

CHARMED, I'M SURE

Seven female artists were invited by art collector Liz Swig to create special charms for this one of a kind bracelet. Text by Anna Heyward

The wearing of charms on the wrist goes back to antiquity, when people carried talismans to repel evil and bring luck. The modern charm bracelet extends this impulse into autobiography, with the ornament serving as decoration but also as a way to mark the milestones of intimate and emotional life. Particularly among girls and young women, it acts as a kind of diary: a chain, usually a silver or gold link, becomes the vehicle for symbolic trinkets—charms—each for a special purpose. Given or acquired to mark a significant moment in life, new charms are added and removed, so that wearers can alter their charm bracelets to express mood and circumstance.

Liz Swig, founder of LizWorks studios, has worked with the New York jewelry-maker Ippolita to produce *Charmed*, a combination charm bracelet and work of contemporary art. To make it—in an edition of fifty, plus artists' proofs—Swig called on seven prominent women artists to create a charm, a small talisman reflecting both their personal history and their aesthetic vision. Each of the seven artists—Rachel Feinstein, Barbara Kruger, Wangechi Mutu, Shirin Neshat, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and Mickalene Thomas—designed a charm to hang with the others on an oversized Ippolita gold-link chain, the trinkets collectively telling a story of contemporary art. For Swig, the bracelet creates “a dialogue between the personal and professional.” Charms, she says, “are a form of communication,” a way for the wearer to communicate with the world: “The charm has been used by women to connect, share, and save memories from generation to generation. It is a form of love among women. This bracelet elevates a piece of jewelry to a piece of art.”

The Pictures Generation artist Laurie Simmons is celebrated for photographs, often made by posing dolls and figurines, that explore the social roles of women. Her charm is an old-fashioned camera box standing on a pair of female legs. Simmons remembers,

My mother wore a charm bracelet that told the story of her life. My father bought her a charm for every occasion—anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays—until the bracelet was filled. A bride and groom, a house, a car, a piano and three little ballet dancers representing me and my sisters... each had tiny little jewels or doors that opened to reveal little surprises. Twenty years ago I photographed my mother's charm bracelet with a macro lens so I could remember every detail. When I was asked to make a charm it wasn't a question of “What will I make?,” it was “Which charm shall I make?,” because I've thought about creating a charm bracelet for a very long time.

Shirin Neshat's charm, a hand, recalls the Middle Eastern hamsa or “hand of Fatima” amulet and refers to Neshat's artwork *Stories of Martyrdom*, from her *Woman of Allah* series (1995–97). “I've always related to jewelry as an art form that gives women a unique sense of style and identity,” says Neshat. “It's particularly meaningful to create a small charm that, in its modesty of scale, can be a fusion in between my artistic vision and my passion for jewelry.”

Barbara Kruger's works combine images from the mass media with sloganlike text to invoke familiar constructions of power and identity, consumerism and sexuality. Her charm riffs symbolically on notions of value and desire: on the front of a disk engraved with the words “liberty” and “e pluribus unum,” like a U.S. penny, and embossed with a presidential pair of heads, the

phrase “Money can buy you Love” is emblazoned in Kruger's signature font; the back of the disk reads “charisma is the perfume of your gods.” “My charm plays with the ideas of desire, charisma, and value,” Kruger says. “It's ‘on the money’ and attached to you.”

Wangechi Mutu's art incorporates performance, collage, painting, video, and sculpture to plumb layers of identity. She has created an ornament shaped like a traditional cameo, in pastel hues. The work externalizes a feeling of doubleness, with an illustrated collage of a feminine-looking bust, eyes, mouth, and facial features exploding to both the left and the right. Mutu explains, “I am aware of the complexity of being an immigrant—albeit one with visibility and voice. ‘Pretty double headed’ were the words I used to describe that feeling of being from two places, two mindsets, and two worlds all in one. It's a privilege with a price to pay.”

Cindy Sherman's photographs of herself, costumed and made up in various roles, subvert the stereotypes of women found in films, magazines, television, and the culture at large. Her charm refers to another traditionally feminine form of jewelry, the portrait locket: a solid golden egg, it opens to reveal two contrasting self-portraits. For Sherman there's something so comforting about collecting freshly laid eggs, each one slightly different yet sublime, to feel the weight and warmth of it in your hand. I'm amazed how anything lays an egg once in a while, much less daily. What a relief it must be when it's popped out! And then we get to eat it! Unless it's a golden egg. Then you can crack it open to look inside. And wear it around your wrist on a bracelet, a symbol of fertility and femininity—and now art.

The pop-cultural references in Mickalene Thomas's work touch on complex notions of gender and race and challenge common definitions of beauty. The charm she created, a pair of larger-than-life, jewel-encrusted blue lips, signifies sensual femininity, which she says she wanted to “gift... to the world.”

Whimsical and fantastical, Rachel Feinstein's charm, like her sculpture, draws on the iconography of the Baroque and Rococo periods of European culture, intentionally overplaying its search for sophistication. Feinstein remarks,

I've always loved the sentimentality and femininity of wearing a charm bracelet. My own mother and grandmothers did not wear jewelry and I don't wear jewelry every day but somehow I became aware of charm bracelets as a young girl just like my own young daughter recently has. Flora wanted to go shopping for her seventh birthday in April and chose a plastic rainbow-colored charm bracelet where one can choose different cute and girly charms like an ice cream cone, Dorothy's red shiny shoe, et cetera. It instantly brought me back to my own childhood. And strangely within the month Liz approached me about her *Charmed* project.

The charm bracelet honors the intimacy and narrative qualities of the work of these seven artists. A story as much as an ornament, *Charmed* is personal history become symbol. “To charm” is also to attract, and one of the characteristics of the charm bracelet, Swig says, is “the sound it makes,” a subtle but unapologetic jingling and tintinnabulation as the charms jostle and knock, intermingling on the wrist with the wearer's motion as she moves through life.



Clockwise (center bracelet):
Laurie Simmons
Wangechi Mutu
Mickalene Thomas
Rachel Feinstein
Cindy Sherman
Barbara Kruger
Shirin Neshat