

Linda Threadgill

BY ELIZABETH MCDEVITT

AT THE END of a winding road through piñon-studded hills, artist Linda Threadgill and her husband Jim have created an environment of inspired beauty and creativity.

About 11 years ago they found in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a perfect escape from the cold northern climate of the upper Midwest, where Linda had directed the Metal Arts program at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater for 25 years. The couple designed both the home and studio in traditional Santa Fe style, and the property sits atop a hill with a panoramic view of the surrounding mountains (the Sangre de Cristo, Ortiz, Sandia, and Cerrillos ranges). Within its gated walls are a lovely native garden, and a private inner patio with a view of the surrounding hills and valleys that goes on for miles, to the very southern tip of the Rocky Mountains. Not surprisingly, even the light fixtures in the patio and the hardware on the doors to the studio were designed and made by Linda herself.

My midwinter visit there coincided with the return of a large body of work from “Master Metalsmith: Linda

Threadgill, *Cultivating Ornament*,” her recent show at the Metal Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. Although I had seen pictures of Linda’s work, I had no clear sense of the grand scale of the mixed-metal pieces that seeing them in person afforded. Candlesticks were large sculptures emerging from rhythmic tangles of textured leaves and pods; trays were monumental presentation pieces of huge abstract floral ornament overflowing from their surfaces. Chalice-like cups and bowls rose from stalks resembling plants from another realm: sharp, intricate, and organic forms that begged to be admired, but not touched. Other

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vessel forms stood atop architecturally strong heavy-gauge bronze. In a large frame on one of the living room walls hung a collection of intricately textured and brightly colored “Rosette Brooches,” organic, yet stylized imaginary flowers in various stages of growth and decay. These and many other works displayed the technical and artistic virtuosity that is Linda Threadgill’s hallmark.

A tour of her studio complex, up a short flight of stone steps in the garden, provided insight into Linda’s creative process. “Overwhelmed” is the word that best describes my initial reaction. A four-foot-tall jewelers saw frame, referencing signs used in Colonial times, hung outside the entry, advertising her “trade” as a metal artist. What was even more surprising was that the saw frame, expertly constructed by her husband Jim, was functional... for a giant hand! The first room I entered looked like it doubled as a tool museum: hundreds of antique tools of all kinds, measuring instruments, a series of small turning mills that were used at one time to turn edges on sheet metal, beautiful handmade wood planes, numerous large steel raising stakes and hammers, large machinery (lathe, rolling mill, drill press, anvils, and vises) and giant wooden plumb bobs were all artfully displayed in wooden wall mounts and cases custom made by Jim. At this point I realized that Linda and Jim work together as a team in studio and concept design.

Not to be ignored is Jim’s beautifully equipped woodworking studio, adjacent to hers. Jim can make just about anything Linda needs, including large wooden lathe-turned forms—for vessel construction, and a huge wooden donut for the base of the largest pitch bowl I have ever seen—and does so with both skill and humor.

Resting against Linda’s jeweler’s bench was another giant tool: a three-foot-tall functional ring clamp! The jeweler’s bench was custom made by Jim as well, and outfitted with multiple shallow drawers



Linda Threadgill holding a four-foot-tall jewelers saw.

opposite:
Threadgill’s custom-designed jeweler’s bench in her Santa Fe studio.

An assortment of forming tools in Threadgill’s studio.





Assorted tools for measurement, edge turning, and lathe work.

The drawing and design area of Threadgill's studio.

to hold some of the innumerable tools and components that her complex work requires. Above it on the wall is a series of framed French 18th-century prints, detailing tools and workshops of a bygone era. Although Linda's work is produced using contemporary and technologically advanced processes, her appreciation of the history of her craft is apparent everywhere. Above her drafting table in this brightly lit studio are 19th-century botanical illustrations of plants and seedpods, which are hand colored in tones that resemble some of her abstract flower brooches. Drawings and models of plant forms cover the table, providing further insight into her design process. Linda's

work incorporates multiple repetitive shapes, many of which she forms in wax and casts in bronze and silver, and some in precious metal clay (bronze, silver, and steel). In the center of the room is a large, heavy printmaker's worktable, displaying numerous layered flower brooch forms in various stages of development. Linda works in series, and in the drawers below she sorts and stores hundreds of components, many of which are intricately textured,

Linda's mastery of tools and process has undoubtedly enabled her to create a complex and somewhat mysterious body of work.

etched, pierced, and formed by hand. Whether large or small, Linda's work requires multiple techniques. Larger, more sculptural pieces incorporate ¼-inch- and ½-inch-thick brass and bronze, which because of its thickness is custom cut by water jet in nearby Albuquerque. The precision of the cuts results in both positive and negative shapes, both of which are used in her work.

As a professor of metal arts for more than two decades, Linda had to become conversant in many processes. Early in her career, she took a machining class which freed her to design and make many of her own tools, including a studio-size spray etching machine modeled after commercial units. This technique yields a cleaner and more precise surface than traditional etching. Because this process requires adequate ventilation, it is done in a separate, detached studio, in which she can also do wax burnout for casting. Linda's mastery of tools and process has undoubtedly enabled her to create a complex and somewhat mysterious body of work. In Linda's words: "Having the ability to design tooling is ironically what frees one from technique. This allows you to concentrate on concepts, without the constraints of technical convention or preconceptions about material. In a way, mastering process allows you to forget about it." Linda was "happy to retire" from teaching so that she could concentrate on her own work. Technically accomplished and prolific, she and Jim have found the perfect combination of isolation and inspiration. The energy of nature and the sharp light and clear air of New Mexico are elements of this beautifully integrated live/work space; perhaps not so surprising in a state officially called the "Land of Enchantment."

Elizabeth McDevitt is a studio goldsmith and jewelry historian based in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Furthermore:
www.lindathreadgill.com



Corbeille, 2015
sterling silver, bronze, silver plate
13 ½ x 12 x 6"
PHOTO: JAMES THREADGILL