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#### A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO DAILY ADORNMENT



Beads are simple. Any small object with a hole in it can function as one. You might be thinking of throwaway jewelry and pre-teen crafters, but beads have been made for tens of thousands of years, and have always held some kind of daily importance beyond the superficial purpose of adornment. Beads have been used as tools for prayer, as currency, as game pieces, and as anti-stress devices. Though I am eager to learn more about these functions, I've made the process of collecting, displaying, and wearing beads a reflection of my ideas about objects we own, and my identity as a designer with some cynical feelings about design.

I, too, was a pre-teen crafter, but when I started collecting beads, I stopped dismantling the strands and just let them be. I've come to like the blunt repetition of the same shape or colors, especially since beads are rarely so exactly the same, and often there are beautiful and subtle deviations. A few memorable bead stores and flea markets in far-flung places drew me in, and my collection really began with colors and materials I already liked or wore often. I bought beads made of materials that interested me, or in places I wanted to remember. My favorite strands are the ones that are marked with a bead or two that are out-of-place. When I see someone with one of those beading trays, meticulously placing a complicated pattern of different colors, sizes, and materials, it saddens me to think of the lost opportunities for the kind of mistakes that make for a great strand of beads. And how a great bead or color might be discarded because of its unappealing cohorts. But other than these elusive and perfectly imperfect compositions, there is no complete set or top-notch piece to yearn for in my collecting habit. Though my focus has broadened over time, there is no agenda for my acquisitions.

Putting these beads to good use, or really, allowing myself to appreciate and remember each one equally, was the start of my bead display/storage/organizational system. The system is a row of small black nails along one wall of my bedroom, and it creates a regular, consistent frame for an uneven, multi-colored, and dynamic arrangement of beads. In rare moments it has been ordered by color, by length, or by some idea about a balanced composition, but most often you'll see it arranged in clusters of compositions I have worn recently. As someone who is more than a little paranoid about having too much stuff, and who is constantly battling the question "Plain or Fancy?", this system allows me to see the beads as multi-purpose (they are jewelry and decor!), and to never see them in a big tangled, nightmarish pile. While some collectors' collections remain hidden in dusty boxes, or basement rec-room altars, or clear vinyl sleeves, I can view all of the beads at once, every day. Better yet, I can put them around my neck and take them to new places in the world.

When I choose which beads to wear in the morning, it feels a little like making a drawing, or designing a product. There are decisions to make about texture, color, line, and shape; and you can't really tell how they're going to work together until they are held together on your neck. Playing with these compositions is easy and self-serving (you may think this is exactly like choosing which clothes to wear), but I have learned some interesting lessons and have certainly found some inspiring results from this activity. Often, in a rush to put a strand back and choose another, I accidentally put colors together that I would have never thought could be beautiful. This has led me to look for some beads in colors I typically find unappealing or boring, as often these awkward colors and shapes are great complements to the beads that I am more naturally inclined towards. I am grateful to be reminded, in this small way, that putting everything "nice" together doesn't not always make something nice. Also, since most of these beads are not precious or rare in any way, I love the surprising moment when a grouping manages to feel more luxurious than the sum of its parts. Best of all, these compositions are infinitely re-arrangeable and absolutely impermanent (the designer in me calls them "modular"). While clothing and other products wear out, go out of style, or become obsolete, these beads belong to no particular time, and can be refreshed by combining them in unexplored ways (of which there are thousands).

I smile to think of my crudely modernist philosophy (of modularity, functionality, economy, and essential form) finds its home in my relationship with beads: especially as they are seen as a superfluous product, and are ancient, often rustic objects with very little room for technical innovation. These are contradictions I am proud to wear every day.