

AMERICAN VICTORIAN : LOLA BROOKS

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by Marjorie Simon

BORN IN 1969, the year of Woodstock and a century after the death of Prince Albert, Lola Brooks is a child of the 1980s with a passion for the Victorian age. An American original with a frank decorative impulse, Brooks creates singular objects out of multitudes: hearts, flowers, gemstones, miles of chain. A fearless materialist and problem-solver, she repeatedly confronts the uncomfortable nexus of death and Eros. Her work is richly layered, grabbing attention with familiar, even clichéd forms, and yielding up hidden narratives upon closer inspection. She craves the constant push and pull of darkness and beauty,

what she calls “the complicated space of human culture.”

By default or by design, Brooks mirrors aspects of Queen Victoria's reign, during which contradictions abounded: the culture of death, a certain romanticism, a passion for collecting, and appreciation for the meaning of objects. A tone of straitlaced sexual morality coexisted with a body of now-classic works of erotic literature. Forgoing traditional jewelry through her decades of mourning, the Queen spawned an industry of mourning jewelry in black gems and steel, eventually allowing half-mourning and the introduction of dark

red garnets. Brooks welcomes it all: the extreme, the sublime, the paradoxes, the edge of human experience in emotion and physicality. Her “sleeve” tattoos, outsize eyeglasses, and vintage fashions not only recall the excesses of past decades, but seem to both celebrate and parody them at the same time.

For a time Brooks was best known for oversized hearts and bows of miraculous construction: labyrinthine, transparent, woven in layers of fine wire, layered with ultra-feminine pink pearls or vintage carved ivory roses. Bristling with movable gems or studded with bezeled ones, they

twinthehand, 2015
male and female quail heads
and wings, walnut, stainless
steel chain, champagne
diamonds, sterling silver
14k gold
4 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 2"





**BROOKS SEEMS
ALWAYS TO WANT
MORE, MORE:
MORE GEMS, MORE
MOVEMENT,
MORE GOLD,
MORE WEIGHT.**

*atehearts (a self-portrait),
modeled by the artist*

- boundheart, 2013*
- stealedheart, 2012*
- pteromerhanophobia, 2012*
- bloodgarnetheart, 2009*
- bubblegumheart, 2009*
- ruffledheart, 2013*
- 279forgetmeknots, 2012*
- bleedingheart, 2009*
- stainless steel, 18k gold,
14k gold, mixed media*

The artist's personal collection of rhinestone eyewear from the 1950s, '60s & '70s



were reminiscent, perhaps, of her own capacious heart. Later, yards of stainless steel chain made rigid with gold solder became ribbons, bows, and neckties, many with poignant, sexually suggestive allusions. Her newest work, not widely published before now, has become more layered and darker, both more personal and more political. It belongs to the genre of *memento mori* at the interface of beauty, luxury, greed, exploitation, and ultimately, death.

As a young star, Brooks and her persona were well documented in print and online. The artist's famous collections—eyeglasses, wallets, gemstones, animal prints, among many others—reflect her partnership with desire. With a collection (of treasured objects) one is never alone. Brooks well understands the nature of her desire, and admits that, with multiples, the loss of one isn't noticeable. In a way, she seeks to evoke that desire in others through her work, trading on lust and seducing the eye by setting quivering elements on tiny springs (*en tremblant*).

Brooks is self-aware, relentlessly questioning, ready to search out and, evidently, discover the extremes of human endeavor, in personal relationships and at the bench. She seems always to want more, more: more gems, more movement, more gold, more weight; how far to the edge can I go? Too much is never enough. It seems obvious to say she invites exaggeration, and is unafraid of excess. "If I like something, I fall in love with it,"

she says. The brooch must be bigger and bigger, larded with vintage carved roses en tremblant, until once, having packed them into a volumetric, voluptuous confection, she famously declared she had made "J.Lo's ass."

Brooks grew up in suburban Connecticut, a place reputedly short on eccentricity. A dexterous child with a beloved dollhouse, she created fashions and jewelry for her dolls. She was a voracious reader, the evidence of which can be seen in the titles and references of each body of work. When she discovered the existence of the Salvation Army thrift store, she used the earnings from her paper route to build a distinctive wardrobe of vintage clothing, with which she crafted an idiosyncratic adolescent persona.

An early talent for mechanical drawing coupled with her sewing skills led Brooks to consider patternmaking for fashion design as a possible career. Fashion seemed practical: she was good at it, people always needed clothing, and New York was the fashion hub of the country. She began at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, but, after discovering jewelrymaking, wound up at SUNY/New Paltz, where she arrived for her interview on the back of a motorcycle.

Eager to be in school, and comfortable with risk-taking, Brooks came well equipped with good hand skills and sophisticated ideas. Cerebral and playful, she had an "aggressive appeal" her teachers found exciting. Her exterior flash belied a strong work ethic and a hunger

to make serious work. Thriving on the honest critical dialogue of a young Myra Mimplitsch-Gray, she showed a mature approach to ideas that stimulated others in the program. Brooks distinguished herself as a student by her keen problem solving and fabrication, and was bolstered by the lofty expectations of faculty who saw her as smart, restless, committed, and indefatigable.

Brooks credits the rigor of the New Paltz program with introducing her to critical thinking about the meaning of jewelry and objects. A good example of student influences might be *Death in the Dining Room*, Kenneth Ames's obscure sociological study of Victorian domestic material culture, which gave her a context for collecting and objects. From Ames's observations came her *Chatelaine*, a tour de force of object-making that shows Brooks's predilection for fabricating complex forms and mechanisms, as well as her work ethic to have completed a project to such a degree of refinement. *Chatelaine* was her stellar final project, revealing the ripening of her thinking and her critical engagement. Layered and compelling, it marked a turning point in her development. Empowered with a woman's armor, she went out into the world.

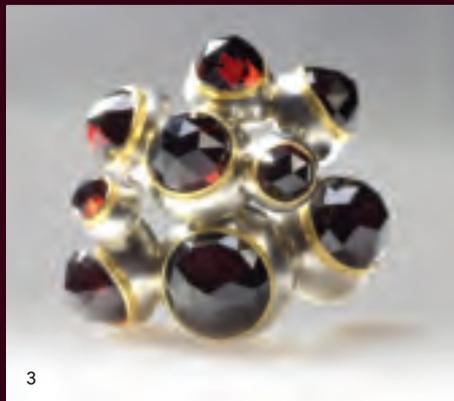
Brooks spent the next two decades at her bench and others', rewarded for her diligence by working for her former New Paltz professor Jamie Bennett and nearby goldsmith Gabriella Kiss. She taught workshops and spent nearly a decade at



1



2



3



4

1
chatelaine, 1996
 steel, sterling
 silver, velvet,
 sawdust,
 dressmaker's
 straight pins
 3 x 5 x 1 1/2"

2
discoball, 2003
 champagne rose cut
 diamonds, stainless
 steel, 18k gold
 1 1/4 x 1 1/4 x 50"

3
garnetclump
 (brooch), 2003
 stainless steel,
 18k, vintage rose
 cut garnets
 2 x 2 x 1 1/2"

4
tower of diamonds
 (rings), 2013
 18k gold, diamonds

rosewreath (brooch), 2009
en tremblant, vintage ivory
roses, stainless steel,
18k gold, champagne rose cut
diamonds, springs
4 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 2"

SHE TOOK TRITE AND SENTIMENTAL THEMES OF MAINSTREAM JEWELRY AND WRESTED THEM FROM CLICHÉ.



the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, as a master lecturer under the leadership of Sharon Church. From Church she discovered her talent for and love of teaching. At each step Brooks encountered makers and thinkers at the top of her field, who welcomed her and challenged her, all the while making and exhibiting her own evolving work.

By 2008 Brooks's work had become personal in narrative. She took trite and sentimental themes of mainstream jewelry—hearts, flowers, the color pink, gemstones—and wrested them from cliché in a post-modern turnabout. Eschewing assemblage of found objects, and committed to the highest level of craftsmanship, she used the symbols of feminine vulnerability to make powerful and impenetrable work. She began to brazenly load heavy steel chain with gold solder, making pieces that appear nearly unwearable in their scale and weight. However, the many photographs of Brooks wearing her work attest to her jeweler's concern for wearability. One can see the influence of Mimplitsch-Gray's explorations with scale in the gonzo fabrication. Constructing a large heart from soldered chain, then cutting through to place a working lock mechanism within, also recalls the early mechanisms of Lisa Gralnick. Each series seems to build on its predecessors; hearts or bows led to hearts *and* bows *and* gemstones.

Brooks's love of materials leads her to consider the history and cultural

ramifications of every process and design. She loves gems. Her edition work has the austere classicism of simple settings that highlight the intrinsic beauty and pictorial narrative of the gem itself, God's pictures. She acknowledges the contradictions implicit in using precious stones, calling them "signifiers of the human condition," in reference to the heavy human price of mining.

What could be more fraught than using diamonds? Brooks is not alone in her love for old-fashioned round rose-cut diamonds. Dating from 1500, but especially popular in the Victorian era, these flat-bottomed gems were valued for the warmth of their sparks, not the flash of fire of the newer brilliant cut. She sources hoards of vintage gems, and makes friends with the seller, who is happy for this young person to take such obvious interest. A garnet hoard of some 4,000 carats came into her possession, enabling her to use them wantonly to festoon bracelets and earrings, fill openworked heart brooches with their blood-red brilliance, and build bulbous brooches as if they were fast-growing tumors of steel and gold.

"atehearts," eight brooches created between 2009 and 2013, characteristically conflate high and low, as gold is paired with steel, and rigid structure with vulnerable or moveable parts. Using herself as a model, as if to reassure those who fear its size, Brooks has created a work that rests easily against a background of inked tattoos with Gothic

themes. The artist's hand in her photos reminds us to consider the origin as well as the destination of this work. Poised between the decorative arts and the functional crafts, contemporary jewelry takes the human body as its stage and performance as its mission. Juxtaposing her ornamented body with her fully dimensional objects, Brooks embodies jewelry at its most performative.

Brooks's newest work is, unsurprisingly, both amalgam and culmination of prior motifs. Beginning with fairy tales, she takes on their primal themes: good and evil, death in life, the fragility of human lives, and the many dangers alluded to in folk tales and myths. Titles contain phrases that may have entered the American vernacular, but whose origins are likely forgotten. She calls up English nursery rhymes, again tapping into a longing for a time she never experienced. The objects, however, have everything to do with childhood memories of hearing or reading the old-fashioned rhymes. The often brutal or sexual content of the tales is masked by the pleasing rhymes and bucolic settings. She uses the psychologically layered narrative to reveal (and conceal) her own personal and political content.

Brooks's ability to tolerate, or even invite, contradiction, is nowhere more evident than in her "exploitation" of the animal world in her use of red coral, ivory, and taxidermy. The pictorial record from the 17th and 18th centuries teems



byebabybunting, 2015
 (front and back of brooch)
 vintage child's rabbit fur
 muff, stainless steel,
 14k gold solder, diamonds,
 hand-carved baby elephant
 skeleton with 14k gold tusks
 5 x 5 x 2"

SEVERAL LAYERS OF CRUELTY AND COMFORT ARE PACKED INTO A SINGLE WORK.



with dead animals, tables strewn with carcasses of game animals and birds, symbolizing death in the midst of life. In the 1990s Robert Ebendorf interpreted personal losses with road-kill squirrel paws and crab claws. Brooks riffs on her knowledge of art history and mythology, trusting that her audience will follow her. The weight of historical reference adds to the depth of meaning in each object. The moral lessons of past centuries remain encoded in Brooks's newest work, which uses animals in many forms, including pre-ban ivory, coral, butterfly wings, fur, and actual animals, such as a pair of quail. Ivory and red coral are also transgressive and controversial. However, craft-based skills such as taxidermy are enjoying a resurgence since New Zealander Julia DeVillie and the Dutch team operating as Idiots (Afke Goldsteijn and Floris Bakker) brought them into contemporary jewelry within the past decade.

byebabybunting takes one of a child's earliest lullabies and spotlights the theme of violence by reminding us that the safety and comfort of a vulnerable babe is dependent on the death of another vulnerable creature.¹ Once more, she acknowledges the price paid for human desire, privileging the life of a child over that of a furry bunny. Brooks considers this new work one of her most political. Using a vintage rabbit fur muff, a popular accessory for women and girls from the 16th to the 19th centuries, and a gift of pre-ban ivory, Brooks combines "both the



violence and nurturing I find in the nursery rhyme itself.” This paradox is captured in the reverse view of *byebabybunting*, with the added shock of the ivory skeleton secreted within. Thus several layers of cruelty and comfort are packed into a single work.² Curiously, the phrase “byebabybunting” is largely unknown today by members of Brooks’s generation, and certainly by succeeding ones. So, what is hidden, and what revealed?

In the past, many children’s tales such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* contained veiled political references or satires, which would have been recognized by readers at the time. The opening of the following classic rhyme also has likely been forgotten.

*Sing a song of sixpence
A pocket full of rye
Four and twenty blackbirds
Baked in a pie.*³

Constructed in signature Brooks fashion, from chains soldered into rigid strips like a heart-shaped cage or lattice top pie, *fourandtwenty* connects her newest work with its predecessors. At once light and dense, heavy and weightless, the intricately made feathers both float from “gossamer stainless steel chain,” and accumulate in a pile at the bottom. In her oblique way, Brooks reassures herself and us of the promise of the blackbird’s flight to freedom, snatched from the hungry teeth of humans.

twainthehand (2015) is also dark and even more personal. This pair of quail is “caught” in a net, yet turned toward each other in repose. The brooch contains elements of loss and beauty, sex and death, and the paradoxes of love. Birds can fly away, but are also noted for their pair bonding, if not, we now know, their monogamy. Contained in the net that slithers down nearly a foot are parts of relationships: the scary intimacy, the elastic bonds of freedom, and the attempt to hold on to one another and oneself at the same time. Using the dead animals to portray another aspect of love keeps the “lovebirds” from being trite and, in Brooks’s opinion, commands a level of commitment from her audience. Brooks provokes the viewer to “confront beauty, sentimentality, death, and loss differently.” Whether you feel desire or revulsion, you are compelled to look.

fearofflying, with its captured butterfly wings, is Brooks’s commemorative portrait of her mother. The layers of chains in the cage of this large brooch do not really “capture” the trembling, multi-hued butterflies. The specific narrative may be missing, but the universal message is that we make our own cages, and what keeps us from soaring may be only the flimsiest of boundaries.

Some contemporary theorists have talked about using jewelry as a lens through which to “see” or reflect contemporary culture. Lola Brooks’s jewelry uses the familiar iconography of

the Victorian period to interpret dangers of childhood and relational contradictions in tangible objects held close to the body. For the most part, Brooks is inner-directed, not especially conversant in the field at large, nor eager to learn. In the end her work seems unapologetically, resolutely American. ♦

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Left:
fourandtwenty, 2015
stainless steel chain,
stainless steel, 14k gold
solder, champagne rose cut
diamonds
4 1/2 x 5 x 2 1/4”

Right:
pteroanophobia
(*fearofflying*), 2012
stainless steel chain, 14k
gold solder, butterfly wings,
hand-cut watch crystals
4 x 4 1/2 x 2”

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1. This 18th-century lullaby (variously published as “Cry Baby Bunting”), has the lyrics of “Bye, baby Bunting/ Daddy’s gone a-hunting./ Gone to get a rabbit skin/ To wrap the baby Bunting in.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bye,_baby_Bunting. / 2. Brooks donated “a significant chunk” of the money received from the sale price of the piece to the Elephant Crisis Fund. / 3. “Sing a song of sixpence”. *My Book House. In the Nursery*. Vol. 1, p. 49., ed by Olive Beaupre Miller. *The Book House for Children*, Chicago, 1937, “... well-known in England in the 16th Century.” Blackbirds were actually eaten in Tudor times. One can imagine the revenge of the Blackbirds when they fly out of the King’s pie unharmed, and make off with the maid’s nose, signaling the vulnerability of the servant class.