

Crystal Clear Vision

Gail Be's glittering, sexy, spiritual art.

Gail Be says she has "Picasso-walking-around eyes." She means that they're gazed at like fine art by every eye doctor she encounters; cornea transplants 10 years ago helped her go from legally blind to 20/20 vision, and she's featured in a medical training video. But she also means that she sees herself as an artist, one whose custom jewelry business in Edina, Great Beads, will ultimately bring her recognition in the world's museums.

"My work is very distinctive," Be says. "Like, I can see a blown-glass Chihuly anywhere in the world and know it's a Chihuly, because it's mental, because who spends that much work? . . . That's what my clothes are going to be like."



Gail Be is familiar to anyone who clicks through local cable channels. Her jewelry and bead-only clothing are fixtures on Metro Cable Network's *Talk of the Town*.

She started making clothes three years ago: Dresses without a thread of fabric that she designs with no drawings or mathematical calculations using beads from her huge private collection. Her particular passion is vintage Swarovski crystal; once, at the Swarovski factory in Austria, her host confirmed that Be's stash dwarfs what's in the company's vaults.

Be doesn't have the usual entrepreneurial bent. Her store? She opened it only because her insurer pressed her to get a commercial location when the value of her beads exceeded the limit for coverage at home. (They're valued at \$750,000 now, but Be says the collection is priceless, because some beads will never be made again.) The location? She doesn't care that it's bad, a tucked-away strip mall filled with service businesses. And her sales? Without giving a dollar figure, she confides that they're not enough to keep the doors open; household money does that. She loves giving people the thrill of wearing jewelry designed just for them, but "I'm not here to sell jewelry in life," Be says. The bottom line doesn't drive her. A spiritual calling does.

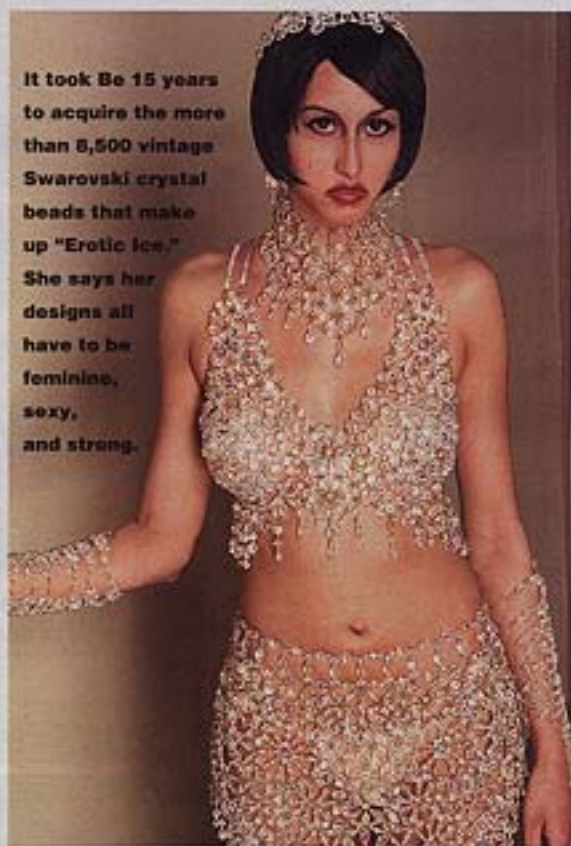
She calls herself "the keeper of the beads," and explains that they contain a creative and sustaining energy of their own. It comes from their beauty, from the elements they're made of, from the artisans who made the beads, and

from her, when she creates something new with them. Her real business is to spread that energy around, and do it with the same crazy dedication she sees in a Chihuly.

Each of her dresses, for instance, takes about 1,000 hours to produce. She shows them at an annual AIDS-research fundraiser called DIVA Minnesota, and a piece for the next DIVA show, in March, a 1920s flapper dress, will weigh more than 20 pounds and will require Be and her assistants to fasten together more than 800,000 Swarovski crystals.

It's the stuff that Hollywood costumes are made of, or that pop divas wear in music videos. That's where Be thinks her work is headed next. "My stuff, I imagine, will be in Hollywood in two years at the most," she predicts. She's looking for an agent. Later, there might be one-of-a-kind jewelry sales at Barneys New York, and works done on commission. For now, though, Be's dresses aren't for sale, and she's satisfied knowing she's "blessed with an artistic eye that no one else will have."

—Denise Logeland



It took Be 15 years to acquire the more than 8,500 vintage Swarovski crystal beads that make up "Erotic Ice." She says her designs all have to be feminine, sexy, and strong.



Be's vintage Swarovski crystal beads are 50 to 80 years old, and never before used.