

ARTIST INSIGHT

How *does* she do it?

Designer Gail Be explains the method behind her madness for beaded gowns

by Ann Dee Allen





The June 2012 issue of *Bead&Button* magazine features a profile of Gail Be, a designer of fabric-free beaded dresses and a collector of beads old and new. In this special online exclusive, Gail describes the process she's developed for creating the dresses.

To Gail Be, the tens of thousands of beads she has carefully selected over nearly a quarter of a century are the muses for her designs. "I usually 'see' the dress in the beads; a complete dress will come into my vision," Gail explains. "I don't draw, I don't sketch, I don't do mathematical calculations, I don't use computer-generated programs. Everything comes straight out of my head."

Crazy for color

When she is planning to make a dress, Gail sets out all her beads, using a giant pizza pan to group them by color, style, shape, and size. As she sorts, she works out different combinations of beads and what they will be used for in the design she is conceptualizing. "It's like I'm meeting them and I'm connecting with them and I'm seeing what they want to do," she says. She then begins to lay out the beads in patterns on a light table.

For many people, choosing colors is an obstacle to design, but not for Gail. When she was a child, Gail's family home included a very large garden. There she learned that in nature all colors go together. She is also a diver and has lived on the Caribbean Sea, which gave her the same information as the garden: All colors go together.

"I have an insane thing about color," says Gail, who lost her eyesight to disease and had it restored through surgery. "That's one of the things about being legally blind. I came out of it with a color scheme that's insane. I'll say, 'What about putting these beads with those beads?' and everyone will say, 'Gail, that will look awful.' And I'll say, 'Just go get them.'"

Formula-free design

All of Gail's designs are beaded by hand, one bead slipped onto "miles" of beading wire at a time. Her rule is to use beads, sequins, feathers, and ribbon but no fabric whatsoever. She uses parachute cord for sequins and also incorporates eye pins, head pins, and jump rings.

The beads are joined in a mighty web built to stand the test of time and look as perfectly crafted as a Steuben vase. This is where the true test of a skilled beadworker comes into play, as it seems that half the beauty of beading is in the beads themselves, a quarter is in the design, and another quarter is in the workmanship.

Many beadworkers use established stitching patterns, but Gail works primarily in free-form, using mind-mapping all the way. When the work is flowing and she is in her creative zone, Gail beads very quickly. "I don't really stop," she

says. "I just keep thinking, oh I know a bead that would go there."

She stays one step ahead of the puzzle, often taking sections of beadwork apart to re-do them so they become stronger and more striking. Every time Gail and her team of beaders fit a dress on a model, she measures where she needs to bead next. "I see that I have to go from there to there in 2 inches (5 cm) with the ribbon," she says. "Then I have to figure it out. Then I'll work on it and put it back on the model and do it again."

Team bead

Gail describes her design process as follows: "I explain to my design team how we're going to do the dress. We have to figure out, are we going to have enough beads? There are perhaps a few thousand to half a million beads per dress. So I have to make a decision about what I have in the amount of beads. From there we start making the dress. Everything just evolves. We bead or sew the dress until we are ready to put it on a live model."

"We're like detectives," Gail says of her U.S. design team consisting of four beadworkers; she also employs nine people in Mexico. "I come in with my clues and we put the case together. If we don't figure it out, who else is going to? We have to get from point A to point B and we have to ask, how do we do that?"

It's a challenge for Gail to maintain a team of beadworkers because the work is so demanding. In fact, she is looking to hire more people who can withstand the rigors of the work and collaborative technical process.

Her team members have backgrounds in sewing and beading, including costume making; they have ranged from 18 to 70 years in age.

"A woman on my design team says this isn't even work it's so much fun. Trying to get your head around it is a big thing. It's the equivalent of 5,000 necklaces. It's beading sculpture. Once they start doing it, people say, 'You've ruined me for life! Now all I think about is how to get this dress to go together!'"

"This is a career, it's not a job," Gail adds. "We're putting our synergistic energy together. The design team has to have the skills but also the attitude. We're constantly thinking all the time: How can I be better? How can I put this together? They have to love beads to do what we're doing."

"When I get done with a dress and I sit back and look at it, I'm so grateful, I'm so happy that I let it happen," Gail says. "When I see a dress, [I think] thank you for letting this energy come through me, thank you for allowing this to go on [in the future]."

To view photos and videos of Gail Be's designs, visit gailbe.com. You can contact her at gailbe@mail.com.

Ann Dee Allen is the former editor of *Bead&Button* magazine. Contact her at anndeeallen@sbcglobal.net.

