



SONDI'S STUDIO

'You've got to have heart....'

A visit to Sondi's Studio

Enter and it is the long narrow timber table that first catches the eye – worn, with not exactly smooth edges, a piece out here and there. How many does it seat? – a dozen people, twenty? It might have been a work table – you picture the workers busily making together, chatting away. There's a bench like a pew along one side - what might be called 'the viewing side'.

On entering we remove our shoes – ostensibly to safeguard the pale varnished timber floor. Its light polished expanse creates the open space that sets off the minimalist furnishings placed around the walls. This ritual - removing one's footwear - is also a reminder that you are entering a separate place. No matter how many times the ritual is repeated, it nevertheless makes that separation remarkable. Initiated for practical purposes, it also reflects the philosophy underpinning the building of this unusual dwelling in this particular place.

We slip or perhaps slide, across the room and down to the long table. From there, through floor to ceiling glass windows, our eyes continue, out and along a sandy track between shrubby bush and gum trees

This page:

Open heart brooch, Sterling silver oxidised,
24 ct gold, bi-metal, constructed

Opposite::

Shades of Deco earrings and pendant, Sterling
silver oxidised, 24 ct gold bi-metal, hollow, 'Poetic
Licence' at Lost Bear Gallery (Collection Shirley Plowright);
Brooch, oxidised silver & 24 ct bi-metal, hollow construction

until it simply disappears. To the right there opens out a deep tree-lined valley of greens and greys. On the far horizon rise the distinctive ochres and blacks of the sandstone escarpment which dramatically reflects red and gold in the late afternoon sun - geological evidence that here we are not on 'mountains' at all, but on a massive dissected sandstone plateau.

This place is magical and to have created a workplace exactly here – what it is and where it is - is to achieve the stuff of dreams. The sandy path that we see from the viewing table, which appears to emanate from beneath the house, is in fact a walking track formerly used as a local shortcut.

The house is rendered in shades of aubergine, pale and dark, and there are the greeny grey colours of the bush. A bumpy dirt track leads in, there are no made gardens, and a freestanding studio in the same style overlooks valley and escarpment - views to uplift the artisan's spirit. There are other features which give this place its environmental credibility – solar panels, a mycrophite system to filter grey water and a composting toilet. And by the way, the bumps (swales) of the dirt track are designed to permit water run-off.

There is birdsong today and a crescendo of cicadas - a bumper year for them - and the warm perfumes of spring.

I began by describing the table, the viewing place but also the gathering place: for sharing food and wine, stories and heart to hearts. The scene over the years of so many discussions and meetings: countering some proposed new development (ever protective of this

Story Carolynne Skinner

special environment), watchful for the independence and integrity of an important public gallery, starting an arts organisation, planning group exhibitions with other artists, and never forgetting to celebrate International Women's Day or the many birthdays of many friends ... There may be music and singing and clinking glasses, and when dusk falls, flickering lights in the trees outside.

And there may be other days and nights of blustery winds, trees thrashing about and branches flying; or days and days of smoke and haze and the sound of overflying helicopters or the whine of sirens carrying from the nearby highway.

As one gets older, is it even possible to separate one's environment from who one is? A lifetime of things collected and loved and experiences and friends.

Sondi has lived in these mountains for forty years, over half of that time in this house built with her ex husband by just two builder-carpenters. Of European origin born in the United States, she is inspired by her environment, her community of jewellers, her students and other artisans.

She describes her interests broadly as architecture and the decorative arts, with influences coming from such timeless designers and makers as Lalique, Tiffany and Georg Jensen. Her Le Corbusier chair is angled so that she looks out to the bush and the escarpment;

Over my career as a contemporary jeweller my focus has changed. Commissions are the pinnacle of communication between a maker and a client: to hear what they would like to wear and make it just for them. Frustration in shopping—seeing mostly manufactured replicas of available designs—is what usually brings them to my studio. I find it extremely satisfying when a commission is completed.

the 1940s lounge chairs sit in a companionable cluster with piles of magazines and books close at hand.

Sculpture, original artworks and prints collected mostly in the 1990s are by wellknown local and Sydney artists, many of them friends—Kerry Johns, Venita Salnajs, Seraphina Martin, John Caldwell... She has commissioned some works and swapped for others.

Sondi's distinctive jewellery designs are widely desired and worn by a large personal following. She is a metalsmith who exclusively handmakes jewellery and wearable objects, combining the unique qualities of metals with the skills of the jeweller which she has acquired through study, practice, experimentation and





Photo Jacqui Dean

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I cannot dismiss the fact that such a peaceful and regenerative atmosphere influences my designs. My new work has become less graphic, more abstract in the surface of the bi-metal I create. The complex hollow structures I make are becoming more open also. Being a more mature practitioner has relaxed and freed me in many ways.

learning from her peers. She has exhibited widely in group shows and occasionally in solo shows and was an important jeweller selling through the renowned Maker's Mark retail outlets.

Mokumé gane is one of her favoured techniques. This is a Japanese metalworking procedure which produces a mixed-metal laminate with distinctive layered patterns, as well as that laminate itself. Mokumé gane translates as wood grain metal or wood eye metal and describes the way metal takes on the appearance of natural wood grain. Several layers of differently coloured precious metals (commonly silver and gold alloys as well as alloys of copper) are fused together to form a sandwich of alloys called a billet. The billet is then manipulated in such a way that a pattern resembling wood grain emerges over its surface.

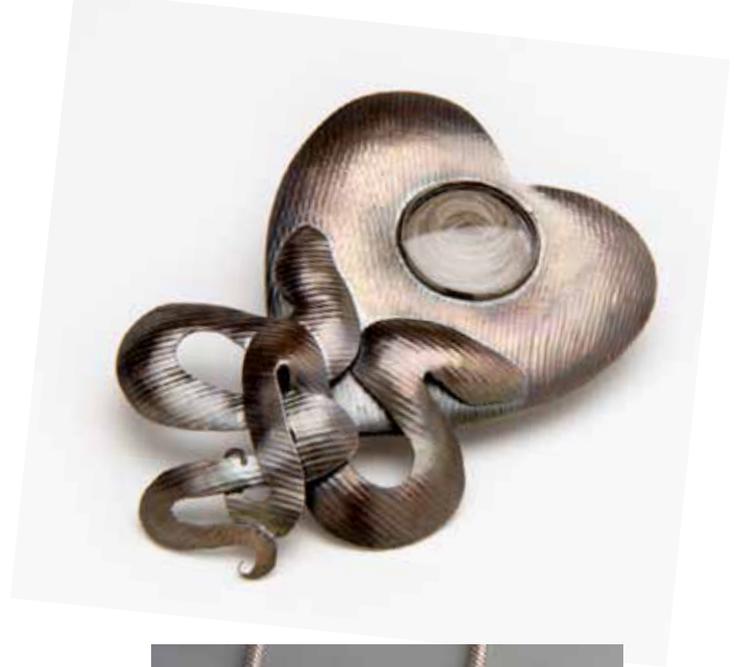
This technique was first developed for the production of decorative sword fittings but today is used predominantly for jewellery and holloware.

Sondi works most days from her studio, making for herself and working on commissions, mentoring others and teaching. Her wedding ring workshops which have been running for many years have been a source of particular enjoyment, for herself and those taking part. Sondi's passions are people and art and the lifestyle she has built around this environment, her workshop and her friendships.

Carolynne Skinner



Mentoring and teaching students, one of my biggest joys. Years ago I was invited to Enmore Design Centre to teach a particular skill. I had no idea that I was a teacher and in fact that I was pretty good! Sharing is one of the most fulfilling of human activities and I felt the need to continue. Since then I have opened my studio for special one- and two-day workshops. I built a classroom and have had many students over the years. I am extremely proud of those receptive students with whom I share my skills. I have even taken on a long term protégé and that has been a fulfilling journey.



Opposite page:

Top left: Brooch, Mokumé gane, Sterling silver and Shibuichi 25%, with diamonds ,hollow construction.

'What does your jewellery mean to me: when I wear it? I always remember that it has touched your hands to make a beautiful piece, and when you aren't able to make me jewellery anymore, or when you are gone, the jewellery will act like a memory of you.' Sascha Stancourt, aged 12

Top right: Amber, Sterling silver and 24 ct bi-metal with mosquito.

Centre left: From Heart Felt Exhibition: Bi-metal pendant, Sterling silver and shakudo 4%, hollow construction with South Sea pearl.

Centre: Cellist Rachel Scott with Sterling silver pendant on amber.

Centre right: My Mum Nancy the Scrabble Queen:

'I have a unique, meaningful and treasured memorial brooch that Sondi created for me. I can feel it is made with love.' Brad Young. Sterling silver oxidised and 24 ct gold, bi-metal with Scrabble tile.

Bottom left: Clip-on earrings, Sterling silver oxidised, 24 ct gold, black diamonds, bi-metal, hollow construction.

Bottom right: Choker, bi-metal, handmade by Sondi, Sterling silver oxidised and 24 ct gold.

This page:

Top: A mourning piece, Sterling silver oxidised with crystal glass and hair.

Centre: Pendant, Mokumé gane, Sterling silver and shakudo4%, hollow construction with South Sea pearl.

Right: Two views, ring, open construction, oxidised Sterling silver with 24 ct gold

Collectors: I am always surprised and chuffed when I hit a chord with people who like my work enough to buy multiple pieces.





*Exhibition work, this is where I can make work I want to make. The ideal. I've only had two solo shows, but I've participated in more than forty group shows in the last 35 years, most recently last year at Lost Bear Gallery with Mountains and Metal
Photo Jacqui Dean*



My Grands, as I call my children's children: About 5 years ago I decided to make a 5-year-old something that she would keep in the future. It is nice to know they are so pleased by the pieces they wear now and that they will have something tangible from me when I no longer exist. I like to involve them if possible: to choose a stone or ask for a pendant or to send me a drawing.



This page top:
Henry Hogan's design at 11 years, pendant Sterling silver, copper and diamond

Left: Earrings commissioned by Urs, a fabric artist, for his wife's birthday. I showed Urs the metal before fashioning the earrings and he said 'can we leave them as is?' I love being pushed out of my comfort zone! 18 ct yellow gold and 22 ct white Mokumé gane



Lower left: The Forever Ring for Sharyn, Mokumé gane, Sterling silver and shakudo 4%, hollow construction. After 4 years of continuous wear: 'I wanted a ring I could wear every day, doing all the things I do ... cooking, cleaning, gardening, even laying bricks! When it was commissioned my partner of many years had died so it needed to serve also as a mourning piece. It is comfortable, beautiful and cherished.' Bottom, showing ring when new.

Below right:
Roxanne Stancourt's drawing and the opal she selected. Sterling silver (aged 8)



Mourning pieces have been a privilege to make and are the most personal. I also feel these pieces fulfil a need in our modern culture that has been lost in the process of mourning.



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Top:

Guggenheim piece, Sterling silver and diamond, hollow construction—'Passion and creativity are so strong in this unique, beautiful neckpiece inspired by the Guggenheim, Bilbao. The curved shapes and textures like fishscales sang to me. My favourite Sondi artwork in an extensive collection that dates over 20 years' (Chris Shoji)

Centre

I met Mandy from Canada at *Collaboration New Zealand*. She had swapped for this opal and then she swapped a wonderful piece of her sculpture for me to make this brooch of her design. Sterling silver and matrix boulder opal.



*Swapping and bartering and gifts:
for me this is the most fulfilling
type of making.*

Below:

Mentoring Megal Turton, my protégé

'My personal journey with Sondi has changed my life. She not only taught me everything I know in Jewellery but has given me a true appreciation for art. Sondi has pushed me in my work, teaching me that if you can dream it, you can make it.

'It is humbling to watch Sondi work and to have her as a mentor is an absolute privilege. Her compassion and commitment to the art community are laudable and I personally will never be able to repay her or thank her enough for what she has done for me.' (Megan Turton)

