

BY JENNIFER HEEBNER, SENIOR EDITOR

A BEADER DAZZLES WITH HER SARTORIAL SKILLS

Thinking Outside the Jewelry Box

When Gail Be was 13 years old, her attempt to make a dress on a sewing machine in home-economics class was unsuccessful: For three days, Be pulled stitches out of the botched garment so a helpful neighbor could salvage the frock. She never touched a sewing machine again. "I don't even know how to turn one on," admits the Minneapolis-based bead collector, historian, and educator on local cable TV.

Ironic, then, that today Be is making a name for herself as a designer of dresses made entirely out of beads. "I don't draw, I don't know how to sew, and I don't do mathematical combinations," explains the beader, who also makes and sells jewelry in her own store. "I was touched spiritually in my mid-40s; that's the only way I'm able to explain how I make these dresses."

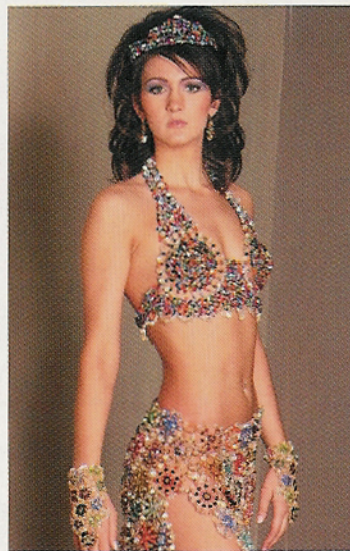
The dresses are essentially like form-fitted chandeliers. Each contains from 7,500 to 250,000 beads and is constructed freeform, meaning there are no soldered metal bases. Be strings all types of beads—vintage and new Swarovski, Japanese, German, Chinese, Venetian, and Czech—together on wire while live models stand patiently, waiting for dresses to take shape. It takes thousands of hours to complete a costume, and Be usually has a specific person—typically, a celebrity—in mind when making a dress.

For example, Be envisioned *Star Wars*' Natalie Portman wearing her first costume—the Silver Star Flower—crafted in 2003. "I thought, What would the queen of a galaxy wear?" says Be of how she brainstormed the costume's design. "I envisioned it as a petite, feminine piece of armor."

While sewing sequins onto frocks is nothing new, outfits made entirely of beads are uncommon. The idea came to her after nearly two decades



[Clockwise from left] Gail Be's Blaze dress was inspired by the accompanying necklace and comprises 150,000 beads and sequins, and no fabric. The two-piece Kaleidoscope Garden halter top, skirt, and hand piece are made of more than 5,000 Swarovski crystal beads of 60 different colors and gold findings.



of accessorizing everybody else's clothes. Be thought, "Why should I continue to be the cheerleader when I can be the quarterback?" she says of her role as a beader-turned-beaded-dress-maker.

Be has a twofold goal: finish her 12th dress this year so she can take to the road with them and eventually donate the dozen to museums. She also aims to incorporate more feathers, sequins, shells, and ribbons into her work, while using little or no fabric. Although some of the dresses require cloth for beads to cling to, most don't. "In the Nature's Fantasy

dress, only three out of 44 inches of the skirt is fabric," boasts Be.

After Be completes this work, she can recruit customers. Performers are ideal for over-the-top beaded gowns. "Beyoncé, Christina Aguilera, showgirls, music-video artists ... I could lease these gowns for Hollywood movies," explains the entrepreneurial designer.

In fact, she's already had a brush with stardom. Carson Kressley of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was in town recently and ordered a peacock-feather belt, which she custom made. "His people said he

plans to wear it for a special event like the NBC Christmas party," says Be. Kressley also wore it during the taping of a *Queer Eye* show set to air over the summer.

Want to rent raiment of beads? Contact Be at (952) 903-0220 or check out all of her work online at www.gailbe.com. ■

Editor's note: This article resulted from Be's sharing her idea with JCK after reading the last "Thinking Outside the Jewelry Box." If you have a great idea, e-mail Jennifer Heebner, JHeebner@reedbusiness.com.