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A JEWELER'S JOURNEY: TRACY JOHNSON

words DANIEL KANY
jewelry photography ROBERT DIAMANTE
studio photography ALLSION McKEEN



Jewelry designer Tracy Johnson at the bench.

Several years ago, a collector contacted the Harpswell-based jeweler Tracy Johnson about returning a necklace to her. Johnson paused. It was a major piece—her “Ancient Artifact,” which had won first prize at the 2008 Maine Crafts Association juried exhibition—and Johnson assumed the client wanted her to buy it back. But the client said she loved the piece and knew that Johnson did too, since she sold it only grudgingly from a show at the Audubon Society five years before. The client then explained that she was ill and had no heir. She thought so highly of the piece that she wanted it to be where it would be appreciated. She wanted Johnson to have it.

Johnson was stunned.

“That was an award-winning necklace,” says Johnson, “but having her give it to me the way she did, honestly, was the highest honor I have ever had in my career.”



“Ancient Artifact” (above) features a rutilated quartz pendant with sterling silver and 22-karat gold and a string of smaller beads of rutilated quartz and other semi-precious stones. The fabricated gold and silver elements are loose, flowing and painterly—accentuating the high-energy rhythms of the striations within the main stone. The entire necklace flows upward and outward from the egg-shaped pendant, smartly appearing to flare up from a band of gold-colored strands of rutile, the embedded mineral that creates the needle-like inclusions. The swirling fabricated gold and silver bell cap of the pendant and the clasp then pull the viewer’s eye up past two silver cones that play the part of cornucopia streaming forth a celebration of the myriad rutilated quartz beads.

Johnson’s hand is readily identifiable in the painterly style of the metalwork in “Ancient Artifact.” While she can be tight and symmetrical at times, her signature pieces often revel in the hand-oriented processes of their making, such as ornamental rows of hand-hammering and engraver marks that echo a classical style seen, for example, in ancient Roman jewelry. The term “painterly” applies not only to her decorative style but also her proclivity to structure her pieces in asymmetrical compositions with a sensibility similar to formalist abstract paintings.



A clear example of this is a gold ring featuring a large keshi pearl, an Australian opal and a ruby along with 18- and 22-karat gold. “This was a carte-blanche commission,” says Johnson. “I like working closely with clients, but of course I love the opportunity to be as creative as I want to be. I see these works as miniature sculptures: They are asymmetrical but balanced—for example, just look at the angle of the ruby. Like so much of my jewelry, it is made in the ancient tradition of working with high-karat gold: It was fabricated by hand—the gold is hammered, bent, soldered and then textured mark by mark with hammers and engravers.”

Johnson is not limited in her arsenal of ancient techniques. There are jewelers who hand-fabricate in metal and there are jewelers who carve wax—and then cast the carvings in the technique known as “lost wax” or “investment” casting—but there are precious few jewelers who regularly use both techniques.



An example of Johnson’s lost-wax cast work is the diamond ring she made for Maine painter Maret Hensick. (“Many of my pieces go to artists,” notes Johnson.) Hensick inherited the diamond from her mother but wanted to update the 1960s-

style setting. To achieve the organic, painterly flow of the 18-karat gold ring, Johnson carved the striations with robust, freehand strokes of her tool. “The idea behind the form,” she explains, “is a riverbed and flowing water.”

While many of her wax-carved pieces have that flowing, painterly feel, others are more formally focused, such as a pendant Johnson made for a gem dealer. According to Johnson: “I made this for a friend based on the onion domes of St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow. That was the inspiration, but particularly for the proportions. It is blue sapphire with rutilated quartz—and it’s the inclusions that make it really interesting because they look like starbursts. For me, this piece is quite stylized. It is tighter and more symmetrical than most. The client and I came to those decisions together. I really love this piece, but it’s different for me and it was extremely time-consuming. I know some people think it has a slightly Egyptian scarab-esque feel—and I can see that—either way, it’s biological symmetry.”

How did Johnson come to pick up her range of skills and sensibilities? The story of her interest in jewelry and metalworking has roots in her family life. Her father, an artist who attended the California School of Arts and Crafts, had an amateur interest in making gold jewelry. Johnson still treasures a charm bracelet her father started for her mother. He would add to it on special occasions such as anniversaries. (Later, Johnson would regularly add elements as well.) “I used to watch him cut out these charms with the saw and the files,” recalls Johnson. “We would go to the store and select the blank disks. Then we came home, and he made the charms. I would sit there and watch him: I was mesmerized by the tiny tools. Normally, he was a woodworker, so he used large and powerful saws and tools. This is what launched my interest in making jewelry.”

Johnson credits her curiosity as a young girl when she would do things like plant her face in the grass to see how it grows. “I wanted to see the very end of it—the intricacy of grass,” she muses. “Art is born from curiosity—how things grow, how things are formed. You have to be observant, but it all starts with curiosity.”

In high school, Johnson attended a gifted-and-talented program in Canton, CT. She asked a teacher about making jewelry—a skill the teacher happened to have—and together they started a jewelry program at the school. “It was an amazing chance,” she says. “I can’t emphasize enough the importance of the arts for kids. It certainly made all the difference for me.”

The literal beginning of Johnson’s jewelry journey began nine days after she turned 18, when she hopped on a bus and moved to San Francisco. “I stayed with a girlfriend’s father,” she recounts. “He gave me a month to find a job and an apartment – and I did. I got a job at Eaton’s in Sausalito, a jewelry shop where I was

hired as an apprentice. It's where I learned lost-wax casting. If I took an order, I met with the customer, designed the ring, and then made the ring. I handled my customers from beginning to end."

After also working at several other jewelry stores in the San Francisco area, Johnson moved to Maine in 1978 to attend the Portland School of Art. Johnson worked at Amaryllis for a while and then opened her own business at 62 Market Street. "It was going very well," she recounts, "but it was a handshake lease, and after three years the landlord wanted to renovate and triple the rent ... so I moved to Bali."

Johnson went to Bali with a few hand-drawn sheets of silver jewelry designs and an entrepreneurial idea. "I quickly grew it into an important business with about 130 accounts around the country," she says, "but I didn't want to use child labor and preferred to work at a higher caliber. So, I went back to the bench in my Portland studio in the High Street Building and did my own work again."

How should we categorize Johnson's jewelry? Is it art? Despite its stylistically refined sophistication, Johnson talks about her work in practical terms.

"It has to be wearable," she insists. "It's not art for art's sake—it's jewelry that's worn. I make it to be worn. I don't want it to be sitting in a box somewhere. This is partially why I do a great deal of custom work instead of just making whatever I want. It's all about building relationships with customers; it's a highly collaborative approach. For the most part, people see the value in having something made just for them. It has more meaning, and it can be enjoyed and then passed down through generations. I like to think of my work as 'classically elegant'—and I think there is plenty of room for expression in a classical format of wearable art."

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Although deeply rooted in Maine, Daniel Kany is a senior writer at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

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Newly Completed



A client commissioned this necklace and earring set to wear for her daughter's wedding. She brought me her dress so I could see the cut and color. We chatted as I made a few sketches until she said, "That's the one—go for it." While I worked from the sketch, the pieces really came to life in the fabrication process as I made design choices around the gold work and gemstones. As a focus, I chose to use Montana sapphires, for their soft blue quality and freshwater pearls for their

luminous texture and organic irregularity. The combination made me think of ocean life: the way sea vegetation and animal life are layered and move underwater, catching the light from above.

I call this piece “The Hidden Reef.”

—*Tracy Johnson*

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