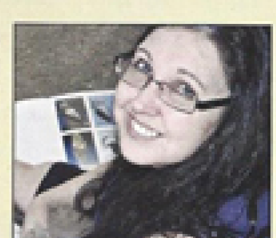
2012 Saul Bell Design Award Finalists – Metal Clay

By Julia Rai - UK

The Saul Bell Design Award competition celebrates design innovation in six categories. Since 2001 it has been challenging and inspiring jewelry designers worldwide. In this issue we'll focus on the four artists who created the five pieces that were selected as this year's finalists in the Metal Clay category.

Christi Anderson



Christi Anderson lives in Marana, Arizona (near Tuscon) and shares her studio with a large collection of birds. Christi was short-listed in the 2010 Saul Bell Design Award competition. Her incredibly detailed, almost architectural pieces are highly distinctive.

Completely self-taught in metal clay, Christi has turned an illustration background and an 11-year photography career into a very successful metal clay business called Elemental Adornments. She draws much of her inspiration from her photographs. "I have an extensive collection of cemetery and architectural photography that I have shot all over the US. I take those scenes and turn them into silver story lockets," she explains.

I asked Christi to discuss her distinctive style. "I believe my style is Victorian in the sense it's macabre and highly detailed," she said. "I give all the stone, wood and brick in my pieces dry-carved detail, much like creating an etching. The spider webs are a Victorian theme. I love the idea of mourning jewelry and the importance that each piece carried for the wearer. The reverence is something I want my pieces to reflect."

Competition Finalist Piece: *The Guardian* by Christi Anderson.

Competition Finalist Piece: *The Fairy Castle* by Christi Anderson.

I was interested in Christi's approach to creating her pieces. Since she has a background in illustration, naturally she uses a sketchbook extensively. "I plan my work carefully in sketches and inspirations I've added to my sketchbook. I carry this book with me and I am constantly adding new things," she explained. "I only use metal clay techniques. If I can't do it with metal clay, then I don't do it."

Christi has two pieces that were selected as finalists in this year's Saul Bell Design Award competition, an unprecedented achievement. I asked her how she designed those two pieces. "I was making them for my sales line and chose to enter them on a lark," she laughed. They took a while to make. "*The Guardian* was about a month of reworking and altering. *The Fairy Castle* was a couple of weeks including the chain." When I asked Christi what inspired these pieces she replied, "I make things that interest me. I get inspiration everywhere!"

Christi's designs always are extremely detailed and her entries for this competition are no exception. I asked her what was most challenging about these two pieces. "*The Guardian* was a double set of hinges with a gate and lock—that was a challenge," she explained. "With *The Fairy Castle* it was the sheer size. I had never made a piece that large."

With the Saul Bell Design Award result pending, I asked Christi what it would mean to her if she were to win. "It would be the greatest honor ever!"

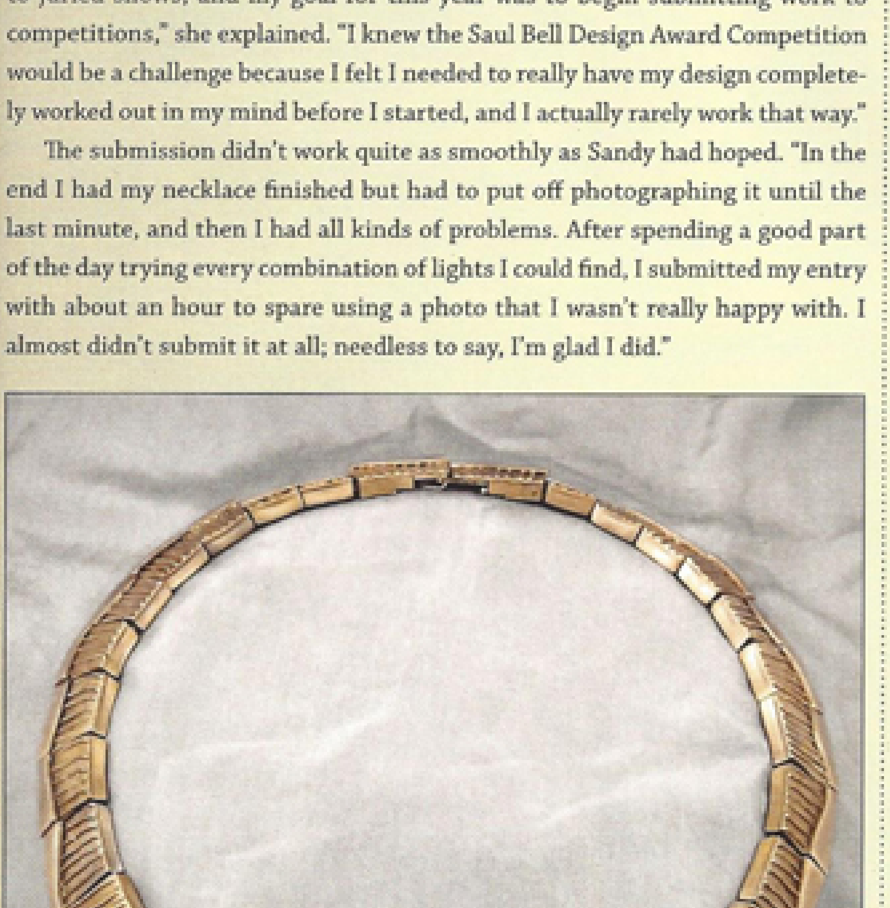
Whatever the outcome, she has big plans for the next few years. "I'm planning a production line for shops and galleries so I can take a vacation! I also want to create my pet project with my photographs that I have been planning for years."

To find out more about Christi's work visit:
www.elementaladornments.com
www.etsy.com/shop/cassioppea

Sandy Mikel

Sandy Mikel lives in Hawthorne, a North Central Florida city just outside of Gainesville, home of the University of Florida. She works in metal clay and also uses traditional silver working techniques. This is the first time she's entered the Saul Bell competition and I asked her why she decided to go for it. "Last year I began submitting applications to juried shows, and my goal for this year was to begin submitting work to competitions," she explained. "I knew the Saul Bell Design Award Competition would be a challenge because I felt I needed to really have my design completely worked out in my mind before I started, and I actually rarely work that way."

The submission didn't work quite as smoothly as Sandy had hoped. "In the end I had my necklace finished but had to put off photographing it until the last minute, and then I had all kinds of problems. After spending a good part of the day trying every combination of lights I could find, I submitted my entry with about an hour to spare using a photo that I wasn't really happy with. I almost didn't submit it at all; needless to say, I'm glad I did."



Competition Finalist Piece by Sandy Mikel.

Sandy's inspiration for the piece was close to home. "My design was inspired by a tiny park I know. This low-budget community development project was built on the former site of a store and presented a significant design challenge. The result was a really inspiring and lovely piece of work. Large round concrete planters of varying heights form a sculptural arrangement and the elements of my bronze clay necklace were inspired by the rough, ribbed sides and the smooth, ripple-patterned bases of those planters."

Sandy told me the necklace took quite a while to create. "I did a lot of preliminary work off and on over several months, drawing out a template of the necklace, figuring out how to get the texture I wanted and eventually test-firing some of the elements to determine shrinkage," she explained.

"When I started work on the actual piece, it took me about two weeks to get all the elements completed. I have found that I get the most consistent results if I don't fire too many pieces at once, so it took six separate firings. I fabricated a hidden clasp from bronze sheet and soldered it in place. The necklace is hung from two strands of heavy stainless steel beading wire secured with bronze crimps."

It sounded to me like the design and the material presented a big challenge. "The biggest challenge was making sure that shrinkage was consistent over the entire piece," Sandy said. "I tried to be

as consistent as possible about time, temperature, placement in the firing container, placement in the kiln—anything I could think of—and crossed my fingers!"

I asked her about her other work and what influences and inspires her designs. "One of the things I love about working with metal clay is the ease with which you can incorporate natural textures and objects. But I also love ancient and ethnic jewelry designs and objects, and when bronze and copper clays became available, that influence became even stronger. When I first started making jewelry I came across the book *The Splendor of Ethnic Jewelry*[1] and I was hooked. I had always liked the use of text as an image and when I started working with bronze clay I knew I wanted to incorporate some kind of script into my pieces. I could visualize using bronze for fragments of text, but couldn't seem to get started because the scripts I was looking at all said something (even if I didn't know what it was) and I felt the meaning had to be taken into account."

This dilemma led Sandy to an interesting discovery. "I found out about 'Eight Scripts That Still Can't Be Read'[2] and they were both enormously varied and visually intriguing. I am aware that they still say something but they are more cultural artifact than simple text, so even if one turns out to be a warehouse inventory I won't be disappointed."

She went on, "I had originally thought my Saul Bell entry was something of a departure from my other work, but after it was done I realized it actually combined the rough organic texture of what I think of as my flora and fauna pieces with a collar design that is common in ancient and ethnic design."

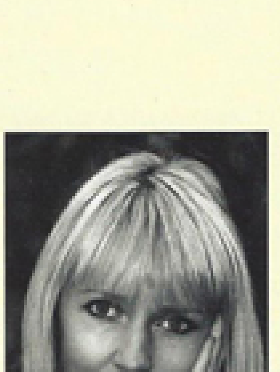
To find out more about Sandy's work visit:
www.sandhillarts.artfire.com
www.sandhillarts.etsy.com

References

1 Ghysels Colett, Frances Borel and John Bigelow Taylor, *The Splendor of Ethnic Jewelry.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

2 Andrew Robinson, "Decoding antiquity: Eight scripts that still can't be read," *New Scientist* 2710 (2009).

Emma Baird

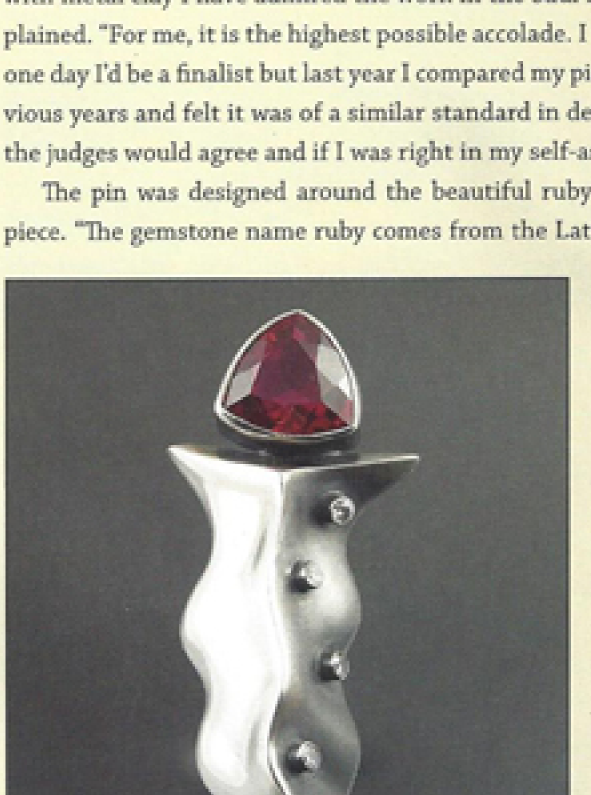


Emma Baird is from the United Kingdom. She creates her work in the Art Clay Scotland studio in Edinburgh. "I try to be as organised as possible, as I teach workshops in the studio which also is open to other jewellers for bench hire," she explained. "When it comes to metal clay I'm not really a tool junkie. I like the basics—slats, roller, paintbrush, mat—and I'm good to go!"

I asked Emma what other techniques she uses in her metal clay work. "I am incorporating more and more silver smithing techniques and sterling silver into my work. I prefer to make all of my own findings from chains to ear wires, and I am enjoying the range of options that has come to me from exploring traditional metal work techniques."

This is Emma's first submission to the Saul Bell Competition and I asked her what prompted her to enter it this year. "Ever since I've been working with metal clay I have admired the work in the Saul Bell competition," she explained. "For me, it is the highest possible accolade. I never seriously imagined one day I'd be a finalist but last year I compared my piece to the finalists of previous years and felt it was of a similar standard in design. I wanted to know if the judges would agree and if I was right in my self-assessment. So I entered."

The pin was designed around the beautiful ruby trillion that crowns the piece. "The gemstone name ruby comes from the Latin word rubeus, meaning



Competition Finalist Piece by Emma Baird.

Complex constructed pieces can be tricky, so I asked Susan about the challenges in creating this piece. "The first time I attempted to make the piece I drew the template for the layers by hand. I worked on the piece for a couple of weeks, thought everything was perfect and fired it. Unfortunately, my hand-drawn template wasn't accurate enough and the piece shrank unevenly. So I re-drew the template by computer to make sure everything was accurate. When I made it the second time it came out perfect!"

Susan works in a home studio that sounds very organised. "My studio is organized by medium," she explained. "I have my workbench where I work strictly with metal and metal clay and a bench where I have two torches set up for lampworking and teaching. That's also where I have my soldering station. On one end of that bench I work on ceramics. A third bench is used for short-term projects such as photography, making photopolymer plates or electroforming."

Susan's interest in a wide variety of media intrigued me, so I asked her about her favourite techniques. "I love to sandblast dried metal clay to incise sharp lines into the dry clay. I also like finding ways to combine hollow glass beads and ceramics with metal clay. I use a lot of dots in my work—flat dots, stacked dots, carved dots, dots upended. I guess I'm a bit dotty," she laughs. "I make my own end caps and solder them onto chain. I also make my own clasps out of metal clay or sterling."

Finally, I asked Susan what it would mean for her to win the Saul Bell Award. "I can't even fathom what it would feel like to win the award. I am so honored just to be a finalist. The work that artists submit for a competition of this level is amazing."

To find out more about Susan's work visit:
www.susansilvy.com
www.susanbreensilvy.com
www.etsy.com/shop/susanbreensilvy

JULIA RAI has been working with metal clay since 2004 and teaching it since 2007. She holds the MCSJ Higher Metal Clay Diploma, PMC Certification from Rio Grande and Art Clay Level 1 and 2 Certification. She also holds the City and Guilds 7407 Further Education Teaching Qualification. She teaches a variety of subjects for several jewellery schools in the UK. She is also the Director of the Metal Clay Academy. *www.juliarai.co.uk*

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