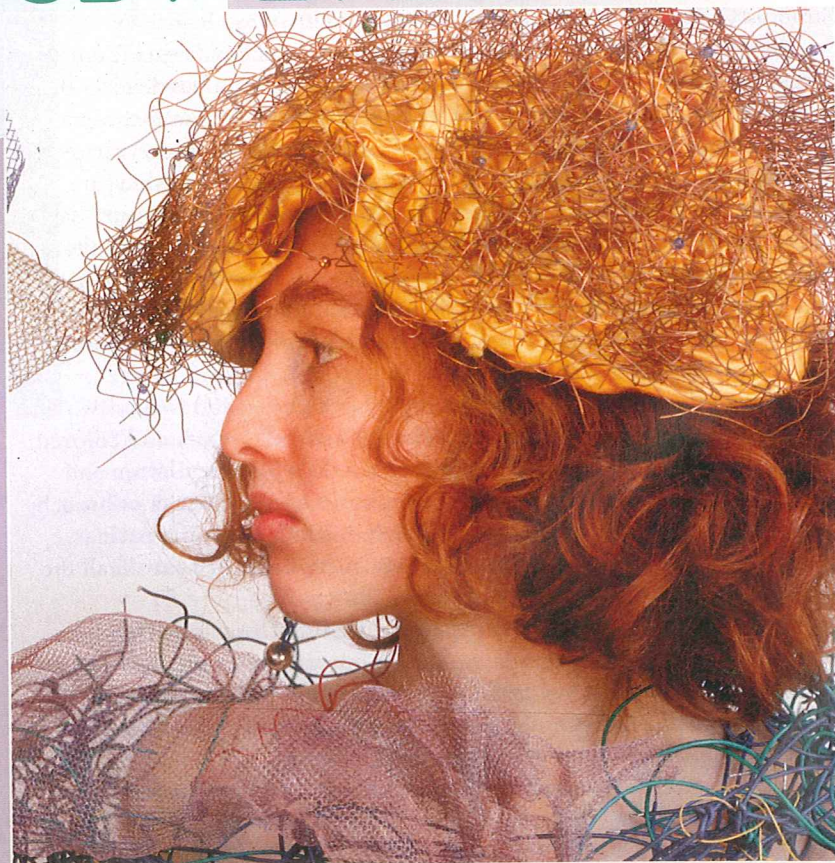


JUDY BALES

fiber arts



Above: HEADDRESS of wire, metal mesh and paint.

Right: HEADDRESS of mixed media.

A multi-dimensional Iowa artist, who creates sculpture for the body as well as more formal three-dimensional sculpture and public art, Judy Bales has a great love for everyday materials and, as she says, "their potential use to create objects that contain humor and life." She laughs when admitting that one of her great joys when traveling is dropping into local discount marts to track down the inexpensive little knots of colored plastic netting that she calls "bath scrubbers" and that most of us know as either tile cleaners or pot scrubbers. She has discovered that they come in different colors in different parts of the country.

Her latest body sculpture is the Eco-Couture Series, a collection of delightfully colorful headdresses suggesting the happy meeting of plumage from exotic birds and bouquets of extravagant hothouse flowers. In a couple of the headpieces, such as a tomato red creation that perches on the head off-kilter like a diminutive Leaning Tower of Pisa, there are also touches of the witty surrealism of Elsa Schiaparelli. Like most of the pieces in Eco-Couture, the tomato tower is a composition of nylon bath scrubbers and plastic rain capes worked onto a rigid wire mesh frame. In other pieces Bales also uses plastic shopping bags, Mylar and Christmas ornaments.

Just after receiving her undergraduate degree from the University of Georgia in the late 1970s, Bales

taught art to children in poor school districts where there was little money for art materials. To find classroom art materials, she foraged for cast-offs, such as aluminum screening, telephone wire and plastics. Her students loved working with them "and it was also a turning point in how I looked at art," says Bales. Returning to the University of Georgia a few years later to earn a Master of Fine Arts in fiber arts, Bales was increasingly drawn to non-traditional materials like wires that she found in hardware stores. Now, after decades as a practicing artist, she uses inexpensive, everyday materials not only for the beauty she coaxes out of such materials but also for philosophical reasons.

"There is so much waste in our society and so much consumption," states Bales, "and there is a lot of discussion about what is valuable and precious. But ultimately what makes something precious and beautiful is the consciousness of the person who makes the object and the consciousness of the person who views it. Disposable plastic bags or bath scrubbers have potentially the same possibility for beauty as fur and silk. It's all just matter, and nothing is better than something else."

Having grown up in a family where economic struggle was a way of life, and having chosen a life in art (her husband is also an artist who makes ceramic and jewelry art), Bales says she has always looked for ways to find beauty in inexpensive materials. And she believes it has not been hard. "I feel very fortunate because there is such a richness of experience in so much of what I see."

In recent years Bales has not only continued her larger three-dimensional sculpture, which she says is somewhat formal, but she has also been selected to participate in numerous public art projects. These works are enjoyable because they force her to use her left-brain, she says, and because she strongly believes in making art and good design available to everyone.

But her occasional sculptures for the body are pure joy. "Body art is not the dominant thing I do, but it is the thing I do with the greatest abandon," emphasizes Bales. "I am happy and free when I do this work and it happens in intervals. The Eco-Couture Series was created for an eco-fashion show at a local university to educate people about toxins in dyes and other issues."

Her inspiration comes from nature and the landscape, from "bird plumage, flowers, foliage and the way grass covers the earth. But I also love to look at historical and contemporary fashion, especially when it's outrageous. And I look at the relationship of the human figure to the landscape. Here in the Midwest, especially, the hills are very undulating and there's a definite relationship to the human figure."

Bales views her body projects as a wholly collaborative venture. She makes the headpieces; a friend makes dresses; then she finds "interesting, attractive young people to model. And then I take the photos. Through the consciousness of the young people wearing these pieces the work comes alive. So it's a combination of the sculpture pieces, the models and the photography. And of course in the end it also means that the person viewing the work has to have a consciousness about it. I think the idea about being conscious to art and beauty is the core of my work."

Author Robin Updike is a freelance author based in Seattle, Washington. She is also a continuing Contributor to Ornament.



HEADDRESS of wire, fabric and plastic rain capes.

Below: HEADDRESS of wire, plastic mesh, fabric and paint.

