



By Lela Nargi

Somewhere back in the late 1960s, consumed by a toddler's desire for self-adornment, I selected a plastic animal from my menagerie and tied it around my neck with a piece of string. I'm not sure the ponderous, inelegant result would have qualified as "jewelry" exactly. But take that playful embellishing impulse, combine it with a true artist's flair for detail, skill with metalwork and needlecraft, and what you've got is fifteen years of whimsical work by Dutch jewelry designer Felieke van der Leest.

Plastic fish, seals, ducks, bears, giraffes, and elephants like the ones most of us collected as children make appearances—in various forms and arrangements—in much of her current work. But van der Leest's initial pieces were entirely knitted and crocheted. Her first shows after graduation from the Gerrit Rietveld art academy in Amsterdam in 1996 teemed with exquisite, micro-stitched bracelets, brooches and necklaces.



Sick Whale (2000). Photo by Felieke van der Leest.



Van der Leest's interpretation of the famed Cartier Trinity bracelet. Photo by Felieke van der Leest.

Using metallic thread in a viscose/polyester blend, she knit a knock-off of Cartier's famous Trinity bracelet, with its intertwined circles of white, pink, and yellow gold. She fashioned a necklace by tightly crocheting an interlocking chain of metallicized polyester/polymide, from which dangled a woolly fiber sheep. Pigs, whales caught in god's-eye-patterned nets, and squawking baby birds all received similar treatment—much to the surprise of the traditionalists running van der Leest's master's jewelry department. (Later, van der Leest's work would be considered by the art historian writing her *catalogue raisonné*, as an “attack on good taste and conventions of traditional jewelry.” It was meant as a compliment of the highest order.)

“There are many techniques from which you can make jewelry,” says van der Leest, who, growing up in Holland, learned to knit and crochet from her mother (she now resides in Norway). “But I always end up with these textile techniques. They never bore me.”

The tools of van der Leest's trade are certainly more highly specialized than those of the average knitter or crocheter. Standard yarns are too thick for her purposes—or her 1.25mm needles—so she

sources instead from embroidery suppliers, working with fine Appleton crewel wool and DMC cotton perle. “I wish there were miniature angora yarn,” she muses. For crochet, she uses machine embroidery yarns, mainly Madeira rayon #40, and Madeira metallic #40. “I make a combination to get a bright color with a nice shine and sparkle, and use a number 1 or 1.25 mm hook,” she explains.

Somewhere around the year 2000, van der Leest began mixing media, and the first of the myriad toy animals that were to tromp through her collections made their debuts. In one, an eight-inch rubber lobster, conceived as a necklace dangle, wears a knitted striped body-wrapper. In another, a resin seahorse is blindered by a delicate knit balaclava, a bouquet of flowers clutched demurely in his tail.



Lobster Necklace (2000). *Photo by Felieke van der Leest.*



Seahorse (2000). Photo by Felieke van der Leest.

Soon, though, van der Leest was not content to merely adorn these animals; she began to mutate them as well, turning her studio into a grisly plastic chop-shop. Stags lost their heads, seals lost their tails, giraffes were sawed into half a dozen pieces. The bits were then reassembled with metal, knitting, and crochet into giddily hilarious accoutrements. And so was born the idea that is now something of van der Leest's trademark: that jewelry can tell a complete—if unexpected—story.

“In our society, when people think of a wolf, they think of a particular fairy tale,” van der Leest explains. “And the wolf is given certain human characteristics, like being sly. That, in combination with [the wolf] wearing a white dress (for innocence) makes a story. I don't have the story already printed out in my head; I work more intuitively. Sometimes, what is in my head doesn't work in reality.” She gives as an example a crocheted piece from 2007 titled *Super Freak Zebra*. After much work crocheting an Egyptian skirt for the animal to wear, a foul-humored van der Leest suddenly realized the skirt was all wrong and that she should concentrate instead on making the piece look like a cross between Rick James and Michael Jackson. “When I become irritated or in a bad mood,” she says. “I know something is not right and I change color, material, or animal. When I feel happy, I know that I am on the right path.”

And how happy are collectors of her work—and those of us lucky enough to see it in gallery and museum shows—that she has hit upon such strange and giddy “stories” such as *The Giraffe with Zebra Legs* (2002), which hangs from an assemblage of beads and leafy crocheted branches, or the *Rescue Ducklings in Pond* bracelet (2003), in which bath toys sporting crocheted lifevests chase a piece of gold toast around a crocheted doily in little silver life boats.



Giraffe with Zebra Legs (2002). Photo by Eddo Hartmann.



Rescue Ducklings in Pond (2003) Photo by Eddo Hartmann.

The animals—or parts of animals—also serve as a way to showcase unworn jewelry. In these instances, the “story” and its crafted components comprise a neat trick. The blinged-out plastic *Emperor Penguin* (2005) is outfitted in a flipper-length knitted sweater. Around his neck is a polar-bear claw necklace on a chain. The penguin’s necklace is a human’s ring; the penguin in his knitted outfit offers a place to hang and display this piece of jewelry, to prevent it from being tucked away, sadly out of sight, in the dark recesses of some jewelry box.



Emperor Penguin Freddie with Polar Pear Claw (2005). *Photo by Eddo Hartmann.*

“People always get [a] smile on their face when looking at Felieke’s jewelry,” says Rob Koudijs, who has shown van der Leest’s work in his Amsterdam gallery since the beginning of her career. “The [phrase] ‘conversation piece’ may have been invented for her.”

Although van der Leest has slowed down in her work since the birth of her son, Felix, in 2010, her ardent fans and collectors eagerly await the next phase of her jewelry designs, whatever forms it

will take. “Fortunately, artists are not predictable, so there is no telling what she will come up with next,” says Koudijs. “She can make whatever she dreams up.” Lately, that includes such playful pieces as the crocheted *Candy Rabbit Rings* (2010), which look suspiciously like baby rattles.



Candy Rabbit Rings (2010). Photo credit by Eddo Hartmann.

Discover more of the work of Felieke van der Leest at feliekevanderleest.com.

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