

The Libertine Jewelry of Sophie Hanagarth

BY LIESBETH DEN BESTEN

Armor Breast (brooch), 1997
iron nails
3 1/8 x 3/4"
PHOTO: MICHEL AZOUS

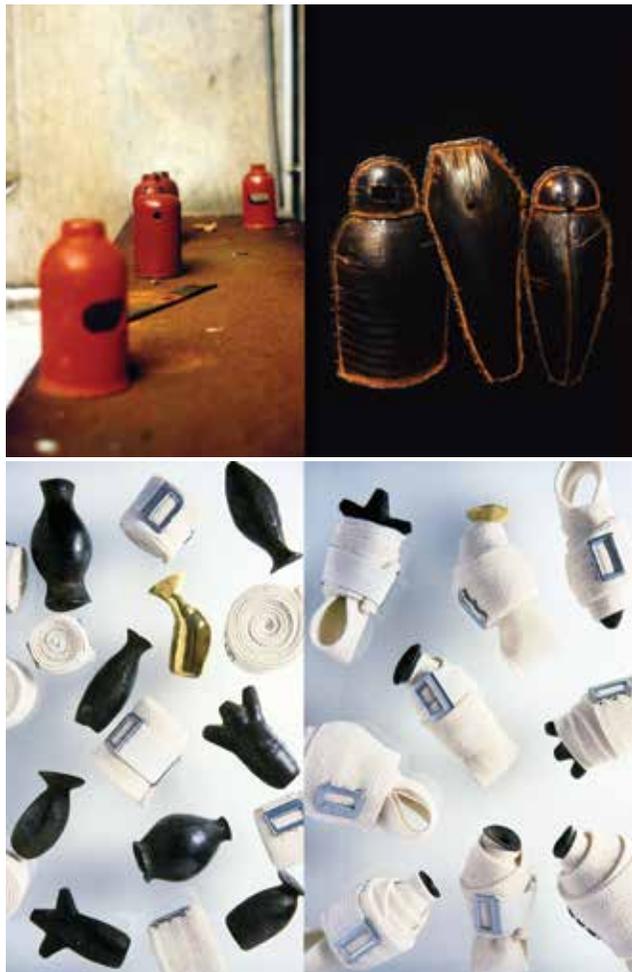


Bretzel (Pretzel) Rings,
from "Serie-B," 2007
pure iron
4 x 2 3/8 x 3/8"



above:
Armor Last and First Armor
 (hand objects), 1993
 tin can
 each approx 4 x 2 x 1"

Parasites (rings), 1994
 iron, gold, medical bandage
 each approx 2 x 1 1/8"



SWISS JEWELER SOPHIE HANAGARTH'S claim that "the jewel is a very complete and very rich subject of study" is borne out by an examination of her own evocative work. Among the issues she addresses in her far-ranging jewelry are power, sexuality, and vanity. Working freely in various materials, she often makes variations on a theme in different jewelry modes.

Since 2000, Hanagarth (Lausanne, 1968) has lived and worked in Paris. Love was the main reason she moved to the city, but the adventure of a new environment certainly attracted her. "France was more like a jungle to do contemporary jewelry," she explains. Hanagarth started her jewelry career in a quite classical Swiss way in the late 1980s, by studying gemology in Idar-Oberstein. During her four-year apprenticeship afterwards with Pierre Bersier, she found she enjoyed the social side of the work of the craftsman-jeweler. Bersier used to have very long conversations with customers before he started sketching. In her view, "in this tension between expectations of the customer and the interpretations of the craftsman emerges a unique piece of jewelry, something you can't repeat." Once past the door of the workshop, as if by magic, the customer "feels like the author of his new purchase." At Bersier's studio Hanagarth also learned to handle tools, techniques, and materials, but in the meantime she was looking toward the contemporary. She knew there were schools where one could learn jewelry in a more experimental vein.

In 1992, after four years of manipulating noble, expensive materials and precious stones, Hanagarth was admitted at the Academy of Decorative Arts in Geneva, where she became a student at the jewelry department. The contrast to her former training was immense. "The education centered on research, freedom of expression, and innovation," Hanagarth says. "It was an answer to my doubts about the value of materials and the notion of preciousness. But in the beginning it was difficult to open up my mind and start working without knowing where to go. Today I like that way of working a lot." Even though the education had a rather classical basis, with courses in anatomy drawing, space, and perspective, professor Esther Brinkmann turned it into a dynamic program.¹ Hanagarth recalls the projects, exhibitions, visiting artists, and the dinners in Esther's studio for informal presentations of jewelry.

Through a workshop by Wilhelm Tasso Mattar, Hanagarth began developing a rather narrative way of working in which she felt comfortable. By using tin sheet, she was able to realize hollow objects, inspired by gas cylinders found in the street. These cylinders reminded her of human forms, and armed soldiers. The transformation from a utilitarian object into a personal statement felt like a revelation, says Hanagarth. "After this, my work

changed. It was the first time I was able to express myself with symbols." She continued to work in this vein until graduating from the academy.

Hanagarth's preference for simple techniques, without using much equipment, became evident. Even today she enjoys working while traveling by train from Paris to her teaching post in Strasbourg: paper and metal sheet are suitable materials to carry and use while on the move. Tin can sheet, a very light and pliable material, allowed her to make small hollow forms consisting of two parts that were connected by folding the edges. When handling this soft and rather elastic material it automatically begins to pleat.

Hanagarth says she can spend hours in museums where she is "disconnected" from everything and "where time is in suspension," where she can empty her head. She finds inspiration in painting, folk art, and religious and magical objects. A small gilded shrine, dated 1514, at the Musée Dobrée in Nantes—for the heart of Anne de Bretagne, who arranged to have her heart housed in a gold reliquary and buried in the tomb of her parents in Nantes—fascinates her as an artifact and because of its shape and execution. Hanagarth is also a virtual collector of images (she loves to browse her many books about painting, the body, or ethnology), and of old religious or popular souvenirs, but, she says, "I never use them literally. They are in my head, and emerge, but in confrontation with another image as a hybrid, or some time later as to confirm the way I take."

Hearts are a theme that have engaged Hanagarth for quite some time. "The heart is a popular image in jewelry," she explains. "It is interesting to see how a heart can be expressed as a plastic form and as a sign." She has made hearts (pendants) with chimneys in the series "Armor for a Heart," or with a hole that enables the wearer to look inside. The chimneys referred to the energy, the soul, the burning and life. "Think about Genesis and about God who blows life in the heart of creatures," she expounds. With these pendants, Hanagarth has achieved a contemporary equivalent of religious mysticism, in her very personal and abstract way.

Around the same time, Hanagarth made a series of "Parasite" rings with found iron and gold objects, rendered wearable and often covered with the use of medical bandage. The small objects remind one of organs and the heart, the inner workings of the human body. The wrapping in medical bandages, including the

bandage fastener, suggests ex votos used to pray for healing and prosperity. These cocoon-like rings only reveal a small fragment of what lies underneath the wrapping,

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Armor for a Heart (pendant), 1994
 tin can, silver
 4 x 4 x 1 1/8"

creating intimacy and triggering one's curiosity.

Hanagarth's work became increasingly involved with bodily issues around 1995. For Hanagarth, a key aspect of jewelry is our physical experience of it, and she always wears her own jewelry, something most of her colleagues don't do. "It's like I'm on the stage of life," she says. "Jewelry is an attribute, something that defines a character." Hanagarth is also sensitive to the experience her jewelry offers other wearers. She underscores that she is touched by people who commission her to (re)make a piece of jewelry. "I like if pieces are really connected to one person and his desire, that there is a strong attraction."



Family Jewels (necklace), 1999
silicone
length 31 1/2"

Family Jewels (necklace), 1997
beer bottle caps
length 63"

Hanagarth often addresses the subject of sexuality, staged on the body, in a lighthearted way. For instance, her "Breasts" series (1995-97), features hollow disc brooches with movable nipples. "I don't like brooches," Hanagarth says; "they are too much a decoration. But with the 'Breast' brooches it worked well; they had nipples that you could manipulate in public." For Hanagarth, it is important that a piece of jewelry should provide a bodily experience.

In 1998 Hanagarth presented her "Family Jewels" series of neckpieces. They look like long sashes ending in a ball or sack at either side; the sash is hung loosely around one's neck, with the pendulous ends hanging low near the legs. This series is based on the artist's interest in haptic

experiences, diverse iconography, anatomical drawings, and etymological word play in French. Anatomical engravings (she is fascinated by prints by the 18th-century anatomist and artist Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty), revealed that the testicles are not one whole but are held together by the skin; therefore she made the "Family Jewels" in two parts. Hanagarth likes the ambiguous nature of the balls she made in diverse materials such as bicycle tubing, silicone, beer bottle caps, and black nails. Each material carries a different association and provides a distinct sensual feel. The beer caps ("always Heineken," she says, "because I can use the red star in the middle as my focus point") strike a humorous tone, while the black

nails (especially when combined with the French trade name "semence de tapissier," printed on the box) trigger the mind to think about sperm.

Hanagarth takes advantage of the richness of language to talk about topics that most people avoid. In French, as in most languages, there are many euphemisms for male and female sexuality. Hanagarth uses this generous source in unexpected ways. Inspired by the word *burette* (oilcan), a euphemism for testicle, she connected a tin oilcan with two round roots of wood she found in an orchard. This fusion of a utensil and a natural material that both deal with juices, energy, and irrigation, results in a neckpiece heavy with fecund symbolism—especially when it hangs low between the legs. As a rebel, Hanagarth likes to tickle, prod, and arouse. Accordingly, at the opening of her solo show at Galerie A in Geneva (1998), she invited every visitor to wear the "Bijoux de Famille." People had to try on and feel the balls, and complete strangers were soon swapping their "family jewels." "It is important to make everyone experience the jewels," explains Hanagarth. "This is how my work is doing its job."

In line with her fearless approach to jewelry, Hanagarth does not avoid off-putting subjects like pests and insects. Such matters, as addressed in the "Vermins" brooches (2001) and the "Fleas" pins (2004), refer to vanity as the essence of the human condition. Excrement has also found its way into her work—and again she found inspiration in historical iconography, language, and culture. She disguised medals of honor ("Shitty Medals" 2001) and pearl necklaces in "excrements," which looked like little brownish balls, simply made from oxidized tin cans. And with "To Put on Index" (2001) violence entered her jewelry, in the form of a sturdy ring with star-shaped bullets worn on the index finger where it could arouse concern. Although inspired by the Order of the Golden Fleece, Hanagarth's "Fleece with Golden Paws" (2004), a series of silver mesh necklaces, moved so far away from their source that they look like fashionable contemporary fur stoles. And while they are soft and sensual, the paws allude to sex toys, and the forged rings with balls and flute also have sexual overtones.

Following a period of absence from her craft due to pregnancies and teaching, the idea of doing something "very easy" attracted Hanagarth. Therefore, in 2008 she made "*Série-B*," a group of pure iron forged jewelry pieces.

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The shapes are informed by folk art, basketry, and bakery (*Brezels*, *pretzel* in English), and in the words of Hanagarth: "describes a rush job." "Hit with hammer, twisted



To Put on Index (ring), 1999
leather, tin can
1 1/2 x 1 3/4"

Shitty Medal (brooch), 2000
leather, tin can, stainless steel
5 x 1 1/8"



Lingam, 2010
steel bar
length 11 3/4"

Fleece with Golden Paws
(neckpiece), 2004
stainless steel, golded silver
35 1/2 x 10 x 1 1/8"



with pincers, pure iron offers a repertoire of braids, weaves and knots," she explains.² After some practice she was able to work with larger iron bars, making a giant "mushroom" for Ruudt Peters's *Lingam* exhibition (2010). Forging pleases her: "It is the gesture I like. And it is really the bar that gets a shape, such as the head of the mushroom."

The first "Trap" bracelets (2009), described by Hanagarth as "a double croissant," started with explorations in colorful plasticine. Resembling giant jaws eating a body part, these iron pieces are stunning, and frightening—especially to men. Hanagarth's choice for forging as a technique cannot be seen apart from issues of gender. Recently she worked with a forger in Normandy to

make two tongues, "It was comical," she says, "You have all these male, long, erotic tools and I made two kissing flabby tongues with it." The resulting piece, *French Kiss*, was made for the exhibition "Mirror, mirror, un homage a Suzy Solidor³" and is further proof of Hanagarth's ability to talk about sexuality in a pithy way. The tongue,

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a gender-neutral organ, is the perfect attribute for the French actress and singer Solidor (known as the "most painted woman in the world"), who was publicly gay and bisexual

Lips - Trap (bracelet), 2009
pure iron
4 3/8 x 3 1/2 x 3/4"



during the 1920s and '30s and had a turbulent sex life.

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French Kiss (collar), 2012
pure iron, leather
length 11 3/4"

Amsterdam-based Liesbeth den Besten is an independent art historian, writer, curator and teacher.

1. Esther Brinkmann (1953) lives and works in Mumbai, India. From 1983–2005 she was a teacher of jewelry at the Haute École des Arts Appliqués in Geneva, where she taught several Swiss jewelers who are known internationally, and who teach, or run a gallery. Other students of hers are: Christian Balmer (Galerie Vice Versa, Lausanne), Brune Boyer (teacher at AFEDAP, Paris), Sonia Morel, Fabrice Schaefer (Galerie TACTILE, Geneva), and Annick Zufferey (Galerie Annick Zufferey, Carouge).

2. Text from her website www.sophiehanagarth.com, see: Série-B

3. Espace Solidor, Cagnes-sur-mer, France, 2012