

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT JEFFERSON COUNTY



A ring designed by Heidi Abrahamson. Leader photo by Laura Jean Schneider

Entirely by design

Modernist adornments reflect a colorful life

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A woman in search of acetylene to make jewelry. That's not your average social media request. Intrigued, I immediately sent her a message.

I met Heidi Abrahamson for tea last week at Cafe Tenby in downtown Port Townsend. I ordered a pot of Earl Grey Creme, and found her already seated beside a Mid-century knockoff coffee table, scrolling through her phone.

I settled in, added cream to my tea, and asked what she was drinking.

Earl Grey.

We laughed.

And we didn't really stop, not until an hour and half later when I had to hastily gather my things and rush to my next interview with five minutes to spare.

I'm still buzzing from what I decided to call the Abrahamson effect.

INCEPTION OF DESIGN

Talking with Abrahamson was like plunging into a memoir. Our conversation was part nostalgic whiplash, part grief, mostly color. Her story felt something like one of those folded paper fans I made as a kid, but a never ending one, where each fold revealed another facet.

She's a modernist to the core, but she couldn't have known that when she had her mother cast her first design in gold; a tiny peace sign she carved from wax when she was about 12 years old.

The tension between Abrahamson and her mother was an undertow of sorts during our conversation.

"My parents were pretty harsh," she said. "My mother especially."

(As an adult, Abrahamson crafted several pieces of jewelry for her mother. She recalls her mother bending a pendant in half, and saying, "Well, there." Another time, inquiring about a piece Abrahamson had designed and was wearing, she said, "Oh, Heidi," in a chiding way, as if her daughter couldn't possibly have made it.)

Abrahamson spoke once of her father fondly, her eyes growing soft. "He called me 'his little artist,'" she said.

Yet it was her mother, a dental lab technician who worked in a studio built by her woodworker husband, who provided young Heidi with much of her early inspiration.

"When I was a kid, I had a lot of material to work with," she said. I had her mother dealt in antique jewelry and textiles. There were often broken trinkets to create with, and a love of the tactile followed Abrahamson



Modernist jewelry designer Heidi Abrahamson scrolls through photos of her work late last week. Leader photo by Laura Jean Schneider

through adulthood.

When she goes to work in her studio, which now is a friend's garden shed on Diamond Point, she gets dressed up.

"I love textiles. I have a lot, it's bad," she said, laughing.

HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

As a child, Abrahamson's family moved to an artists' community in Nashville, Indiana, where they lived in the countryside and operated an antiques shop out of an old log cabin. (Abrahamson's father also had the bug; he specialized in art glass and furniture.)

The innovative child that she was, Heidi asked her father if she could have some pieces of slate he had removed from their previous Victorian home's roof, and she set to work painting images of mushrooms and other motifs on the chips to sell.

"I wanted to do oil painting," she said.

But after attending Indiana University for three years, she'd had enough. "I didn't even finish," she said.

Her next idea was to study graphic design to make money. So she packed up and headed to Evergreen State College with her boyfriend. Evergreen, however, was not the place to make her own graphic design program, so Abrahamson kept on a search for artistic meaning.

She found the job she was picking up doing some graphics work uninspiring, and described a scene with a wheat shock and fruit that she painted for a store.

"I'm sure it was just absolutely hideous," she said. "Oh my God, it's a good thing that I don't have a photo of that."

A RESUME OF DESIGN

Abrahamson met her husband of 36 years at a party in Seattle, where she'd been doing visual merchandising for designers such as Hermès and Burberry.

Six months later, the two were married.

The couple, who have two children, moved back to Indiana briefly, then to Scottsdale and Phoenix, spending 26 years in Arizona before coming back to the Pacific Northwest.

While Abrahamson and her husband were selling antiques in Phoenix, she was going a little stir-crazy.

"I've gotta find something to do," she recalled thinking.

"I was looking at my jewelry, and thought, 'Why can't I do that?'"

That got her fired up, literally.

She took a class on soldering and casting from the now-defunct Arizona Mineral and Mining Museum in Phoenix for \$50, and a stone setting workshop elsewhere.

In 2005, in classic Abrahamson fashion, she jumped into jewelry making and hasn't looked back.

"[My] earlier pieces were all Scandinavian-inspired, with stones," she said, harkening to the original forebears of Modernist jewelry.

But things really took off for Abrahamson when her work was noticed by Marbeth

Schon, a jewelry historian and Modernist jewelry pro. Schon asked if Abrahamson could bring some of her jewelry to a Mississippi American Modernist jewelry expo.

And she did.

"Going to that show, I got to meet some of the Modernists that were still alive," Abrahamson said, such as Daniel Macchiarini, whose family is famous for Modernist-inspired sculpture and jewelry. She was still buzzing from meeting her design idols when Schon took her aside for a one-on-one talk.

"I had this little pink velvet purse with my jewelry in it," Abrahamson recalled.

"She's looking at it [the jewelry] and she's not saying a word. I just about crapped my pants. Then she said, 'Can I take all of it?' Then I wanted to throw up."

"She helped put me on the so-called map," Abrahamson said. Now, she's become a major player in the world of Modernist jewelry, and many of her pieces are listed on the site 1stDibs. She's had shows in New York, Florence, Phoenix, and Scottsdale. She does most of her marketing through Instagram.

A RING TO IT

"If I could do just rings, I would do rings," she said, although her work as of late has been focused on earrings, which sell better because they don't require resizing.

"I drive the old man at the hardware store nuts," she said, laughing because she often incorporates utilitarian things like washers and rubber rings into her work.

She's been at work on some wooden dangle earrings, combining stained wood with colored inks, rubber, and onyx.

Abrahamson pulled up a photo of a Memphis-style brooch. (Think 1980s colors, shapes, and motifs.) One of her proudest moments was Peter Shire liking her work on Instagram, and approving her series of miniatures based on his sculptures to showcase her jewelry. (A highlight of her career was meeting Shire in person in 2019).

"Memphis is back big time," she told me later.

An abstract line of glowy yellow-green plastic runs under the length of the pin. That, Abrahamson said, she pulled from a garbage can in a studio where she was trying to learn how to laser cut acrylic.

"I found that in the trash," she said, bursting into laughter.

I was pretty sure it wouldn't be the end of our conversation.

Or maybe, that was just the Abrahamson effect.