

Sunshine **ARTIST**

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Aquatic Jewelry,
Barbara Umbel



Photo by Hap Sakwa



Forging a life aquatic

Barbara Umbel

By Nate Shelton
SA Editor

When art-show patrons step into Barbara Umbel's booth, they frequently comment on how much they adore her gorgeous, aquatic-themed jewelry, which merges precious metals and stones with actual seashells, resulting in truly unique creations. Little do they know that they have something as mundane as collegiate requirements to thank for the objects of their affection.

"I entered the art program at [Maryland's] Towson State University in 1988 and started taking core classes — drawing, painting, sculpture, art history," she said, adding that art majors at her alma mater had to take a crafts class to graduate.

Luckily for Umbel's legion of admirers, she chose Jewelry 101.

"I was completely floored when my professor ... started forging out a piece of wire while explaining that metal moved and stretched like clay," she

said. "I had always thought of it as a rigid material, like steel. I decided within days that I would continue taking jewelry and metalsmithing, and I never looked back."

Long before college, though, she had her eyes set on a creative lifestyle, boldly telling everyone that she'd be an artist when she grew up. Perhaps more importantly, she spent her childhood putting in the time and effort to hone her skills. "I used to draw pictures of myself drawing pictures," recalled Umbel, who took drawing and painting classes during her early summers. "I simply loved to draw and was able to interpret what I was seeing at a young age."





Photo by Hap Sakwa

In addition to illustration, she's also dabbled in painting and black-and-white photography. But outside of a blacksmithing class that she took a few years back and an interest in learning lampworking, jewelry has continued to be the focus of her talents.

This doesn't mean that Umbel's work in the medium hasn't evolved. Her early efforts consisted of kiln-enameled pieces, primarily brooches, which she described as "very contemporary, boxlike constructions." Then she and her future husband Rick moved to Pawleys Beach, South Carolina in 1996, and the ocean swept into her world.

"There were these beautiful sea urchins all over the beach, and I found the colors and the geometry in the shells amazing," she said. "I also liked the challenge of working with a found object. The shell

is what it is as far as shape, size and color, so the trick is to make it into a beautiful, wearable sculpture."

Over time, she became increasingly interested in finding ways to get the shells to act like the sea creatures from which they came, including pieces that appear to be swimming like octopi, floating or even diving into the depths. Constantly dreaming up these innovative designs can be just as difficult as it sounds — in fact, Umbel considers it to be the most challenging aspect of her job.

"It's easy to produce jewelry once you have experience," she said, "but to constantly challenge yourself to change what you already know how to make is what keeps the work fresh. Some of my hardest work is done in the time I spend thinking and imagining. Then I run for the nearest piece of paper to scribble it down before I forget!"

And whenever she needs a blast of creative stimulus, a quick trip around her and Rick's current home in Melbourne Beach, Florida, usually does the trick. "I like to ride my bike to the beach in the morning and look at the ocean," she said. "The patterns of the surf and the clouds and the possibility of finding

treasures to work with are excellent inspirations for time in the studio."

Fortunately, the joy she finds in bringing those designs to life easily makes up for any tribulations she faces during the design period. "Fabricating jewelry is wonderful because I get to use so many different processes," she said. "I build settings for seashells and stones, forge the silver 'tentacles' and other elements that suggest movement and solder them together with a torch once I tweak the design."

What's more, the object she thinks she's going to make frequently turns into something completely different by the time it's done. "Much of the design process actually happens as I am building the piece," she acknowledged, "and often the work will come out looking far removed from the original sketch... Often inspiration strikes in the middle of assembling a piece, and the design will turn in a whole new direction."

In 2001, she and Rick didn't just marry — he also became her first student and her business partner. "He produces half the work that



Photo by Hap Sakwa



Photos by Ryder Gledhill

comes out of our studio, and we split all of the other tasks that running a small business requires,” explained Umbel, who still designs every piece. “I might be able to do this on my own, but I don’t know if I would want to!”

As is to be expected, the two maintain a busy show schedule. Moreover, Umbel’s been exhibiting since 1994, when she debuted at the Baltimore Alternative Craft Show. She was so enamored with the experience that she became involved with producing the event and continued to help the promoters for years before moving south.

In the years since, she’s appeared at scores of shows across the country. Like any seasoned pro, she has her favorites, including

the Piccolo Spoleto Craft Show in Charleston, South Carolina; the Fine Craft Shows in Chautauqua, New York; and 2009’s St. Louis Art Fair. But the event she credits with providing her most pleasurable exhibiting experience to date is 2006’s Sausalito Art Festival in California. As she put it, “The show ran like clockwork, and the preview party was amazing!”

Umbel doesn’t show any signs of slowing down, either. Besides her first-ever appearance at Milwaukee’s Lakefront Festival of the Arts in June, she’s looking forward to a couple of singular honors. First, two of her necklaces will be featured in Lark Books’ *Showcase 500 Necklaces*, which is scheduled for a June release, and she’ll be the featured Artist of the Month at Winston-Salem, North Carolina’s Piedmont

Craftsmen Gallery in September of next year, marking her first one-woman show.

So, much like the ocean tide brings her inspiration and found objects, Umbel’s art will continue to provide her and Rick with new travels and experiences, and she can’t wait to see what’s next.

“We especially like the opportunities we get to travel together as a result of this business,” she said. “Visiting Yellowstone, Yosemite and some of the other sights out west are memories we are particularly fond of.

“We’ve seen a lot of the country, but our list isn’t done. ... Hopefully we’ll get to keep on this crazy journey we embarked on years ago.”

More of Barbara Umbel’s work can be found on her website, www.barbara-umbel.com. ☼