

Rebecca Strzelec: The Age of Bears and Other Self- Portraits

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by Sharon Massey

An unlikely trio of technology, design, and wildlife science come together in "The Age of Bears and Other Self-Portraits," a solo exhibition by Rebecca Strzelec. The show features recent jewelry inspired by the artist's personal history and created using computer aided design and rapid prototyping processes.

While on a camping trip in Central Pennsylvania in 2005, Strzelec learned about Cementum Age Analysis, a technique for determining the

age of a bear based on layers of annual deposits on their teeth. She made a connection between these layered deposits and the layers created in her jewelry by means of the rapid-prototyping processes she employs. In the series that most closely associates age with teeth, "Self-Portrait Series: Neckpieces," Strzelec displays four school yearbook portraits of herself at various ages with neckpieces that feature oversized structurally-gridded teeth, ranging from baby teeth to permanent teeth. The clean, almost clinical display of the neckpieces is reminiscent of orthodontic headgear or other corrective devices most of us have endured for the sake of straight, white smiles.

Throughout the exhibition, layering plays an important role, especially in *Adam and Rebecca*, and *31 Neckpiece*, both of which utilize bands of color to represent various events in the artist's life, explained by a key displayed with each neckpiece. These colored stripes are in



Best of Series 1-5, 2009
fused deposition modeled ABS plastic

addition to the visible layers created by the rapid-prototyping process, which produces a sort of wood-grain pattern throughout the object. Upon close inspection, it becomes apparent that the neckpiece, links and all, was designed and created in one piece. Thankfully, the artist provides a DVD looping with a presentation on rapid-prototyping processes, helpful to novices with limited understanding of such technology.

But why jewelry? After spending time with this exhibition, I found myself questioning the use of rapid-prototyping technology in a field traditionally dominated by hammers, flames, and metal. One series of clip-on brooches, "Age of Bears 1-5," drew me in with their colorful, highly textured, vortical (vaginal?) forms, but I could not reconcile their function as brooches. The jewelry purpose feels forced, unnecessary even. And the same amazing technology that allowed the links of a neckpiece to be designed and created as one object leaves something to be desired when the brooch is reduced to something as basic as a mere clip-on. But why does any maker choose certain materials over others for the purpose of adornment?

This question aside, there are many facets of the exhibition worth noting. Perhaps the most successful series in the show, *Dead Cardinal for Dad 1, 2, 3*, features life-size, red birds,

hanging from leather straps, in various expressive poses. Here, the rapid-prototyping technology is used effectively in a complex, representational manner. Strzelec achieves similar complexity with *November 1985 Neckpieces: Hats and Vests*, in which photographs from her childhood are paired with neckpieces featuring the pictured toboggan hats and 1980s-style vests. The construction of the pom-poms on the hats is particularly intriguing, with zigzagging visible layers creating the intricate, fluffy form. It's an appropriate use of the technology resulting in a fun, highly personal series of pieces.

The self-portraits in this exhibition range from representational to intentionally vague, yet all have a highly personal feel. As a fellow maker, I was especially interested in the *Best of Series* brooches, which feature images of Strzelec's previous iconic works, such as the "Army Green Orchid Series," along with a new version of each piece. By referencing these past projects within the context of self-portraiture, Strzelec acknowledges the primary significance of creative work in her life. Placing one's art on an equal level to personal events is a bold statement, and one to which artists of all disciplines can surely relate.

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Dead Cardinal for Dad 1, 2, 3, 2008
ABS plastic, leather, mixed media

