

ARTIST PROFILE

# Strike a pose



**E**ven before learning the details of Gail Be's extraordinary story or seeing her astonishing beaded gowns, her voice signals an unusually strong presence. It's as if she is spreading the word about how to face down life's challenges with every fiber of her body, mind, and spirit.

Gail describes her motivation to create breathtaking all-bead gowns as a spiritual calling. "It can't be explained," she says. "It's a God-given gift, there's no question."

Gail also brings resources of her own into play. A Minnesota State Power Lifting Champion, she first tried beading when she took classes in 1989. Now that she is making dresses that can weigh up to 30 pounds (13.6 kilograms), she reflects on the connection between her two passions. "Weight lifting and beading are both mind over matter," she says. "They are hard and uncomfortable. But you don't stop."

[www](http://www.BeadAndButton.com/resources) You can read more about Gail's design process in an exclusive online article. Go to [BeadAndButton.com/resources](http://BeadAndButton.com/resources), select this issue, and scroll down to the downloadable file called, "How does she do it?"



Artist Gail Be  
adds eye-popping,  
fabric-less beaded  
fashions to her  
design legacy.

by Ann Dee Allen

**BEAD**  
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**Chandelier Marina**  
(above) weighs 26 pounds and is 1 inch dense with beads.

### From beads to blindness and back again

Gail's unyielding attitude served her well through personal challenges. The same year she started beading, Gail was diagnosed with a degenerative eye disease that left her legally blind from 1994 to 1998. Unable to stitch, she began collecting beads instead and has since amassed one of the largest collections in the U.S.

Her sight was restored in 1998 after she received corneal transplants and LASIK surgery. Then Gail's vision as an artist came into full view. She started beading elaborate necklaces and became a jewelry designer for the largest bridal shows in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Despite her success, she didn't feel world-class. "I noticed that I was always the accessory person, always the cheerleader," Gail says. "I thought, God, if you teach me how to make a dress out of beads, I can be the designer *and* the quarterback."

From this challenge, Gail set to work creating what became her 2003 *Silver Starflower* dress, inspired by Natalie Portman in "Star Wars."

She remembers, "From the minute I started that dress, I just kept going. I felt, what happens if I basically sew with beads?"

### Lights, camera, crystals

Gail decided to create 20 different wearable designs before revealing them so people wouldn't think she was a one-dress wonder. The dresses' first public appearance came at the fall 2004 "World on a String" beading documentary post-premiere party in Los Angeles. The reception was ecstatic.

Dresses like *Silver Starflower* are spectacular for one reason, she explains: "When you're working with tens of thousands of hours of hand-sewn crystals and no fabric underneath it, when the lights hit it, it's unlike anything anyone has ever seen. It's like thousands of cameras going off at once. All the crystals explode in the light."

Gail designs her dresses in her mind's eye, jots down notes, and then begins a multi-step bead-sorting process until her plan becomes crystal clear. The beads are from trips to Europe and Asia, and include rare finds like original Swarovski crystals. She also works with distributors and buys anything that interests her, whether extremely rare or plastic. "I am respectful of every single thing and understand that it's a gift that I have these beads," Gail says.

### The building blocks of design

In 2008, Gail underwent surgery on both hands, which left her unable to bead until the summer of 2011. In the meantime, she channeled her creativity into bricks-and-mortar architecture while helping to design her studio and large estate in Mexico. Building the studio





and estate allowed her to focus on the spatial relationships in buildings and in beads, relationships that she accesses to create the bead paths in her dresses.

The brainteasers involved in designing just one dress are highly stimulating for Gail's team of four beaders — so much so that she's on the lookout for more people to join the team.

When Gail beads alone, she works all night, which allows her to embrace the flow of creative energy. "Part of what I do involves being spiritually open," she says. "If I see a dress in my head, I know that I'll be shown how to do it."

Gail says she is inspired by the artists who have gone before her. "When I read about the designers in *Bead&Button* who are creating the bigger pieces, I really hear them going into what we call the 'zone,'" she says. "They're just letting this creative process go through them."

### Sights set on celebrity

Gail has spent recent years developing techniques to make her beadwork stronger and easier. Gail's fashions take an average of eight to 12 months to make, although the full-length *Garden of Eden* took six people 5,500 hours over four years to complete. Most dresses include thousands of beads, with *Garden of Eden* requiring more than 50,000 beads in 70 different colors. It can take dozens to a few hundred hours of fitting time for the models.

Gail says other beaded dresses worn by entertainers are generally made by soldering wire. Although her dresses are

incredibly dense with beads — for instance, *Chandelier Marina* weighs 26 pounds (11.8 kilograms) and is 1 inch (2.5 cm) thick — some can be uncomfortable for the wearer. However, compared to dresses made with soldered materials, Gail's dresses are breathable and flexible.

"The reason we put a model in the dress is so that it comes alive," says Gail. "I'm planning on making dresses for music videos and movies, and the dresses have to be on someone live." Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Jennifer Lopez, Gwen Stefani, and Beyonce come to mind when Gail envisions major stars wearing her galaxies of beads. Watch out, ladies — this haute couture heavyweight is on a mission! ●

*Gail's first fabric-free beaded fashions appear in part 5 of the "World on a String" beading documentary. To view photos and videos of Gail Be's designs, visit [gailbe.com](http://gailbe.com). You can contact her at [gailbe@mail.com](mailto:gailbe@mail.com).*

**Ann Dee Allen**  
is the former editor  
of *Bead&Button*.  
You can contact  
her at [anndeallen@sbcglobal.net](mailto:anndeallen@sbcglobal.net).



***Garden of Eden* (right) took six people and four years to complete.**