

BODY *and* SPIRIT

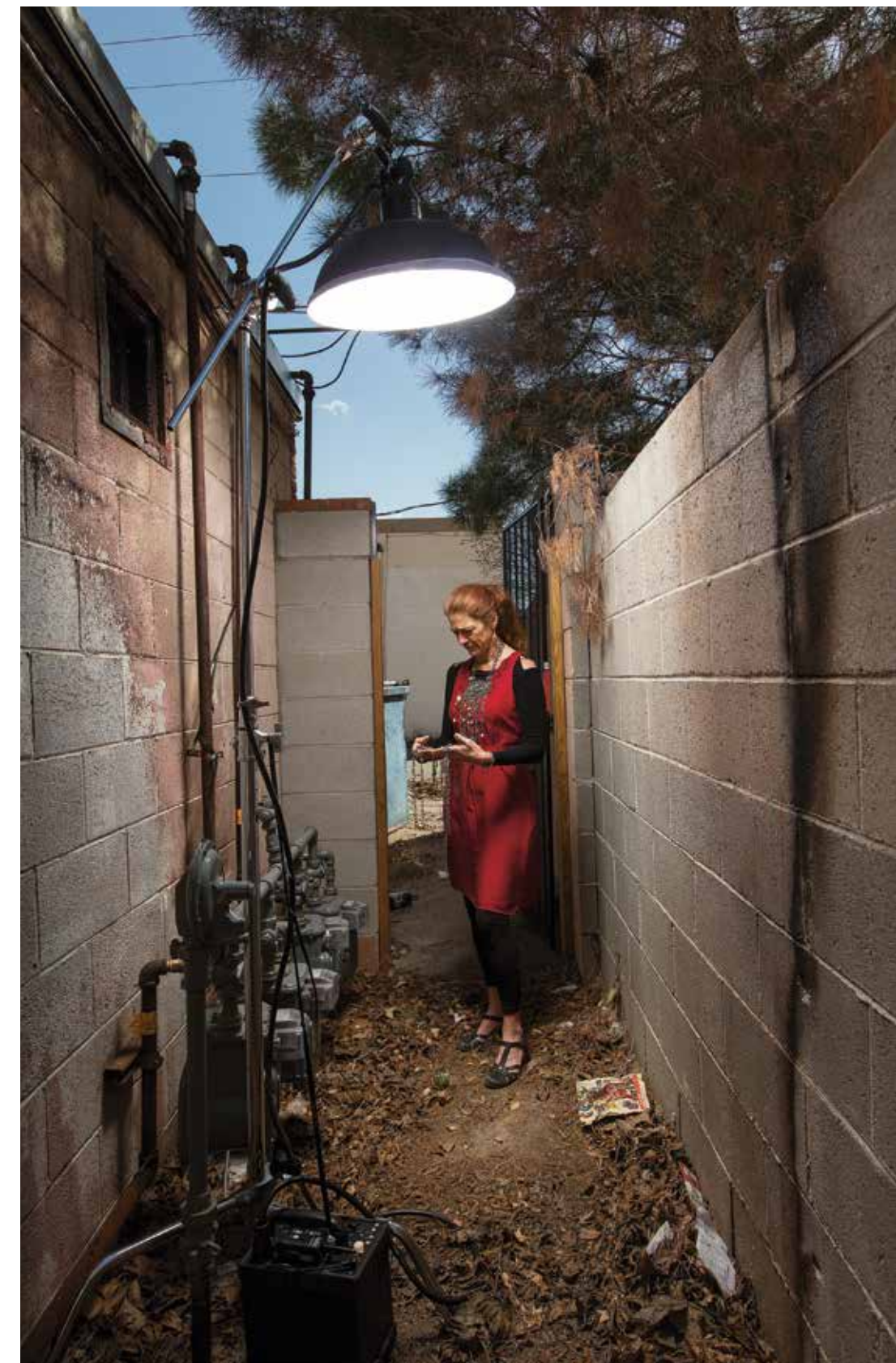
Jewelry maker Kristin Diener runs a finger down a length of chain on one of her necklaces and stops at about the one-and-a-half-inch mark. The hand-soldered sterling silver links are tiny, an eighth- to a quarter-inch long. “This section took me eight hours,” she says, “And that was working full steam.”

The piece, *Blue Sky: Cascade* (2013), is nearly 20 inches long and striking in its intricacy: link after link supporting a sterling silver plate shaped like half a sunburst and adorned with semiprecious stones, off of which more chains—what Diener calls “danglies”—are attached, themselves linking additional stones and tiny bits of found objects. Looking at this and the other finished and unfinished pieces housed in her Northeast Albuquerque studio, one gets an immediate sense of the transformative quality of both her process and the resulting works; the obsessive nature of their construction becomes an act of devotion, turning jewelry into sculpture, adornment into armor.

Born in the Midwest and raised in New York, Georgia, and Alabama, Diener received her MFA in jewelry making and metalsmithing from Bowling Green State University in 1986. She had been studying ceramics and drawing before learning of a jewelry class taught just once every two years. “As a kid I had always loved the ancient historical jewelry I had seen in books or museums, so I took the class and thought, ‘This is it,’ ” she says.

Since her instructor was more into casting than fabricating, Diener worked for several years in clay, producing organic, botanical-themed shapes. It was toward the end of her seven years in Boston that she began to experiment with soldering. A move to New Mexico in 1996 finally forced her hand. “I couldn’t cast anymore because I didn’t have the equipment, so I began fabricating.” And, she says, she rediscovered the beauty of turquoise and just how “yummy” sterling silver could be.

Which is not to say her work in any way mimics the turquoise and silver work



Diener, in the egress behind her studio, wearing *North Star: Earth-Sea-Sky-Soul Navigation: Madam X's Ear* (2016), necklace with handmade chain of sterling silver, fine silver, and brass; precious and semi-precious stones; mica and foil; and various found objects. *Coast Is Clear: Eyeglasses For Divination of the Future* (2001), is about the irony of thinking you have life figured out and then things fall apart.



*Winter's Heart: Devotion* (2017), sterling silver, fine silver, gold, hint of brass, topaz, heart charm, shell buttons, bone, pearl, enameled headpin with 24k gold leaf.

of Native American jewelers. She starts with a theme or an idea, not a form or a function. An avid traveler, especially throughout the American South, her work has always been about navigation—the journey, not the destination—and, most recently, how we are guided by water and the stars. Which is perhaps why much of her work is built around the shape of the cross. “I learned when reading about archetypal imagery that the cross is energizing,” she says. “It represents a crossroads.”

A lover of all forms of ancient armor and ceremonial jewelry, Diener’s work also references the pageantry and talismanic qualities inherent in certain forms of body decoration. “When I see beautiful ancient jewelry and metalwork and armor and chatelaines and samurai swords and Peruvian nose rings and kingfisher feather crowns and crowns encrusted with jewels . . . I do know that [they are] related to rank, beauty, and gender,” she says. “That fascinates me, often dismays me, and informs my studies.”

She is similarly drawn to the power of found objects, both from her own life and travels and those of others, which she always incorporates into her work. Navajo tears (rounded obsidian pebbles) collected on her hikes, bits of colored foil, animal hair and bones, the nose piece from a long-discarded pair of eyeglasses, antique buttons—they all become elements of the overall story she tells.

“I am not thinking about gender,” she continues. “I am thinking about the human body and spirit . . . about going someplace fantastical.” \* [kristindiener.com](http://kristindiener.com)