



Modernist Maven



Jewelry artisan
Heidi Abrahamson's work
gives new shape to the past.

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Earrings and rings by jewelry artist Heidi Abrahamson evoke the works of midcentury Scandinavian designers. Abrahamson uses simple, bold materials, such as brass, sterling silver and even rosewood, to craft her statement pieces.

“YOU HAVE TO KNOW HISTORY,” Heidi Abrahamson exclaims. Standing in a narrow hallway in the backroom of Phoenix’s modern home-goods store For the People, where she has a small studio, the jewelry artist pages through her personal collection of well-worn books that focus on 20th-century modernism. There are numerous volumes that cover the movement in the U.S. and Scandinavia, as well as guides to the work of such groundbreaking designers as Fritz Meyerhoffer, Björn Weckström and Ettore Sottsass. “Artists today start making jewelry, and they have no history behind them. I find that to be a huge detriment,” she continues.

Abrahamson’s love of art and design is deeply rooted. As the child of antique dealers, she grew up near Columbus, Indiana, a city known for its collection of masterworks by some of the most renowned midcentury architects, including I.M. Pei, Eero Saarinen and Alexander Girard. “I was very aware of architecture as a child,” she recalls. “I used to go ice skating in a Harry Weese-designed building.” Trips with her parents to Chicago afforded glimpses of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s modernist glass-and-steel high rises.

After high school, Abrahamson went on to study interior design at Indiana University, and she would often take inspiration from her memories of those structures. “I remember one project we had to do, which was building a model house,” she reflects. “Mine had a flat roof and clerestory windows, and my design teacher asked, ‘Do you know of van der Rohe?’ Of course I did!”

Instead of finishing her degree, Abrahamson chose to move to Seattle, where she found work as a visual merchandiser for such luxury brands as I. Magnin, Burberry and The Bon Marché. On the side, she and her husband, Doug, got involved in the antiques business, specializing in Arts and Crafts-style furnishings, a pastime that eventually led to an interest in midcentury modern design. In 1995, the couple moved to the Valley and, in 2005, Abrahamson took her first jewelry-making class at the now-defunct Arizona Mineral & Mining Museum.

“I was selling antiques, and I would see modern jewelry by Viviana Torun Bülow-Hübe, Astrid Fog and Ibe Dahlquist,” she recalls. “I wasn’t working at the time, and I would look at the pieces and think, ‘Why can’t I do this?’” She signed up for a \$50





A collection of tools and jewelry parts engulfs Abrahamson's workspace. These tiny jeweler's anvils are used to shape, bend and flatten metal.



Abrahamson uses a miniature square to ensure that a frame has a perfect 90-degree angle. Like many of her tools, the minute 1"H by 2"W square is vintage.

class on soldering and began creating wearable works of art in a workspace in her spare bedroom. “Most of my earlier pieces were Scandinavian-influenced, but I kind of got away from that.”

These days, Abrahamson’s distinctive oversized shapes crafted of silver and gold reflect midcentury, Brutalist and Bauhaus architecture. Hollow tubes and rows of forged arches are stacked on top of solid metal forms on rings that often stand inches above the wearer’s finger. Earrings featuring long layers of hammered disks dust against the shoulders for an attention-grabbing look. The overall aesthetic is minimalist, almost austere, allowing the silhouette to take center stage. “Making little things drives me crazy, so my pieces just keep getting bigger and bigger,” Abrahamson says with a laugh.

Recently, the artist began exploring the works of the Memphis movement. Founded by Sottsass in 1981, the short-lived style—that is currently making a comeback—is



known for its use of bright, often clashing colors; haphazardly arranged geometric shapes; zany patterns, such as Sottsass's Bacterio squiggle; and the use of vividly hued plastics. Abrahamson combines elements often seen in glass art by Sottsass, jewelry by Dutch designer Gijs Bakker and historical works by postmodernist artists to create runway-ready looks. Statement-making earrings, brooches and rings are fabricated out of acrylic, vintage Bakelite and architectural-grade rosin, accented with brass, sterling silver, glass and onyx beads, and even random bric-a-brac from the hardware store. The pieces are both playful and flamboyant—like they were plucked directly from an episode of “Pee-wee’s Playhouse” or a Patrick Nagel illustration.

“Heidi’s jewelry is kind of demanding,” says Sara Cochran, former director and chief curator of the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. “In some ways, it’s a negotiation to wear her work because of the unusual materials and sizes. The pieces are more than an afterthought. They don’t fit easily into categories, and I find that

To display her rings, Abrahamson constructs tiny stands that are modeled after authentic furnishings. This piece, which displays a minimalist brass and sterling silver ring, is a replica of a vanity by architect Ettore Sottsass, founder of the 1980s Memphis movement.

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—JOHN REYES, art curator



incredibly exciting.” Cochran commissioned Abrahamson to create her wedding ring, a striking angled gold piece that incorporates 10 diamonds that once belonged to Cochran’s mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

Art curator John Reyes has exhibited Abrahamson’s work alongside more traditional art forms, such as sculpture and paintings. “I don’t think of Heidi as a jeweler. She’s more of sculptor who happens to use jewelry as her medium for getting across her ideas of what form and line and metal are all about,” he explains. “You can see where she has taken the idea of midcentury Scandinavian and Memphis-influenced jewelry and moved it a little bit forward. Her work is very weighted, both fundamentally and visually. There’s a certain boldness to her designs.”

This past November, Abrahamson was invited to exhibit her creations at the prestigious New York City Jewelry Week. This curated, invitation-only event showcases independent jewelers from around the globe. “When I first saw Heidi’s work, I was wowed,” says founder JB Jones. “Her shapes and colors are so striking and Memphis-inspired. It’s really interesting to see someone creating historically influenced pieces that aren’t super-traditional. Heidi’s voice speaks to the past and remakes it for modern times. There’s no one doing anything like she does.

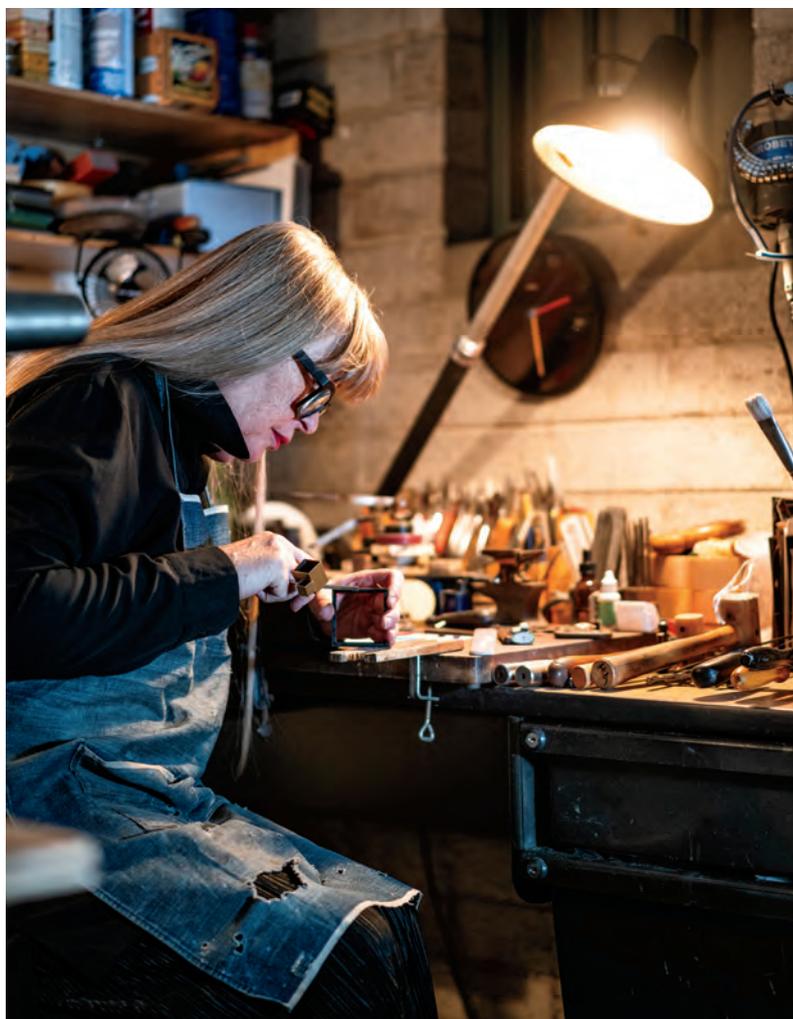
“She also makes these little chairs to display her jewelry,” Jones adds. “They’re art installations on their own.” Abrahamson got the idea to use the handmade miniatures—replicas of actual furnishings by Sottsass, California-based artist Peter Shire and other members of the Memphis movement—as pedestals for her rings from the late British jeweler Wendy Ramshaw, who showcased her stacking rings on ornamental posts.

At her studio at For the People, two work tables are piled high with tools, paint and jewelry parts. Wood organizers overflow with needle-nose pliers, miniature hammers, dremel bits, brushes and files. Many of the tools belonged to her parents; others are antiques she’s picked up over the years. Earrings and brooches in various states of completion lie among brass tubes and wires. Abrahamson picks up a silver ring with a large turquoise cabochon. “This is one of the first things I made,” she points out. More early experiments line a small shelf next to the work space—a visual reminder of the artist’s evolution.

“Heidi used to be a stylist. She collects vintage clothing. She looks at midcentury modern jewelers from the past. She is someone who really takes the best of what’s out there and incorporates it into her work,” Reyes notes. “Everybody’s trying to find something that’s modern and interesting, and it’s a matter of looking forward. But it’s also a matter of understanding what has previously been done, and then giving it your twist, your understanding of what you know to make it yours. And I see Heidi doing just that.” □

For more information, see Sources on Page 174.

OPPOSITE The Memphis movement was known for its use of color and geometric shapes. These earrings, which are fabricated from acrylic, nylon washers from the hardware store, vintage Bakelite, onyx and silver beads, and metal chain, also bring to mind the costumes from Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadic ballet. “Someone once told me that if you mix Bauhaus with Playskool, you get Memphis,” Abrahamson jokes. The silver ring is inspired by Memphis designer Martine Bedin’s Super Lamp.



Abrahamson works out of a small office in the back of Phoenix homegoods store For the People.