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Enamels

An enamellist foregrounds the material and its distinct visual effects. **Barbara Seidenath** (b. 1960) does exactly that. Seidenath was born in Germany and rigorously trained in that craft-education system. In the early '90s, she was working with bright-colored botanical imagery that could verge on the erotic. Later, she made enameled brooches with a restricted palette of pale, icy hues. Called the “Midnight Sun” series, these enamels are deeply evocative.

Seidenath finds winter to be intensely poetic. The fecundity that was once her subject has gone dormant. Colors are muted, passions are (presumably) cooled. Decorating a person in ice might seem to run counter to the purpose of jewelry. The association with frigidity is off-putting, suggesting the wearer has a chilly personality. And yet diamonds are sometimes called “ice,” and white is the color of purity. Just as Harper proposed a fresh notion of beauty based on hot colors and found objects, Seidenath suggests that a color and symbolism of frozen water can be seductive.

Some brooches in the series are framed in oval bands of metal, which reinforced the reading of her enamels as tiny paintings. However, others are attached to a backing structure, leaving the edge of the enamel exposed. Still others are built up into angular boxes. These are more effective than the framed brooches because they look like chunks of ice or crystal—objects, not representations. By emphasizing the thing-ness of her jewelry, Seidenath avoids the old pitfall of direct comparison to painting.

To create the impression of ice, Seidenath engraved a piece of pure silver with hundreds of fine, straight lines. Some were deepened with enamel color, usually a dark gray or black but

occasionally a flash of red or orange. She then added layers of transparent white or very light tints of blue or green. The sense of fissured ice is vivid, even though it is far from a literal representation. Seen from a slightly different angle, these shift into complete abstraction, nothing more than lines and colors.