,
steel, paint
13 3/4 x 2 3/4 x 5 1/2"



Calavera, 2013
leather, copper,
silver, paint
13 x 6 3/4 x 1 1/8"

just a record of jewelry on a body. The photographer and jeweler enjoy showing how a piece becomes transformed when it is worn by a man, or a young boy. The subjects in the photos are ordinary people, not models, but they are always beautiful and slightly mysterious. "In some cases the people are extraordinary looking, but in others they simply have a watchfulness or self-possession that prompts the viewer to imagine an alternative universe," Hedman says. Hedman herself has served as a model for many of the photographs. "The portraits of me are a way of playing with this alternate universe that surrounds my work and to position myself inside of that world that I am trying to create,"

Hedman has also undertaken several public commissions around the city of Stockholm. *Med Risk AttFörsvinna* (*At Risk of Disappearing*), a two-year project that began in 2014, is reminiscent of "While they Await Extinction." In conjunction with Stockholm Konst and the construction company Sisab, Hedman created fences that will surround preschools near Stockholm to educate children about the loss of biodiversity in Sweden. As a new mother, Hedman is interested in using her art as a medium for educating young minds about the preciousness of life. In addition, as an affirmation of Hedman's international reputation, the Art Jewelry Forum, a global non-for-profit art jewelry organization, has asked Hedman to design their 2016 supporter pin.

Hedman is constantly engaged with the world around her. She has been a follower of the Swedish radio podcast *Människanochmaskinen* (*The man and the machine*), hosted by Per Johansson, a neo-Socratic philosopher with a Ph.D in human ecology. Hedman says that Johansson's views on history and our past have greatly influenced her work, so much so that she asked him to contribute an essay to *Murmuring*. Johansson has since become familiar with Hedman's work and persona. "Hanna is soft-spoken. Her manner is mild. Meeting her casually you would never expect the wild things manifested in her art," says Johansson. "In an often quite stunning way she allows the creeping and crawling things to emerge out into the open, in places where, usually, quite different adornments are expected. What is more, they break all reasonable bounds. As a result you wake up. You become conscious of what was hidden away underneath the geometric cosmetics of our technological society. And you are confronted with an option. Either shy away and go back to sleep. Or remain conscious, present in your breathing, sweating body, and start to wonder..."

Bella Neyman is a New York-based gallery director, curator, and journalist.

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