

IRIS EICHENBERG: WHERE WORDS FAIL

“Where language fails me, I make, and language fails me often.”

–Iris Eichenberg in Maria Jimena Ríos, *Verdadero es lo Hecho: Exvotos y joyería contemporánea/ Ex votos and contemporary jewellery* (Buenos Aires: Museo José Hernández, 2019), 61.

Since the mid-1970s, artists worldwide have reacted to the age-old exclusivity and preciousness of jewelry, advocating for conceptual statements creatively fabricated primarily from a wide assortment of non-precious materials. German artist Iris Eichenberg, whose studio practice over the past quarter century has centered first in Europe and now in America, is one of the most influential contributors to this discourse. Recipient of the 1994 Gerrit Rietveld Academie Award given annually until 2020 to that institution’s outstanding graduating student, she was awarded the coveted Herbert Hofmann Prize at Munich’s *Schmuck 1999*. More recently, in 2021, Art Jewelry Forum (AJF) conferred on her the prestigious Susan Beech Mid-Career Grant.

Two essential premises guide Eichenberg’s practice: first, a relentless interrogation into materiality in order to identify the craft process and combination of materials that best suit the idea at hand, and second, her particular multicultural perspective generated from having lived in Germany, the Netherlands, and now in the United States along with additional extensive travels. Unlike others who have lived in multiple European countries and choose to inject aspects of diverse culture into their works, Eichenberg’s sojourn in America has made her increasingly aware of her “Germanness.” However, this response to her heritage has always been complicated by a sense of guilt and responsibility for a past with deep cultural and historical implications.

Eichenberg’s work addresses such relevant issues as identity, gender, and *Heimat*—a German word denoting the personal happiness and inner peace found upon reaching a safe haven. Starting with materials, she searches for answers by mining childhood memories and adult experiences for recognizable imagery that she then maps through mark making. She rejects work that provides a straightforward narrative; she also dislikes discussing the meaning behind each object. Instead, her works are best experienced through sensorial perspective. Assembled for the first time for West Coast audiences from international private and public collections and the artist’s extensive archive, the thirty-eight works on view demonstrate that Eichenberg’s examination of self includes the impact of place and community.

Guest Curator, Davira S. Taragin