

Memory often reemerges to secure important events in time. However, I don't recall the first time I saw Norwegian artist Liv Blåvarp's work. It may have been on one of my frequent visits to Norway working with artists like Tone Vigeland, or perhaps through publications that colleagues have shared with me or that I have acquired during my travels. What I do know is that I was immediately drawn to her work, and I eventually sought her out to begin educating myself and other like-minded colleagues passionate about unconventional jewelry.

Since she first emerged in the mid-1980s, Blåvarp has distinguished herself by making wearable works of increasing complexity primarily in wood, occasionally combined with other organic materials such as whale teeth or coral. Whether polychromed in paint, dyes, gold leaf, or even all three, her objects—especially her collars or neckpieces—are remarkable for their simultaneous and occasionally contradictory conditions of delicacy, tensile strength, organic form, and architectonic structure. She has said of her work, "It's largely about developing sculptural form. . . . But you could also say [that] the recurring theme in my artistic practice is to create structures that seem alive."<sup>i</sup> Indeed, her works emulate characteristics of exotic land-based or deep-sea life, whether vertebrate or vegetal, a quality that becomes more prominent when her objects move in tempo with the body.

Thanks to a research grant from Arts Council Norway in 2003, my understanding of Scandinavian history and culture was enriched through visits to museum collections, commercial galleries, and studios of artists such as Sigurd Bronger and Tone Vigeland in Oslo, with whom I already had a working relationship. It was then that I took the train from Oslo along the Skagerrak strait to the village of Skreia, where I finally met Blåvarp and her husband, Tore Gimel. Entering the studio where Tore worked with his father (who passed away later that year), I was greeted with the rich and compelling aroma of turned wood shavings and oranges. **[[In Skreia??]]**, wood that had survived for thousands of years defying time brought together artists and village craftsmen, whose **[[wooden?]]** cake carriers held Blåvarp's homemade carrot cake. **[[Not sure what you are saying in the previous sentence. Do the edits make sense?]]** The experience **[[what**

**experience? your travel?]]** underscored the passion for wood evident in Norwegian culture for centuries. The smell of wooden stave churches (Old Norse) preserved with tar is still strong in my memory.

It was then that I understood the deeper indigenous roots of Blåvarp's endeavor. When I was in Oslo at that time, I visited the Viking Ship Museum to see the meticulously restored Gokstad ship, which had been discovered in 1879 by two young boys digging around a monumental burial mound on Gokstad Farm in Sandefjord, Norway. As I moved around looking up the ship's hull, I recognized a correspondence between its undulating, uniform structure and a similar aesthetic found in Blåvarp's carved wooden-ribbed collars. Of course there are vast differences in scale, use, and construction, but whether by intent or by design, Blåvarp's art resonates with a Nordic aesthetic that is at once contemporary and historical.

Wood, whether in architecture, furniture, or ornament, has the capacity to capture the competing qualities described above in a way that has always seduced me. Whether one is referring to American woodworkers like Wharton Esherick and Daniel Jackson, sculptors like Martin Puryear (who studied woodworking with James Krenov at Stockholm's Royal Academy of Fine Arts), or jewelry artists like Sharon Church, Dorothea Prühl, Terhi Tolvanen, among many others internationally, the material lends itself to a unique fluidity and anthropomorphic quality teased out through meticulous carving, warping, blending of different types of wood, and dyeing or other forms of coloration. It is both light absorptive and reflective, depending upon how it is finished, which reinforces that sense of liveliness that Blåvarp refers to as a goal.

It is no accident that she works in wood; some might say it was predestined. She was raised in her father and grandfather's carpentry workshop, and after a brief foray into metalwork, she settled on the familiar. By the time she met her husband in 1989, she had already established herself in the medium, but they formed a powerful partnership, as he too is a woodworker. Their mutual interest in issues involving wood as an artistic medium has led to an enrichment of both of their practices. In a recent e-mail to me, she wrote, "I often get the question, 'Where do

you get all of this exotic wood?' ... [T]he answer to this: we buy wood in Hamburg. We go there to view the assortment of woods from the whole world and buy what we need and what we think can be turned into something exciting. This is an example of how we support each other professionally. I would never drive a car down to Hamburg, but Tore is absolutely fearless in this respect, and without these tours, there would be less variety of woods to use.”<sup>ii</sup>

Indeed, it is not only Blåvarp’s keen sensibility for combining different types of wood and organic matter that contributes to their exotic aura but her eye for alternately vibrant and muted patinas and forms. Aside from their Nordic heritage, they conjure up Oceanic, African, and South American ideas of ritual and spirituality. If we consider the trajectory of her development since the mid-1980s, this becomes immediately evident and also shows a broadening of approaches to form, fabrication, and coloration. By way of example, consider *Necklace* from 1984 (Collection EPCOT Center, Florida), which consists of laminated birch and mahogany. In it one finds the beginnings of undulating form and the rhythm resulting from two types of wood whose contrast of hues creates a fluid linearity. The desire to move away from the rigidity of a piece like this led to a gradual experimentation with opening up and suggesting the individuation of each element to create a whole, such as her 1989 *Necklace* (West Norway Museum of Applied Art, Norway) made with ebony, amarant (coral), and dyed holly, which looks like a kind of nest but is also embellished with fish forms at its rim. By 1991, her works were becoming more complex, both materially and figuratively. Blåvarp’s *Bird (Necklace)* (National Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, Oslo) is crafted from dyed bird’s-eye maple, Taranta, **[[what is Taranta? I can’t find a definition]]** and whale tooth. It is one of her most rhetorical works made up to that point, successfully integrating different mediums and elements of different scale and texture, and patinated in a way that both occludes and enriches the natural grains of the wood. It also reflects the increasing importance of drawing in her work, which began to move from sketch to actual plan. She later remarked, “I wanted to test the results of thinking out forms in advance. And without doubt my forms have become tighter.”<sup>iii</sup>

However, the work was still not achieving the precise results she sought. “I was trying to crack a very hard nut. I wanted to move away from the laminated works and especially the large collars, which I felt were too stiff. They were simply uncomfortable to wear.”<sup>iv</sup> A breakthrough can be found in her *Necklace* (Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum), made in the same year as *Bird*, but now composed of individual pieces reconnected in such a way as to allow not only the fabrication of an infinitely more complex animation of form but one that is more responsive to the body’s movement and thus more comfortable to wear. It is also exemplary of a hooking system she developed that became a feature of her neckpieces for a time.

Freed from the constraints of “solid” collars, her art has continued to evolve in a manner that explores different forms and references, like baroque collars, a continuing search for unique combinations of materials that achieve maximum sculptural energy; different methods of clasping, sometimes disguising them altogether; and the breakdown of hierarchy between inside and outside elements in her neckpieces. “It was like a form within a form. I first developed two separate forms then integrated them into one form. I colored them differently to distinguish them from each other.”<sup>v</sup> The discursive properties of flow have become increasingly integral in her work, with greater animation of form and undulating curvilinearity. Whether tending toward the more figurative, grotesque, or abstract, Blåvarp reminds us that sculpture and jewelry are things born from life and, as such, continue to live and evolve through the process of aging and transference of different configurations as they pass from wearer to wearer.

—Helen Drutt English in collaboration with Matthew Drutt

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Reinhold Ziegler, “Liv Blåvarp: Touch Wood,” *Norwegian Crafts*, October 20, 2014, <http://risekult.com/design/liv-blavarp-touch-wood>

<sup>ii</sup> E-mail from Liv Blåvarp to Helen Williams Drutt, January 27, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> See note i.

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<sup>v</sup> See note i.