

Smithsonian 2027 Visionary Artist: Rachelle Thiewes

Celebrated jewelry artist Rachelle Thiewes is honored as the recipient of the 2027 Smithsonian Visionary Award for her original and captivating metal jewelry. Her work abounds with innovative and unique techniques, bringing together movement, light, color, and sound in extraordinary ways. The contemporary necklaces, bracelets, earrings and brooches created by Thiewes are not simply adornments, but an adventure into our senses, personal empowerment and body awareness. Her artistic process suggests a new approach to the way in which we think about jewelry.



Thiewes is inspired by the starkly beautiful West Texas landscape, music, and countryside walks in her native El Paso and abroad. She has commented that after moving to El Paso, “My artwork changed overnight. It became heavily influenced by the austere landscape of desert and mountains. The visually and culturally colorful El Paso Juarez border made a strong impression.” Another influence has been the Lowrider car culture, particularly as a source for color and finishes. Much of her recent steel and silver jewelry incorporates the specialized auto paint she methodically selects for each work. In the article about Thiewes’ 2025 solo exhibition *Paint*, curator and critic Kate Wagle states that Thiewes’ recent work is “rigorously conceived and flawlessly crafted.” Wagle speaks of her “sensitivity to the beauty and tension of restraint. There’s no excess flourish here. The work and its presentation are consistently confined to the opportunities inherent in structure, materials, and light. The astonishing, complex color is the exception that illuminates the rest.” Thiewes has always been intrigued with the interplay of light and color in her often oversized, geometric pieces. As her career has progressed, Thiewes’ style has developed through different phases, all designed to engage the wearer.

Thiewes earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale and a Master of Fine Arts degree from Kent State University. Thiewes is Professor Emerita in the Department of Art at the University of Texas in El Paso, where she taught for 37 years, influencing generations of students. Following her retirement, she created several endowments to benefit students and faculty alike. Robert Ebendorf, American metalsmith and jeweler, considers her gift to her students was providing them with “cornerstones of curiosity.”

Her art is in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Arts and Design, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the National Museum of Scotland, among others. Thiewes has earned many awards for her work and teaching career, including a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artist Fellowship, the University of Texas Regents Outstanding Award for Teaching, and Distinguished Achievement Awards for Research and Teaching at the University of Texas El Paso.

The Smithsonian Visionary Award is presented annually by the Smithsonian Institution to American artists who are deemed by experts in the field to have achieved the pinnacle of sculptural arts and design, who have works in major museums, and who demonstrate distinction, creativity, exceptional artistry and vision in their respective medium. Previous awardees include Albert Paley, Wendell Castle, Toots Zynsky, Dale Chihuly, Faith Ringgold, Joyce J. Scott, Patti Warashina, David Ellsworth, Michael Hurwitz, Chunghi Choo, Mary Lee Hu, Dan Dailey, Judith Schaechter, Nick Cave, and Wayne Higby.