

## Leslie Ullman — Artist's Statement

### Bead Poems

By profession, I work with language—my own poetry and that of my students—which after nearly forty years has come to involve such a complex interchange of instinct and technical knowledge that I can't possibly separate the two. But my more recent engagement with natural materials like ammonites and semi-precious stones has involved me in an ongoing exchange between the eye and color/heft/shape/texture that seems purely instinctive, arising as it does from happy ignorance and an energy that feels spontaneous and curiously devoid of ego.

I never plan how a necklace will look. I begin by choosing a focal piece and then place clusters of beads, often not matching clusters, on either side of it. I do this one pair of clusters at a time, selecting combinations of materials that immediately appeal to me; thus do I proceed by way of an unfolding, trying for incremental harmonies and contrasts, working my way to the top of the necklace pleasure by pleasure. With the longer pieces, the clusters usually are not composed of the same materials, nor are they the same length. Each cluster gets its own half-to-three-quarter inch of breathing room and becomes its own moment, like a self-contained image in a poem that works in dialogue with other images around it, creating a web of correspondences strong enough to sustain surprises.

It gives me physical pleasure to handle stone, glass, bone, gemstone rounds and rondelles, pewter, shell, porcelain and, more recently crystal—I have amassed an enormous supply of beads and beadlike entities, including coins and tiny keys from luggage locks. Whenever I feel I'm flagging in curiosity and ingenuity, I find focal pieces I'm drawn to but don't yet know how to work with, and this starts the dialogue all over again. Carved bone has inspired the use of spiny oyster shell, turquoise, and antique glass, or else the earthy tones of carnelian, green jasper, and agate. Electroplated leaves invite the flash of Czech or Chinese crystal. Tibetan pendants attract turquoise, coral, pewter with an antique finish, and maybe a touch of bone. Ammonites, for a long time, wanted the presence of warm-colored gemstones, but lately they're enjoying some communion with a wink of crystal, or earthy African beads and slender doughnuts of bone.

Clearly a spiral of energy drives and informs this entire endeavor, especially in the way the focal pieces dictate a progression of choices leading to a finished piece. Even the acquisition of materials itself feels like an unfolding, the focals having inspired my selections of beads which now form a vast landscape, in their segmented boxes, across my work table.

The unfolding doesn't end with a finished piece; the "bead poems," once they belong to others, acquire a new energy. They seem to bond to the women and occasional man who wear them. They look just right, and I'm enchanted all over again by the appeal of the materials themselves. No longer do they have anything to do with me, and I don't regret, as I did at the beginning, that I can't Xerox them like poems or essays. They make their individual ways into the world, and I witness this with neither pride nor anxiety. Acquisitive as I am about my materials, and anxious as I remain where the reception of my writing is concerned, I find it easy to let these low-tech assemblages separate themselves from me entirely.

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