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Feminine Charms

JEWELLERY

Art-world patron Liz Swig has brought together seven female artists to create a bracelet that's more a work of art than a piece of jewellery

Words Sarah Royce-Greensill

Engaging though Liz Swig may be, during conversation your gaze is still drawn to her right wrist, specifically the chunky mélange of 18-carat gold and multicoloured charms that jangle from it with every gesture. 'Nobody looks me in the eye any more,' she laughs. 'They're always distracted by the bracelet.'

The bracelet is what the New Yorker is in the country during Frieze London art fair to showcase. 'I'm travelling with my art collection,' she says, because as well as being a remarkably eye-catching piece of jewellery, the charm bracelet is first and foremost a piece of art – or, more accurately, seven.

Entitled 'Charmed', the bracelet is the latest project from LizWorks, the company Swig founded in 2014 as a platform for creative partnerships between artists and brands. The bracelet is a collaboration between Swig and

seven female artists: Shirin Neshat, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Rachel Feinstein, Mickalene Thomas and Wangechi Mutu, each of whom designed one of the charms dangling from Swig's wrist, all brought to life in precious materials by Italian jewellery brand Ippolita.

Created as a limited edition of 50, plus a one-off charity edition that will be auctioned in aid of Two by Two for AIDS and Art (a charity that raises money for amFAR and the Dallas Museum of Art), the bracelet is 'a celebration of the charm, what it means to women and a celebration of femaleness itself'.

'I think the poignancy of charms, the history of using them to mark life's milestones and passing them down through generations, has been forgotten,' says Swig, who is a lifelong art collector and patron of the arts, as well as a

former trustee for New York's Whitney Museum and a current board member of the American Friends of the Israel Museum. 'I wanted to bring a bunch of artists together to acknowledge the charm again, to take that tradition and contemporise it.'

Swig settled on an all-female 'wish-list' of seven artists (a number also imbued with meaning, from the seven-day week to the seven deadly sins), 'because it's really about what the charm bracelet means for women'. The project's launch coincides with a time when powerful women are being championed within and outside the art world. 'Whether it's politics or art, there's a significant focus on women globally, right now,' she says. 'And there's a real intense, intelligent femininity to this project.'

Every artist on the hit list was instantly on board, something Swig puts down to the nostalgic allure of a charm bracelet. 'As soon as the word "charm" came out of my mouth it was like, "let's do it!"; she recalls. 'There's something about the idea of a charm that struck a chord. It sparked creative and female and artistic interests instantly.'

It's an indicator of how enthused the artists were by the concept that it took just six months to come to fruition, from Swig's first meeting to



WANGECHI MUTU

Nairobi-born 'Afrofuturist' considered to be one of the most important contemporary African artists, Mutu's multi-disciplinary work focuses on rewriting the rules of identity.

CHARM printed resin portrait of a woman on a disc of 18-carat green gold, overlaid with a distorting dome of faceted rock crystal.

SHE SAYS '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

American photographer and filmmaker, renowned for appearing as different characters across sequences of conceptual portraits.

CHARM 18-carat green gold egg, which opens to reveal two never-before-seen portraits of the artist.

SHE SAYS 'I'm amazed how anything lays an egg at all, 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.'



trying on the finished first edition. Given how utterly diverse each charm is, they sit together as a coherent, complementary whole, despite each one being designed in isolation.

'No one knew what anyone else was doing, but the artists all know and like each other. They have a dialogue in their own right irrespective of this, so I knew the charms would speak well to each other,' says Swig, who was a close friend of Simmons, Sherman, Kruger and Feinstein before the project, and who met Neshat, Thomas and Mutu while working on it. 'It's the first time their work has been shown together; on every level it's a first.'

Each artist had free rein, the only stipulations being the size - 'we needed to hit that spot between being a significant, intelligent artwork and still being wearable' - and the fact that each piece alluded to their work as an artist, while incorporating a personal element.

So Sherman's charm reflects her fascination with eggs, popping open to reveal never-before-seen portraits. Simmons' mirrors her Jimmy the Camera walking objects, while also referencing the photographs she'd taken of her mother's own charm bracelet 20 years ago. Neshat's palm is engraved with a script from her Stories of Martyrdom artwork; Kruger's charm features a typically assertive slogan stamped across a coin; and Feinstein's comprises a hand-painted enamel portrait of an 18th-century woman, dotted with diamonds. Thomas called upon a pair of lips from her portraits of African-American women, rendering them in tactile blue sapphires, while a layer of faceted rock crystal distorts Mutu's resin portrait: a nod to the notion of obscured identity as a woman of dual nationality.

'Artists are my pure joy, love and fascination - to think that these seven women came together and made this with me, so seamlessly and quickly, is unbelievable,' says Swig. 'Each charm feels amazing in your hand, and as a whole it is fantastic to wear. It's a good weight, it makes a great noise, but it has an extra energy that comes from the power of women. It's intelligent, it's whimsical, it's unique... anybody who has put it on doesn't want to take it off. I feel very lucky. I feel charmed!' ■ lizworks.biz



SHIRIN NESHAT
Iranian-born, New York-based visual artist named the *Huffington Post's* 'Artist of the Decade', Neshat's work explores the identity of women in Islamic societies.

CHARM 18-carat green gold and rock crystal palm with a bracelet of emeralds and an engraving from her *Stories of Martyrdom* artwork on the palm.

SHE SAYS 'I've always related to jewellery as an art form that gives women a unique sense of style and identity. I have never indulged in creating a piece of jewellery myself. It's particularly meaningful to create a small charm that in its modesty of scale can be a fusion of my artistic vision and my passion for jewellery.'



RACHEL FEINSTEIN
New York-based artist and sculptor whose work includes fantastical wood sculptures and oil-on-glass portraits of elderly women inspired by Miss Havisham.

CHARM 18-carat white gold pebble featuring a hand-painted enamel portrait of a lady wearing an ornate costume and wig, dotted with diamonds.

SHE SAYS 'I've always loved the sentimentality and femininity of wearing a charm bracelet. I became aware of them as a young girl just like my own daughter recently has. Flora wanted to go shopping for her seventh birthday in April and chose a plastic rainbow-coloured charm bracelet. It instantly took me back to my own childhood; strangely within the month Liz approached me about her Charmed project.'



MICKALENE THOMAS
The artist behind the first individual portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama, Thomas is known for her colourful, rhinestone-studded depictions of African-American women, often in provocative poses.

CHARM 18-carat green gold lips with multi-coloured blue sapphires.

SHE SAYS 'When Liz contacted me to participate, I was watching the TV show *Charmed*. It was serendipitous that she wanted to talk about the Charmed bracelet. The lips and eyes in my paintings are always encrusted seductively with rhinestones. The lips signify the luscious aspects of a beautiful woman. I wanted to gift that to the world.'

'We needed to hit that spot between being a significant, intelligent artwork and still being wearable'



BARBARA KRUGER
American conceptual artist who uses bold, red-and-white slogans alongside appropriated images to address themes of gender and identity.

CHARM: 18-carat white gold coin, ringed with red enamel and emblazoned with 'Money can buy you love' on the front and 'Charisma is the perfume of your gods' on the rear in place of a signature.

SHE SAYS: 'My charm plays with the ideas of desire, charisma, and value. It's "on the money" and attached to you.'



LAURIE SIMMONS
Part of the 'Pictures Generation', Simmons is known for photographing dolls, dummies and objects on legs to play out domestic scenes.

CHARM: 18-carat green gold interpretation of 'Jimmy the Camera' with slender legs, a diamond in the lens and sapphire on the flash.

SHE SAYS: 'My mother wore a charm bracelet that told the story of her life. Twenty years ago I photographed my mother's bracelet with a macro lens so I could remember every detail. I've thought about creating a charm bracelet for a very long time.'

Art patron Liz Swig, left, wears the 'Charmed' bracelet, created as a collaborator with seven different female artists