

DRAWN *to* METAL

BY NINA GRACI



Susan Brooks' imagery is rich with pattern, swirls, dots and the human face. The brooch is her favorite format, because the rectangular shape was a logical progression from her works on paper. Brooch, hand fabricated sterling silver with vintage glass, engraved, chased, and patinated. 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". 2006. Photo by Chris Wahlberg.

On paper or silver, line is what Susan Brooks follows on her artistic journey

When Susan Brooks draws on sterling sheet, she applies a lifetime of art-making to the point of her graver. Brooks has been making her mark in pencil and gouache while pursuing line across paper, metal plate, and sterling for 30 years.

Brooks's art education began even earlier, in the Bronx. She grew up stimulated by the artists and musicians who visited and was inspired by her father's life-size torsos and her mother's paintings. Growing up in a household where color, form, and line were hotly debated inspired Brooks to study graphic design and fashion illustration at Parsons School of Design. But she quickly realized that she wanted to make art — not study it — and moved to Berkeley



Brooch, hand fabricated sterling silver, engraved, chased, and patinated. 2¼" x 2⅜". 2006. Photo by Chris Wahlberg.

at the tail end of the '60s during the Summer of Love.

Once established, Brooks made a living from painting, etching, and calligraphy and from buying and selling Art Deco objects, vintage clothing, and jewelry. She combed San Francisco's flea markets for broken vintage jewelry to refashion into marketable earrings, and occasionally discovered a treasured Egyptian Revival bead for her own collection.

While honeymooning in Yosemite National Park in 1985, Brooks purchased a cache of life-altering chased silver bracelets, which she laid on her bedside table. During the night, she was awakened by the certainty that she could teach herself to chase line across silver and make jewelry. Next day, she called her father.



Brooch, hand fabricated sterling silver, engraved, chased, and patinated. 2½" x 3". 1999. Photo by Chris Wahlberg.



Pendant, hand fabricated sterling silver with 22K gold embellishment, engraved, chased, and patinated. 3½" x 1½". 2007. Photo by Chris Wahlberg.

The history of my tools is very romantic, because my father used them before me, and someone before him.



Brooks draws constantly, both consciously and unconsciously. She works on both paper and metal, but her style remains constant regardless of the medium. Gouache painting. 11¼" x 7¼". Photo by Kate Cameron.

"A few days later, a can filled with hand-made chasing tools and hammers arrived. The history of my tools is very romantic, because my father used them before me, and someone before him. I've used some of them every day, and others I am still discovering. Some my father made when he was a teenager, others he made as needed over his career as a toy designer and model and mold maker, still others were passed down to him. It's thrilling to spot a mark my father made on something 50 years ago and recognize the tool he used to make it." "A few days later, a can filled with hand-made chasing tools and hammers arrived. The history of my tools is very romantic, because my father used them before me, and someone before him. I've used some of them every day, and others I am still discovering. Some my father made when he was a teenager, others he made as needed over his career as a toy designer and model and mold maker, still others were passed down to him. It's thrilling to spot a mark my father made on something 50 years ago and recognize the tool he used to make it."

Exciting too, was the discovery Brooks made one morning while printmaking. As she scratched through the acid-resistant surface to the metal plate below, she realized that metal was a canvas that would make her drawings wearable. Brooks had succeeded in teaching herself to chase sil-

ver and was now ready to learn how to connect it. She learned the basics of metalsmithing from mentor Dawn Nakanishi, and by 1987, Brooks was producing one-of-a-kind jewelry in her new studio.

"I've always had a deep lust for jewelry and never leave the house without wearing the snake bracelets I made 22 years ago. I have worked as an artist, printmaker, and collagist, stitching together my own figurative elements to make totemic pieces. It took a while to find ways to connect my artwork to metalwork because I wanted to recreate the drawings, textures, and stacked elements of my paintings on metal. Right from the beginning, the brooches were rectangular because I was already accustomed to years of painting on that shape. Chasing and repoussé gave me the techniques to go at the metal in the same way as I did my drawings."

It is not surprising that Brooks took to repoussé, growing up as she did under the eye of the 151-foot monument in repoussé — the Statue of Liberty — and a father who used the process to create lead and copper sculptures.

When Brooks first began to repoussé, she followed tradition and buried 22-gauge sheet in pitch. She soon developed her own methodology and now adheres masking tape to a steel block to hold the metal in place. Brooks uses an engraver to go deep into the metal to delineate main characters with fetching, long-necked Modigliani-inspired faces. Swirls, flowers, and dots are tapped into graceful metal dresses and a nimety of light-reflecting balls and patina-holding dents are chased into ornamental borders. Interlocking geometric patterns frame stacks of heads and all-seeing eyes that urge viewers to see a different perspective. Amidst this allegorical backdrop, Brooks' willowy figures gaze out from their sterling dreamscape as wistfully as Russian icons.

Whether she is tapping out a brooch the size of a stamp, a showpiece brooch, a pair of earrings, or a bracelet, Brooks always works facing her inspirations. Painted Russian boxes, carved Inuit boxes, and Indian miniature paintings sit amidst cans filled with tools. From the wall hangs a century-old Chinese robe embroidered with the intricate Forbidden Stitch, which according to legend, blinded its creator. Brooks places her embroidery on metal using textile-like iconography, and by doing so embeds old-world techniques into fresh, contemporary settings.

"When you first start chasing, the mark you make never seems to land where you want. It looks sloppy. In time, you get comfortable with the tools, and by keeping at it you discover what you and your tools can do. I draw constantly, even while I'm on the phone, because it keeps the line quality in my jewelry loose and makes me less afraid to just go at the metal."

MOVING METAL

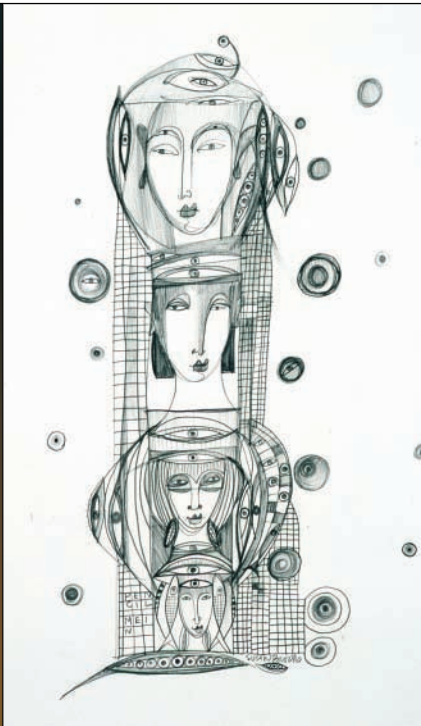
Brooks always moves metal gently. She applies adhesive to a steel block to hold the sheet and keep her lines crisp. If, on the other hand, she wants to define an area, she places leather on the block. Employing an arsenal of chasing tools to line, raise, dome, texture, and stamp metal, Brooks has



Brooch, hand fabricated sterling silver, engraved, chased, and patinated. 1¼" x 1¼". 2007.
Photo by Chris Wahlberg.



Brooch, hand fabricated sterling silver, engraved, chased, and patinated. 3¼" x 2¼". 1993.
Photo by Chris Wahlberg.



Pencil drawing on paper. 13½" x 9¼".
Photo by Kate Cameron.

Brooch, hand fabricated sterling silver, engraved, chased, and patinated. 4⅞" x 2⅝". 2006.
Photo by George Post.

achieved the concatenation of minute elements that has become her signature.

Brooks chases with a punch and hammer to tap a depressed design on the metal surface. To add dimension, she repoussés by pushing out a design from the back of the metal. For instance, to make a face, she works from the back and uses a wooden dapping block to pop the face out. Then she turns the metal over and defines the face on the front. She works back and forth, front to back, until she has attained the desired shape. Straight and curved lines are made with liners and she adds texture with a hammer or matting tool. Brooks also has a collection of beloved tools, like the edgers, that make ridges similar to the ones on the sides of coins.

Once her design is chased and designated sections sawn out, Brooks embellishes the edges and adds shadows by delicately crosshatching with a tiny drill bit in a flex shaft. She retouches the piece, solders on a pin back, and adds a patina with liver of sulfur. Finally, Brooks selectively removes patina with a polishing cloth or uses polishing points in a flex shaft to produce subtle shadows and reveal delicate lines.

Although it takes long days, a myriad of techniques, canfuls of tools, and infinite patience to turn metal into portrai-

ture, Brooks has made that leap by doing what she does best.

"I've achieved the look I wanted, which is something between a line drawing and an etching, by honing my skills. When I think of artists starting out now, I feel that unfortunately, if they start making money early on, they can stunt their growth as artists. They are afraid to veer or don't take classes, and it's important to take workshops. But never try to be artistic in them — just take in what you've been taught. Be patient and realize you can't walk out of a workshop with a masterpiece."

Brooks has marked her passage through life with personal hieroglyphics. She uses art to elevate the mundane by drawing a frame around her studio mirror or carving tiny heads into a door. Whether she draws unconsciously while on the phone or is intensely focused, Brooks is constantly playing with something she loves. And only by playing, according to psychiatrist Carl Jung, can something new be created.

"My life has marks all over it," says Brooks. Fortunately for us, this magician now hammers her symbols into a permanence that brings out the soul in the metal.

NINA GRACI is a freelance writer based in Toronto, Ontario, and a frequent contributor to this magazine.