



# MARJORIE SIMON

## THE FUTURE OF THE FLORAL

Carl Little

When she speaks about the fascination people have with flowers, noting that this attraction dates back to the Neanderthals who placed them in their graves, Marjorie Simon grows animated. “I think we’re hard-wired for flowers,” she says, then wonders aloud if that is putting it too strongly. Whatever the origin of this fervor, she acknowledges a deep personal connection to flowers; “and if I feel that kind of passion,” she states with conviction, “it might as well be in my work.”

Over the past ten or so years Simon has explored floral and botanical imagery in her jewelry, bringing a fresh perspective to a rich tradition. She has employed a wonderfully diverse variety of techniques and mediums, from vitreous enamel to manipulated photographs, to fulfill her inventive visions. The inspiration for this work derives from equally varied sources, both historical and of the moment.

Back in 1995, Simon visited the British Museum in London where she came across six-thousand-year-old Egyptian necklaces with paste glass fruit and flower elements. Struck by how fresh and alive the pieces were, she eventually drew on this experience to create her own Egyptian-inspired flower necklaces. One necklace from 1999 features overlaid floral and leaf shapes made from vitreous enamel on copper and various semiprecious stones. Another necklace, from 2000, combines twenty-two karat bimetal, fourteen karat gold and fine silver with amethyst, peridot and glass beads.

Simon turned to floral imagery again in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Living in Highland Park, New Jersey, at the time, she recalls pacing her studio like so many of her peers, not knowing what to do. When she did get back to work, she made a series of flower brooches from cast sterling

silver and pearls, the latter chosen for their suggestion of tears. Going to shows and speaking with fellow jewelers the next year, Simon discovered that many artists had had a similar impulse to create flower ornaments as a means to deal with the grief.

A sunflower brooch from 2003 is bold in its design. The rows of yellow and white petals that form a halo around the center are vitreous enamel on die-formed copper while the sunflower seeds consist of a cluster of Murano glass beads. Her signature Fluffy Shades of Red necklace from the same year is a delightful arrangement of small four-petaled enamel-on-copper flowers attached to sterling silver rings (one of these necklaces was recently acquired by the Newark Museum).

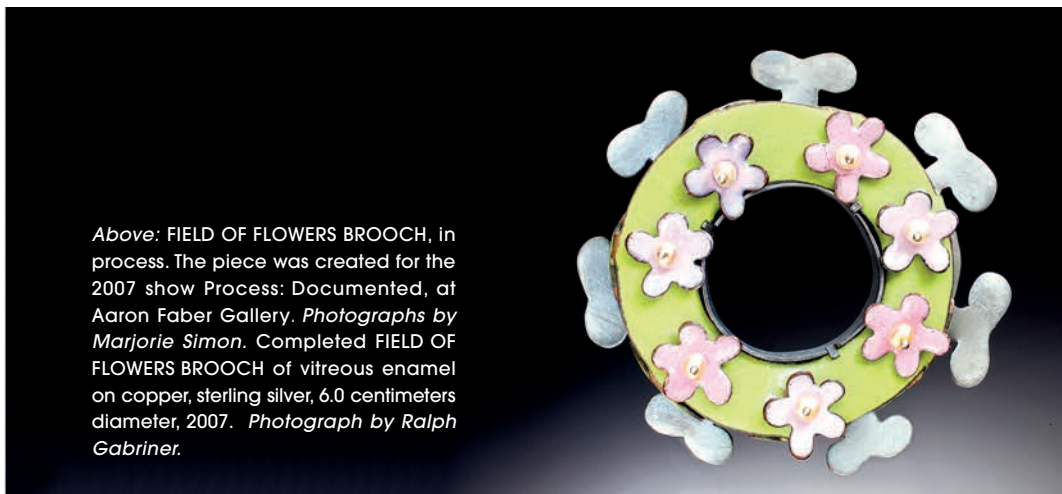
Simon uses the term “vitreous enamel” to make it clear that the material is glass, not a pigment in resin, which she has also worked with, but less frequently. The glass enamel offers different textures and wonderfully luminous qualities; and its surface can be rendered shiny or matte (the latter achieved





WILLIAM MORRIS BROOCH: ORANGE PEONY, in process. The flower is based on William Morris Wallpaper. Photograph by Marjorie Simon. Opposite page, top: Completed WILLIAM MORRIS BROOCH: ORANGE PEONY of vitreous enamel on embossed copper, sterling silver, approximately 5.1 x 7.6 centimeters, 2007. Opposite page, bottom: WILLIAM MORRIS: YELLOW PEONY BROOCH of vitreous enamel on embossed copper, sterling silver, approximately 5.1 x 7.6 centimeters, 2007. Photographs by Robert Diamante.





Above: FIELD OF FLOWERS BROOCH, in process. The piece was created for the 2007 show *Process: Documented*, at Aaron Faber Gallery. Photographs by Marjorie Simon. Completed FIELD OF FLOWERS BROOCH of vitreous enamel on copper, sterling silver, 6.0 centimeters diameter, 2007. Photograph by Ralph Gabriner.

with a weak solution of hydrochloric acid). It also is a risky medium: overfiring, as Simon knows full well, can easily destroy the piece in progress.

The metalsmith loves adding a skin of glass to a metal form by sifting enamel and firing it in the kiln. She frequently combines torch and kiln firing for enamels, deliberately burning out areas to keep the work looking, in her words, “raw and gestural.” She employs basic metalsmithing techniques, among them, scoring and die-forming, stretching and compressing.

A red zinnia brooch from 2004 exemplifies Simon’s daring, both in its expressive design and its vivid coloration. Her palette tends to be vibrant, with the orange/tangerine to deep red range among her favorites. She is fond of the Thompson enamel colors, including a cornflower blue she has used on several occasions. “I really go with what I would like to wear,” she admits.

In 2007, Simon produced a series of brooches based on William Morris wallpaper motifs. These floral and botanical designs are abstracted to the point where their origin may not be immediately evident. The expressive and tactile lines that emerge from these translucent pins are the result of embossing the copper underpinning then using an alundum stone or diamond abrasive to remove any enamel that is on

the raised part. The copper then oxidizes to black, further accentuating the line.

While Simon acknowledges that her choice of Morris carries an intellectual and historical overlay, she is primarily focused on the imagery. As with each new body of work, she seeks to improve her technical skills even as she refines her themes. “I proudly bear the mantle of the fine craft artist,” she has written, “because the construction of each piece is as important to me as the idea behind it.” She enjoys the additional challenge of bringing the ornament to the body, employing innovative pin stems, ear wires and clasps.

Since moving to Philadelphia from New Jersey nearly two years ago, Simon finds her flowers not in her own garden, but at the city markets. For a new group of floral pieces, she has been taking photographs of these purchased peonies, daisies, zinnias, and tulips and then manipulating them on a computer and on a color photocopier. “It’s pretty low-tech,” she notes, but the results are edgy and abstract—and visually engaging.

For one recent piece, a close-up photograph of a blue peony was manipulated in size and color on the photocopier until it became something quite celestial—and not immediately recognizable. Simon is not interested in representation, but rather in extracting the essence of floral features through various stylizations. These intriguing images

are accented with pearls and torch-fired enamel elements, while the backings are cut from polyester (acetate).

The shapes of these pieces were inspired by Victorian jewelry—a purposeful appropriation, Simon says, with a new post-modern feel provided by the technology of photocopier and digital camera. The Victorian influence also appears in her latest brooches inspired by keyhole escutcheons and drawer pulls. In one pin, the statue of David is visible through a stylized aperture, a kind of peephole view—and his backside is revealed when the pin is turned over. The enamel is granular, a result of underfiring.

In an appreciation written in 2003, jeweler Lisa Gralnick called her former student's floral ornaments “lovingly democratic in their ability to soothe, comfort and bridge across generations and cultures.” Tracing Simon's craft journey helps explain how she developed this special sensibility—and the out of the ordinary stature she enjoys in the world of jewelry.

Born Marjorie Lipshutz in Philadelphia in 1945, Simon made her first jewelry at summer camp; indeed, she was always making things from an early age, whether it was knitting, sewing, building model cars—or writing. The catalog for Botanicals, her 2000 exhibition at the Objects of Desire Gallery in Louisville, Kentucky, is dedicated to Miss Shirley Betts, Simon's homeroom teacher and seventh grade English teacher at Ardmore Junior High School in Philadelphia—“the first person,” Simon recalls, “who really encouraged me to write.”

The catalog also pays tribute to her professor, Philip Goldberg, who taught Simon psychology at Connecticut College and served as a mentor, sparking her intellectual curiosity. If Betts and Goldberg did not lead her to jewelry, the imprint of their positive influence manifests itself in the dedication and sharp intellect their student brings to her craft.

Simon went on to graduate school at Bryn Mawr where she received her master's degree, writing her thesis on Freud's

*The Future of the Illusion*. She moved to Boston in 1968 to teach sociology at Cardinal Cushing College, a small Catholic women's school.

Around this time, the earlier creative drive returned; Simon missed working with her hands. In 1971 she took her first class in jewelry, at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, and started making beaded and hammered wire jewelry. She and her anthropologist husband, Kevan Simon, would set up shop in Harvard Square using a board with glued felt squares and cup hooks for hanging earrings. They sold jewelry until they had made enough money for dinner. “That was the time,” Simon remembers with a smile.

Moving to Highland Park, New Jersey, in 1976, Simon soon organized a work space in the basement of her house, working on her jewelry while raising her children, Ya'akov and Eli. In 1979 she was accepted to the Morristown Craft Market; in 1983, she received a fellowship grant from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

This grant led to Simon's first major work, an elaborate neckpiece titled Honoring Margaret Mead. It was a way, she says, of bringing together two parts of her life, social science and jewelry. The necklace incorporated charms, a locket and other elements that referenced the anthropologist's life and work. Three repoussé figures represented infancy, adolescence and maternity, the phases of a woman's life that Mead had studied in Samoa and New Guinea. “She was a hero to me,” Simon states; “This was a way of paying her back.”

To make the Mead piece, Simon drew on a workshop in textile techniques for metalsmiths that she had taken with Mary Lee Hu at the Parsons School of Design. She also visited the Michael C. Rockefeller wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where she made drawings of Pacific Islands weaving patterns.

Simon knew she needed more fabrication skills to advance her craft, but with small children to tend to, being a full-time student was not an option. Instead, she took community-based courses at Parsons and the 92nd Street Y's Art Center in

SUNFLOWER WITH BLOSSOMS BROOCH, in process, also created for *Process: Documented*, at Aaron Faber Gallery in 2007. Photograph by Marjorie Simon. COMPLETED BROOCH of torch-fired enamel on copper, sterling silver, 7.6 centimeters diameter, 2007. Photograph by Ralph Gabriner.



New York City, making the two-hour round-trip commute. She studied with Gail Saunders at Parsons and Enid Kaplan and Rebekah Laskin at the Y (the Art Center celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2005). It was Laskin who taught her kiln-fired enameling.

In 1985 Simon began her metal education “in earnest.” She embarked on a mentorship with metals master Robert Ebendorf, who was teaching at the Y. “That’s when I learned what it meant to live the life of an artist and to be a jeweler,” she recalls. At that time, Ebendorf was teaching at the State University of New York at New Paltz. A number of his graduate students taught with him in Manhattan. Simon took classes with Lisa Gralnick, Jamie Bennett and Pat Flynn, among others.

Ebendorf did more than guide Simon in her jewelry. He showed her work around and introduced her to people in the field. He also helped jump-start her career as a writer, albeit inadvertently. When Simon shared her criticism of an essay written about Ebendorf’s work for a show of his jewelry at Artwear, he forwarded it to the writer Mark Leach, then curator at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina. Leach admired her forthright critique and ended up acquiring one of her necklaces for the museum.

Simon continued to write and eventually landed a regular spot with *Metalsmith* Magazine (she also served on its editorial advisory committee for several years), contributing book and exhibition reviews and profiles of contemporary jewelers. Over the past decade-plus, this experience has benefited her work. Visits with jewelers like Pat Flynn and Sharon Church have led to greater knowledge of technique. “I’m going into studios and asking, ‘How did you make this?’” she recounts with wonder.

The connection between the writing and the work is direct. “The vocabulary of art criticism, how you talk about your work, how you justify the decisions that you make—it’s not

until I started writing about other artists that I think my jewelry began to go in a more sophisticated direction,” she states.

For thirty years Simon worked in the basement of her home in Highland Park, eventually taking over the entire space. Despite its spatial limitations—she could not raise her arms over her head—the situation allowed her to be with her children (“I was always there when they came home from school,” she notes).

In 2004 after teaching for two months at the Penland School of Crafts, Simon returned to New Jersey and vowed to move above ground. Relocating to Philadelphia, she found a loft space in a newly rehabbed factory in Center City. The eleven-by-forty-foot studio features plenty of light, thanks to a wall of windows. Among her tools are a hydraulic press, an enameling kiln, a six-inch belt sander (a gift from her husband), and a scroll saw, which she uses to cut Plexiglas. A dressmaker’s dummy helps Simon see what something will look like on the body; and she uses an IV pole on wheels for her flex shaft.

The centerpiece of the space, so to speak, is a heavy duty plumber’s bench with big pipe legs and a shelf underneath for storing tools. Simon has also carved out a niche for writing and for her substantial library of reference books. A cabinet for enamels is on her wish list, but overall she is very happy with these improved working conditions.

While some jewelers can sit down at the bench with an idea and realize it in metal, Simon almost always makes paper models as part of her design process, an approach she learned from Ebendorf. She finds that the physical act of manipulating materials three dimensionally stirs the design impulses in a way drawing alone does not. “Heavy paper behaves quite like metal—you can score it and fold it,” she explains, although it cannot be stretched. This model-making also relates to an interest in *origami* and *kirigami* (folded and cut paper).



BLUE PEONY BROOCH of sterling silver; acetate, 7.6 x 7.6 centimeters, 2008  
Photograph by Ralph Gabriner.





BLUE AGAVE BROOCH AND DETAIL, of sterling silver, altered photograph, pearls, acetate, acrylic, 10.5 x 4.5 centimeters, 2008. Photographs by Ken Yanoviak.

Simon has started keeping records of the models, which she uses to highlight the design process in her classes and workshops. “It helps the students to understand that there’s a reason for doing that preliminary work,” she explains. For one, design problems can be worked out. And in the end, the metalsmith does not slavishly reproduce the model. “It’s not like all your creativity is gone,” she states.

Another lesson from Ebendorf: “Make fifteen and choose your best eight.” This approach, in a manner of speaking, “gets you off the hook of thinking every little thing is so precious,” Simon notes. “There are going to be some pieces that are better than others; you might as well have something to choose from,” she adds.

Simon enjoys commissions, counting them among the most meaningful of her design work as they often carry a personal connection. A friend studying papermaking in Burma, for example, purchased beads expressly for the jeweler to create something from them for her. After researching Burmese textile patterns, Simon created an elaborate necklace with matching earrings. “She thinks about me when she wears it,” Simon notes, taking visible pleasure from this connection.

Among her favorite commissions are wedding rings. “To me, that is such a responsibility: to be asked to contribute something that someone wants to wear for the rest of her or his life.” A commissioned piece sometimes leads to new work. A sea urchin necklace designed for a client led to a series of ornaments featuring this motif.

When Simon gives a talk about her work, she tells her audience she became a jeweler because she loves the creative process. After thirty-five years of being active in the field, however, her true passion lies in the intimacy of designing something that will be placed on a body, against skin. “It took me a long time to articulate that sense of the intimate and what it means to me,” she reflects.

Casting an eye over the field today, Simon points to what she perceives to be “a resurgence in beauty” in the best of American and European jewelry—“as opposed to modernist, constructivist, abstract,” she explains. She also has noticed increased use of non-precious materials in jewelry. She recently saw *Neoteric Matter: New Studio Jewelry*, at the Long Beach Island Foundation of Arts and Sciences in Loveladies, New Jersey, that featured new materials like silicone and computer-assisted designs.

Simon has attended a number of national fairs, including the Smithsonian Craft Show, Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show and Washington Craft Show. She has never had to make a living from the marketplace. “That’s very different from having to put out a production line,” she notes. She admires the sense of community at the shows: “As I’m talking to you, I can hear the sound of people putting up their booths,” she relates. That sense of community is “what it’s all about,” Simon avers, “because it’s a hell of a way to make a living.”

Simon feels blessed to be where she is in her life and craft. “I’m so grateful that I get to spend my days at my bench, to write about somebody else and to be a cheerleader for jewelry and for craft, and to teach,” she says. Hers is a full life, with plenty of flowers to inspire. ☞

#### SUGGESTED READING

- 500 Earrings* (juror: Alan Revere). Asheville, NC: Lark Books, 2007.  
*500 Necklaces* (juror: Marjorie Schick). Asheville, NC: Lark Books, 2006.  
**McCreight, Tim.** *Color on Metal*. Guild Publishing, 2001: 52-53.  
 ——. *The Metalsmith’s Book of Boxes and Lockets*. Hand Books Press, 1999: 6.  
**Price, Beverly.** “The Self As Work”—a Review of Marjorie Simon’s Enamelled Jewellery,” *Enamel* (British Society of Enamellers newsletter), Winter 2006.  
**Simon, Marjorie.** “Anything Goes: An Insider’s View of American Enamels,” presentation from the British Society of Enamellers Symposium, 2006 (available online).  
**Szorad, Felicia.** Review of “Botanica” exhibition. *Metalsmith Magazine*, Volume 24, No. 5 (Fall 2004): 48.