

Startwith the wound" 1 : The Work of Iris Eichenberg

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The fundamental and austere practice of putting pencil to paper, drawing, has always had the ability to embody a sense of urgency and ephemerality, and as such it occupies a cherished place in the visual art hierarchy. An art object produced without interference of clumsy processes and materials, perched on the edge of its own annihilation (erasure, or worse, being crumpled and tossed away), is simply irresistible, and, not unlike the fanatical gardener who wakes at sunrise daily and immediately surveys the spoils of her efforts, coffee mug in hand, only to repeat the ritual again before dusk, there is something fortuitous about glimpsing an ever changing process through stolen frozen stills. Feeling privy to a narrative that is in a state of *becoming*, we do not long for resolution but quite the contrary—our hope is that the cinematic display will continue indefinitely and that we will have the privilege of witnessing it through a series of brief evidential markers. Such is the seductive phenomenology of the work of Iris Eichenberg.

Eichenberg works within a paradigm of art-making that is both contemporary and idiosyncratic yet is bred of a tradition that can be understood as an evolution of the methods of figuration—an attempt to depict our human collective experience in a meaningful and reflective manner, as an allegory in the broadest sense. Her work has a significant allegiance, albeit at times a reactionary one, to German Romanticism. Hers is a vision in which sensory experience is super-charged and the grand themes of life, death, family and identity lay in the details and not in her veiled narrative. It makes an argument for meaning from a fragmented, pieced together montage of memory data, and it negotiates this challenge in the pixelated language of its own *post mechanical reproduction* time. Non-confrontational, non-academic and apolitical, yet still capable of provoking profound discomfort, it is, like the stranger hugging you unexpectedly on the street, almost unbearably earnest and intimate. It is ritualistic, requiring an acceptance of the authority of its premise, and it is work that fuses the urgency of a drawing, the surgical skill of the filmmaker, and the moral neutrality of the artifact. As an attempt to reclaim and resurrect something apparently lost in much of contemporary art as political activity, we must look backwards to understand it.

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These final chilling words by Susan Buck-Morss are forever etched in my psyche like a recurring nightmare that continues to unfold over time. They haunt because they describe a culture of consumer-based mass media so

intoxicating as to produce a state of societal numbness and self-centeredness in which the populace could be manipulated into believing anything. In these closing remarks of her ***Aesthetics and Anesthetics*** essay (1992), Buck-Morss refers to the now legendary photographs of Hitler that were juxtaposed against those of ordinary people featured in Darwin's work ***The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals***. The comparisons reveal that Hitler's facial expressions, which he reportedly practiced in a mirror under the tutelage of an opera singer, did not project the expected aggression or rage of a ruthless authoritarian. On the contrary, they suggested both fear and emotional and physical suffering, a propagandistic tactic that successfully appealed to an entire nation that saw in his face their own image. Buck-Morss reminds us that these photos not only stir recognition of our own reaction to Hitler as "evil incarnate", but, more importantly, they remind us how fully the agencies of mass culture can and have been used to soothe the sense of alienation that modernity has delivered, and how dangerous that salve is as the capitalist extravaganza continues to blind us from the truth of our own apathetic narcissism at the same time that it encourages and fuels it. One only needs to think of the American Neo-Nazi movement, and the way it acquires young white male converts by appealing to their wounded machismo through a messenger who is *just like them*, a mirror into which their own castrated conceit is reflected. Within a message that is both familiar and flattering, promising to focus on our individualized despair by identifying an enemy, the seeds of fascism have been sown. In an era when the arts seem to actively participate in the anesthetizing phantasmagoria of commodification, it is possible that it is an appropriate time for an art that is reactionary, urgent, and sensual, and that the work of Iris Eichenberg may well represent a noble effort in that direction.

Buck-Morss published her essay as a response to the more famous one by Walter Benjamin, ***The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*** (1936), referred to simply as his ***Artwork*** essay. A cursory look at this essay (which has been analyzed *ad nauseum*) is necessary. In ***Artwork***, written shortly after the Nazis came to power and Benjamin, a Jewish cultural critic and Marxist, had fled Germany to France, an examination is made of the aural and phenomenological characteristics of the traditional handmade art object, gleaned through sensory cognition, and their replacement with the political, social and didactic advantages inherent in an art object that is reproducible by mechanical means, specifically, the newly emerging arts of photography and film. Benjamin identified the traditional art object as potentially dangerous, citing both the glorification of war and industrialization as expressed by the Italian Futurist manifesto, and the implicit elitism of the ritualized art object. In many ways history proved him right, as the Nazis advocated a return to more traditional Romantic modes of art-making as part of a quest for the eradication of the decadence and depravity of modernity. Although Benjamin acknowledged the importance of *sensorium cognito*, thinking through the senses, to the made-by-hand art object, and entertained an idealistic notion that Marxism would ignite the human sensual experience through labor, he felt that the shock of modern life, including warfare and industrialization, had mandated a more significant mission for the arts, and his essay has become synonymous with "an affirmation of mass culture

and of the new technologies through which it is disseminated."

2 (Buck-Morss)

The most rudimentary aspect of Benjamin's seminal work is on his isolation of the concept of "aura" as a defining component of the authentic (non-reproducible) work of art, and the perceived benefit of its loss in the ability of photography and film to provide a politicized, democratic, and accessible art for the masses. The aura that accompanies a traditional art object requires a distance that allows for the artwork's autonomy and disinterested contemplation, always as part of a ritual (either religious, magical, or, after the Renaissance, as part of a theology of art based in the notion of "art for art's sake"). Hence, there is an implied authority of the authentic artwork that flirts with imperialism. As with phenomena in nature -- contemplation of mountains from a distance, a beautiful sunset --- our perception of the uniqueness of the thing perceived is contingent on our inability to reproduce it, own it (metaphorically speaking), nor bring it any closer -- physically, theoretically, perceptually -- than it is. Again, Benjamin:

...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual... But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice - politics. (Benjamin)

Benjamin was fascinated by the emerging art form of film, and **Artwork** became, in the ensuing years, seminal to the field of film criticism. His discussion of the machinery of film -- cameras, lighting, props and sets, etc. -- and the place of the cameraman (*auteur*) within this milieu of the tools of mechanical reproduction, visible to the maker but invisible to the viewer of the final work, sheds light on the fascinating process of the penetration and dissection of reality by reality. He compares the traditional painter/artist and the cameraman/artist, and the distance (again, the aura or lack thereof) that separates each from his subject, providing a fascinating analogy using the magician and the surgeon, respectively, that draws attention to the ability of the new, reproducible media to both see more than the naked eye and to "critically test" reality, reassembling the fragments or frames "under a new law" to create "an aspect of reality that is free of all equipment". This "penetration of reality", as opposed to the mimetic model on which all prior artmaking was based, is central to Iris Eichenberg's work, which is oddly cinematic in its democratic use of both real and reconstructed fragments of reality that seem to present an image of action and randomness that exists in real frozen time. It is my assertion that Eichenberg's work can only be understood in the light of what can be called the age of

post-mechanical reproduction in which we find ourselves today. Hers is a reactionary vision, an attempt to restore the aura of the traditional art object with the aesthetic tools of perception of the mechanical age, and to understand it we must take a brief look at what transpired in the fifty six years after Benjamin's essay that resulted in the appearance of the one by Buck-Morss.

Much changed in the world in the years between 1936 and 1991, including World War II, the advent of the digital information age, post-modernism, and the almost complete collapse of the Marxist ideals that lead to a tragically corrupted Communism. In addition, arguably the most important German artist of his generation, Joseph Beuys, was producing work with supercharged materials that addressed, using a personal mythology based on his experiences in the war, issues of German nationalism, reconciliation, and social progressiveness. (Interesting, I think, that Iris Eichenberg was born at almost the exact intersection in time between the two essays). Buck-Morss's essay addresses the closing remarks of Benjamin's essay, recognizing that the new media he innocently championed has produced, in addition to a repertoire of film, photographic, video, and digital masterpieces that remain some of the most important artworks of the twentieth century, a consumer-based culture of fantasy, escapism, and lack of accountability that Benjamin could never have imagined. Questioning his tripartite model of art, aesthetics, and politics, she suggests that Benjamin has engaged in a sort of linguistic roulette in his conclusion, since the politicizing of art in the way Benjamin advocated would (and did) change the nature of art as it is defined in modernity. Tracing the concept of aesthetics as etymologically rooted in the perception of reality through the senses, continuing with its evolution into the detached contemplation of beauty and the sublime, she delivers us to its current incarnation as the philosophical and intellectual study of art. Subsequently, she presents a disturbing picture of the evolution of mass media into an *anesthetic*, a mode by which we are numbed from the shock of an everyday experience plagued with violence, over-stimulation, industrialization, lack of accountability, and the detachment from genuine social contact. She outlines the way in which a neurologically based sensory environment is at the core of social behavior, and the way in which the commodity-based "phantasmagoria" feeds our narcissism. Thus, modern aesthetics as detached contemplation and intellectual inquiry joins the rank of drug addition, television, and consumerism, as an anesthetic with which the neurologically-based sensorial experience has been rendered numb. (Interesting, as an aside, that this was one of the major criticisms of the 2002 **Mirroring Evil** exhibition at the Jewish Museum—that we were being numbed from the horror of the Holocaust). Acknowledging that human sensorium is, ultimately, the most reliable device of both individual and societal accountability and human self-preservation, she presents the anesthetized state as one that is perpetually vulnerable to its nemesis or mirror image, fascism. There is an enemy and the enemy is the media that corrupts. Her final comments offer a frightening presage of the future of

art and the cultural milieu that will produce it.

One may legitimately ask at this point, "What does all of this have to do with the work of Iris Eichenberg, the new Artist in Residence and Head of the Metals/Jewelry program at Cranbrook Academy of Art?" Perhaps nothing, and more likely everything. In the time intervening between the two essays, much also happened in the art world. The issue of distance and loss of aura was already pivotal in the work of the Surrealists and Dadaists, and Marcel Duchamp's readymades can be interpreted as early examples of a reverberating echo from the age of mechanical reproduction. The visceral, socially progressive work of Joseph Beuys, the most significant mentor to a generation of post-war German artists that includes Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo, was fueling German artists to both confront their recent past, rise above it and redefine Germany. Now, in the early twenty-first century, it all seems a moot point, so complete is the blurring of distinctions between advertising and art; mass media, visual culture and aesthetic phenomenology; and propaganda and Realpolitik. However, it is my basic contention that Iris Eichenberg's work can be seen as an attempt to restore to art the notion of the aura in a *post-mechanical reproduction age*. What exactly do I mean by that? She has taken her experience of reality, shaped by the non-auratic and omnipotent lens of the photographic, cinematic, and digitized eras of her time, and panned the landscape of memory for snippets and fragments, that, once assembled, create a montaged image comprised of bits of sense-data, both real and constructed, that form a cinematic tableau. They are indeed three-dimensional drawings. She employs a process of making that attempts a restoration of the aura through sensual urgency and fragile tangential relationships that seem to be assembled by chance. The works exist in a limbo between the aural and non-aural and, as such, they are neither truly political nor truly detached and authoritarian. It is their neutrality that, like an artifact, makes them so disarming.

Iris Eichenberg is, arguably, a German artist (she insists her work is rooted more in Holland since she studied and practiced there), who grew up during the post post-war generation of the sixties and seventies on a farm in Gottingen and had an early short career as a nurse. As the old adage goes, "it takes one to know one", and I can say with some authority that she has the soul of a romantic. After meeting her and experiencing her warm, sensual, nurturing presence, not to mention the repeated appearances of medical apparatus, body parts, and wound-like images in her work, it

seems to make perfect sense that she gravitated at one time to nursing. Eventually, she studied jewelry in the Netherlands at the Rietveld Academy, under Onno Boekhoudt and later Ruudt Peters, and continued to live and work in Holland for many years, leading the jewelry program at the Rietveld until she moved to Michigan to accept her current position at Cranbrook two years ago. Having recently visited her at the Academy, she seems to be infusing the program with a new jewelry-oriented direction that favors broad material exploration in service of an idea, and de-emphasizing the more rigorous metalsmithing practice of the Gary Griffin era. This, again, makes perfect sense, and the entire metalsmithing and jewelry fields are poised to see how these changes will be reflected in the student output over the next few years. Unquestionably, a new era has begun for Metals at Cranbrook.

Conversations with Eichenberg have revealed an attitude that can be considered anti-craft. Her own training at the Rietveld did not require intensive metalsmithing practice, and she, admittedly, does not particularly value labor or technical skill as assets. In fact, her creative endeavors suggest an obvious disdain for the authoritarian propaganda of the craft agenda. Eichenberg's work, not unlike several other jewelers from the US and more abroad, and a much larger population in the general arts community, seems to embrace an aesthetic that can be understood as anti-craft if one interprets craft as an attitude towards making that respects a defined and structured protocol relevant to material and process and values labor and technical skill as providing the credentials with which conceptually advanced work can be explored. Her approach can be seen as a rebellion against the fascist regime of craft practice that, in an effort to defend its relevance, has mandated that things be done a certain way with certain tools and with an unerring respect for tradition that, in return, promises a certain freedom within the confines of that tradition and the license to critique it. The rule she snubs goes something like this: You can make whatever you want as long as it is made well by metalsmithing standards. In her work, a certain roughness in execution is *de rigueur*, and this is not to suggest that the work is haphazard, sloppy, or cavalier, although I suspect that it can appear to the more traditional metalsmith to be all three. Her work is more akin to drawing, and she does not let process interfere with urgency. Nevertheless, in Eichenberg's work, the rules of making that apply to craft traditions are most often intentionally disregarded, without apology, and one must reckon with the impressive self-confidence of a methodology that is direct, evidentiary, poetic, and both personal yet intentionally ambiguous. She does not hide, but she also does not give it away.

Eichenberg's oeuvre is comprised of a dozen or so titled bodies of work, each accompanied by a modest but handsome catalog, mostly produced by Galerie Louise Smit in Amsterdam. Several of the catalogs contain brief essays that are elegantly and lovingly written by Eichenberg's partner Renee Hoogland, an accomplished feminist literary critic. Anyway, the groups of work follow a clear continuum that begins with her

earlysolipsistic "body part" pieces--knitted breasts, hearts, and gastrointestinal parts-- and moves on to worksthat explore notions of warmth, family, wounding, healing, home and homeland, and then, after a *tabula rasa* in **Weiss** (White), branch out (literally) to issues of community, culturalvoyeurism, and displacement, ending in her most recent group of works titled **Tenement/Timelines**. She has moved from the inner to theouter. The titles of other collections, such as **Heimat** (Homeland), **Warmte** (Warm or Warmth); **Wolle** (Wool), **Bombay Rubber/Delhi Thoughts**, and **Shurfen** (To Dig or Mine) reveal the evocative mission of her work and the emphasis on an *a posteriori*, or experiential, accumulation. The approach is vaguely reminiscent of the early works of JosephBeuys, nakedly biographical yet devoid of narrative. I am reminded once again of the all seeing non-auratic lens of the camera, able to zoom in and out, to magnify and sharpen focus, to isolate and mete out meaning, to penetrate reality like a surgeon. The resonance of the work is in its ability to withhold just enough while appearing effortless.

An interesting aspect of Iris Eichenberg's work is her non-hierarchical relationship to materials and time. Her works are comprised of an array of the precious and mundane--bone, silver, fabric, tree branches, linen gauze, rubber hosing and vintage hot-water bottles, knitted wool, porcelain, leather, bits of this or that - a button, a garter belt clip, a who-knows-what it is--and her reverence (or lack thereof) for her materials seems unfailingly democratic. The way she snips a hand outline from leather, or bends a silver wire into a hook, or wraps gauze around the tip of a white porcelain branch or rhizome, is astounding in its consistency. There is no apparent hesitation, no blending to hide connections and transitions, no fussiness, no extra emphasis on the handwrought silver parts. Each element is charged with its own baggage of memory-data, which she neither tries to erase nor enhance. There is only a tangential relationship between parts. Her interest in evidence is obvious but, whether genuine or fabricated, it is given the same phenomenological weight. Often the fragments of this or that-- bone, mirror, metal, fabric--are marked by the artist with scratching, sgraffito, stitching, writing, or molding (as in the carved cast chicken hearts), but her mark blends almost flawlessly with those left by the hands of time. In fact, there seems to be no time encased in the works, they are but a mere breath.

She is a creator of an artifice of reality that is more real than reality itself. It is an examined, edited, and reassembled reality, and one that owes at least some debt to the age of mechanical reproduction.

I confess at this point that I am not going to talk about individual pieces of Iris Eichenberg, although I will be grateful for the images that will accompany this text. You, reader, will have to do some work and put the two halves together. If you are looking in Eichenberg's work for specific meaning and symbology, or a well-defined narrative that is directly translatable into linguistic terms, I cannot accommodate. What I can do is circle around like a hawk, hoping to get closer still and provide some meaningful context through which to view the work as through layers of increasingly transparent gauze. This is difficult work, and it is work that

conveys meaning through the senses, and any attempt to academicize it any further than I already am would amount to butchering. But, still, I have more yet to say.

Although the Netherlands has been, for the last half century, the center of a movement in jewelry and body adornment that has pioneered the exploration of alternative materials and the breaking of social conventions, and it would be easy to make an assessment of Iris Eichenberg's work that seems to fit a Dutch model of material experimentation, social progressiveness/feminism, and an exploration of the body as political instrument, I am not going to do that. Holland is not, for me, where her more significant affinity lies. Eichenberg is, as I've already mentioned, a romantic, and her work falls into a tradition of post-war German work that was forced, after the complete corruption of Romanticism by the Nazis, to find a new way of expressing that dark, intensely rich, and sensually-based search for individuation that is at the heart of German Romanticism. But the residual effects of fascism produced a culture suspicious of sentimentality, epic masterpieces, and grand themes. Hence, Joseph Beuys' quote in the title of my essay, a proclamation he would often make at the start of lectures late in his career, could as easily be uttered by Iris Eichenberg. Her work also began with the wound. Hers is an aesthetic that descends from Beuys, himself, but also from Georg Baselitz, Reinhard Mucha, Meret Oppenheim, Eva Hesse, and an entire generation of non-German Fluxus and Arte Povera artists—Robert Filliou, Jannis Kounellis, et al—whose German-influenced work has entertained notions of the frozen moment in time utilizing a vocabulary of supercharged materiality capable of producing poignancy. Not surprising, of course, that the two most important places that this type of work emerged in is in Germany and Italy—both countries in which fascism, and its after-effects, became an integral part of cultural identity.

Early works by Iris Eichenberg, from her graduation exhibition at the Rietveld, and the first years afterwards, included knitted wool tube-like forms suggesting blood vessels, organs and human orifices which later developed into sagging empty pink knitted breasts and sanguine hearts, some suspended from cut branches sealed with wax. These pieces, some of which have de-sexualized renditions of vaginas, clitorises, and nipples, are more comforting than shocking, more accessible than clinical, and present an image of femininity that is both domestic (knitting, of course) and mundanely functional, a body meant to create, feed, nourish and nurture. She also executed an eccentric collection of knitted wool garments that are enveloping anthropomorphized objects such as tables and chairs. All point to a body trying to understand itself in and through the world. But they are also a body in pain, and the image of propagation as suggested in the sealed branch is apparently the wound from which begins Eichenberg's multi-year process of self-identification.

Two bodies of work appeared in rapid succession, *Bombay Rubber/Delhi*

Thoughts (2000) and **Sunen** (2002), In **BombayRubber/Delhi Thoughts**, which one can deduce is produced from artifacts collected in India, Eichenberg creates figurative constructions from out-of-date medical paraphernalia—orange rubber hosing, hot water bottles and atomizer bulbs, glass labware, bits of ginseng, felt and fabric. Hands, legs, and body parts figure prominently, as do references to femininity—rubber nipples, a silver garter belt clip. These works are unexpectedly humorous and silly, suggesting a child-like fascination with rather sinister suspicious devices. They are, like the earlier furniture swathed in knitted wool, provocative attempts at making a bodily connection with the alien world that services that body. **Sunen** (which is basically untranslatable, although it refers to the German words for both kiss and karma, according to Eichenberg) is an intriguing collection that features brooches coupled with rear and side view mirrors from cars. Mirrors show up again in more recent pieces of Eichenberg's, in which dark ominous figures are produced by scratching through the metallic surface on the back, suggesting a concept of afterimage, doppelganger, or alter ego. In **Sunen**, stacks of fabric are stitched loosely together to create the brooches, some with stitched and pierced surfaces creating drawing-like marks, others covered with bits of shell or what appear to be mangled inexpensive rings. The brooches are reflected in the mirrors, which are partially obstructed by etched or sandblasted hieroglyphics. The double entendre of the title suggests the relativity of truth, the impossibility of knowing, the temporality of perception. One can only guess, and, perhaps, that's the point.

In 2004, Eichenberg produced **Heimat** (Homeland), immediately followed by **Weiss** (White, 2005), a cathartic monochrome baptism manifested in all white works of porcelain and linen gauze and white silver. The rich pieces in **Heimat** recall her bucolic childhood in the German countryside—animal skin and fur, bone and horn, twigs and the timber of farmhouses and tables, desiccated frogs, stitching on the run, mending and making do. It is a world ripe with smells and hard work, the unsparing cycles of life and death, the simple and the necessary. The works in this group suggest a coming together, a resolution, and as such they are deeply affecting. It is not surprising that they were followed by a collection in which the wound has become sanitized and

purified.

The most recent body of work (2007) by Eichenberg, **Tenement/Timelines**, is a heartfelt response to the early to mid twentieth century artifacts stored in the vaults of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York. These artifacts are testament to the rich, bustling immigrant culture that flourished on streets named Delancey and Essex and Orchard in the years preceding WWI until after the Second World War. They bear witness to a ragtag neighborhood of clotheslines and cramped quarters; sweat shops and cottage industries, makeshift lives rife with the pungent aromas of transplanted traditions and reconstituted rites. And, of course, to a

culture of hope mingled with the mourning and loss for those left behind.

Eichenberg's voyeuristic interest in these relics is quite a departure from the familial ones she interprets for *Heimat*, which is rooted in a world she knows experientially from childhood, and one can only assume that they hold interest to her process of finding a way to be in the world during her own recent emigration and assimilation. They also represent a conceptually cumbersome object—meaning gleaned from an artifact in order to create another. Here I must confess an agging bias-- as the grandchild of an immigrant who landed at Ellis Island and set up shop as a tailor on the Lower East Side-- I am trying desperately to forgive and accept this apparent cultural opportunism. I keep remembering the famous line in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* when Binx, a thirty-year-old white Southern Baptist insurance salesman, says, "Lately I have become acutely aware of Jews. Every time I pass a Jew on the street, a Geiger counter in my head starts rattling away like a machine gun." He continues, "Jews are my first real clue...we share the same exile." Perhaps this romanticized notion of exile is related to the collective German emotional baggage that seeks to come to terms with a painful history that manifested itself on the other side of the Atlantic. As Joseph Beuys himself would have advocated, she looks it in the eye and, without sentimentality or self-pity, courageously allows herself to feel the wound. Can one possibly take issue with that?

Clumps of stacked leather or silver hands, hanging from rings like so many keys, figure prominently in this grouping, as do leather strapping, stitching, delicate leather roses as a milliner might create, lace, carved plastic and coral, and other indicators of the meager piecework livelihood of these immigrants. (Here again my own history intervenes—my grandfather used to make us winter coats with fur collars and matching muffs from the cut-offs of rich ladies' fur coats that he had altered). Almost all the works are intended to be worn in the manner of a chatelaine, large keyring, or tool belt—hooked on the belt or hanging from a button or pocket, suggesting a proletarian functionality and a badge of survival. Many of her works are inscribed with registration numbers of some sort—do they refer to the museum's cataloging system or perhaps the numbers identifying individuals as they came off the crowded boats into the new world? As with all of Eichenberg's works, the table is set with a careful, but seemingly random array of signifiers, suggesting the uncanny way necessity makes strange bedfellows. Gestures, all of them.

Although most of Iris Eichenberg's works are wearable jewelry, primarily brooches and necklaces, my inclination is to prefer to view the objects off the body and I find that the wearer's body is a mere distraction to the art object as body. Clinging to a contextual trope that they neither rely on nor actively critique, I find that their wearability represents redundancy. Surely the works speak eloquently about the body in a physical and metaphysical sense, but pinning one on a jacket seems to trivialize the point. If there's one thing all of us can understand and relate to quite readily, it's the body, and images of breasts, hands, hot-water bottles, enema syringe bulbs, bandaged limbs, et al are fairly easy to connect with on a visceral level. While visiting Cranbrook, I had the opportunity to

view some of Eichenberg's works at Paul Kotula's outstanding small gallery near Detroit, and to engage in some good-natured debate with him regarding the relevance and value of "wearing" Eichenberg's pieces. His insightful words in response to my concerns are worth noting:

Lisa, you discussed jewelry as ornament. I wonder, however, if one can consider jewelry in that same manner since the late 20th century. Much of the awareness of the body has been on alteration or augmentation. I'm talking the surgical (or self-imposed) work that emerged when the consciousness of the body became so skewed and less about the intimate reality of body than about the manufactured body. Iris' work explores this issue in many ways.

Iris' jewelry expands the physical body --- literally (hence your question of how one might actually wear it), but it does it within the awareness of our cultural body. She brings an unusual coupling of images, materials and processes to the surface - in a very direct way. That directness is foremost intimate. The sometimes frightening element of her work may be that she is reaffirming the beauty of the unaltered (or unmanufactured) - of the honesty of actions and materials (think craft). She then asks one to wear it! The wearer must believe in Iris' truths and not those of broader cultural and social spheres enough to feel comfortable to integrate her jewelry onto his or her body (to hold it close to oneself). If one only wants to experience it from afar - on the table - then one can only yearn for those sensibilities rather than participate in them.

Whether you choose to wear or simply look, touch and feel, the works speak in a coded language that you are not meant to fully understand and that may be indecipherable. You must, ultimately, trust or not trust, give in or not give in, and this is the transcendental challenge that Eichenberg presents. If your intellect is too big or heart too small, they will remain silent forever. Enter without expectations and the works begin to deliver. Stay still, for they may be gone tomorrow.

