Sculptor & jeweler who finds inspiration in the sea, land and found objects discovers art in her own baldness

Description

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Ann Hedges began losing her hair when she was just nine years old. She started drawing to cope, â??creating a world that was mine, and one I belonged in,â?• she said. â??Along with having alopecia areata, I was short for my age and painfully shy.â?•

With both a bachelorâ??s and masterâ??s degree in Fine Arts from the San Francisco Art Institute, Hedges, now 73, went on to develop a 45-year career selling her sculpture and jewelry. These days she also does some modeling and creates flower installations for the San Francisco Fine Art Museums.

She wears scarves predominantly and the very occasional wig for parties and art openings, but doesnâ??t shy from posing without them. A one-time student activist, she now supports other sufferers of alopecia areata, helping them and people with cancer with how to wear scarves. She made peace with a friend who inadvertently outed her by posting pictures of her sans hair on Facebook. After her initial upset, Hedges said, â??Wow, this is really me; itâ??s OK to be bald.â?•

Hedges has embraced the unique beauty of her head. (Photo by Randall Whitehead.)

Wigs were expensive when Hedges was growing up in Manhattan; they were made from human hair. Her parents had the money to buy one, but there was a problem â?? they tended to fly off her head. â??Before there were secure ways to hold it on, there were many embarrassing moments â?? like when it flew off and I had to run down the street to retrieve it, or having it fall off sliding into third base playing baseball,â?• she said.

Hedges also played tennis, rode horses, swam, and scuba-dived. Sports have been an important part of her life, a penchant that runs in her family. Her father was a silver medal winner in the high jump at the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam. Her mother was a modern dancer with the Humphrey-Weidman Company.

Hedges became a competitive tennis player in high school but abandoned it after a fall from a horse that injured her knee and required two operations. A strong swimmer, she started scuba diving in her early 20s. Although she hasnâ??t delved into the deep in several years, Hedges said she isnâ??t ready to hang up her fins.

She joined the National Foundation for Alopecia Areata, based in San Rafael, 20 years ago. Sheâ??s been active in many aspects of the groupâ??s work, from running support groups to conducting seminars at national conventions.

Around that time, she also was chosen to be on the San Francisco Fine Art Museumsâ?? flower committee. â??It was an opportunity to do sculpture in flower form,â?• said Hedges. The committee creates flower arrangements in museum entryways, in the directorâ??s office, in bathrooms, and at special events. â??I had no formal flower training, but as a person working in three-dimensional art, I put things together well.â?•

Two years ago, her friend Randal Whitehead, an award-winning architectural lighting designer, photographer and writer, decided to expand his fine photography portfolio into portraiture and asked Hedges to pose for him. â??He liked how versatile I was: I can be the trifecta â?? able to pose in a wig, a scarf and bald,â?• Hedges said.

Hedges models some unique hats. (Photos by Randall Whitehead.)

After graduating from Briarcliff College in New York, Hedges chose to leave the East Coast and apply to the San Francisco Art Institute. She received her bachelorâ??s degree in painting in 1970.

She lived and worked in a studio on Balboa at 41st Avenue that was the former home of a dog grooming business called the Pink Poodle. â??I cooked off a hotplate, took a bath in the tub that the poodles were bathed in that was three feet off the ground, and kept my clothes in what were the dog cages,â?• she said.

Life was exciting. â??I was finally doing what I wanted to do all my life, having finally gone to art school, living in a studio and making art.â?•

But she developed an allergy to oil paints, and already living with two autoimmune diseases â??asthma and alopecia â?? she left oils and the Pink Poodle behind. She rented a huge studio in a womenâ??s collective on Third Street at the now unheard-of price of 10 cents a square foot.

Hedges with one of her sculptures. (Photo by Jan Robbins.)

When it came time to begin her masterâ??s degree, Hedges chose to major in sculpture. For one, her work was becoming more three-dimensional, combining acrylics and elements from the natural environment. â??I was able to create a giant sand environment â?? the walls, floor, and light fixture all in sand,â?• she said.

Hedges has always been fond of collecting natural materials that would later become part of an art piece. As a girl in New York City, she would go to Central Park looking for the sparkly mineral mica. â??I organized the mica pieces by configuration and personality and displayed them in a shoebox on

my radiator,â?• she said. â??That was the direction I was going in.â?•

She also thought sheâ??d have a better chance of getting into the sculpture department as there were fewer women in that discipline. Being a woman in art school in the â??70s. wasnâ??t easy, she said. â??I was criticized for making anything detailed, small or pretty.â?•

She got her masterâ??s in 1976 but said â??It took me leaving the Art Institute to understand that I could be a good artist and make whatever I wanted as a woman.â?•

Hedges with wig. (Photo courtesy of Ann Hedges.)

With teaching credentials from California College of the Arts, she taught art at Golden Gate Elementary School and ceramics at Galileo High School while establishing herself as a sculptor. She also immersed herself in other cultures. â??I traveled as much as I could, collecting objects for my sculpture pieces.â?• She spent two years in Vietnam, working with students from the San Francisco Art Institute.

Outside of school, even scuba diving influenced her art. â??Being under the water changed my world in terms of imagery, and I used that in my art,â?• she said. Her father was a diver, and she got her certification in 1972. While volunteering at the California Academy of Sciences, she once swam with an injured shark to help it breathe.

During scuba diving travels â?? Sulawesi in Northern Indonesia, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, and Pohnpei and the Truk Islands in Micronesia â?? she often found things she later used in her art. â??I love to find discarded objects and familiar everyday objects. My intention is to repurpose them â?? give them a new life.â?•

Hedges creates jewelry out of unusual stones, gems and found objects. (Photos by Jan Robbins.)

She drew inspiration from the land as well as the water. She and a fellow artist built a 40-foot by 60-foot studio on property they purchased in the redwoods of Fort Bragg. For 19 years, she divided her time between her Noe Valley and Fort Bragg homes.

When she gave up the studio and settled permanently in her Noe Valley home, she ratcheted up her jewelry making. â??I think of my jewelry as sculpture, just smaller scale,â?• she said.

Hedges gets creative with scarves. (Photo courtesy of Ann Hedges.)

To deal with the lockdown at the start of the pandemic, Hedges decided to make 30 necklaces in 30 days. â??I thought the thing was going to be over by then,â?• she said. Other than conventional jewelry-making materials, she incorporated only items she had on hand, including a crab claw, birch bark, and hair from a wig.

Hedges said she has accepted her baldness and become more outgoing as a result of self-awareness work. In the late â??50s, doctors told Hedges alopecia was a psychosomatic condition. As a result, she was put in therapy, which she said: â??benefitted me terrifically.â?•

Still, as an adult, Hedges had tried everything available to regain her hair. â??I did cortisone injections, topical applications, acupuncture, Chinese herbs, and many other futile attempts at restoring my hair,â?• she said. â??I finally accepted that my alopecia universalis is probably here to stay.â?•

In years past, it may have taken Hedges more guts to model bald than swim alongside a shark. Not anymore. â??After Randall outed me by putting bald photos of me on Facebook, I figured itâ??s about time. This is who I am and all that goes with it,â?• she said.

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