

SPIRIT OF PEARL

Romancing the Stones: Couple finds challenges, inspiration in creating jewelry together

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For the layman, the notion of making jewelry might bring to mind cauldrons of molten metal wielded by rough-hewn Tolkien-types with a yen to rule Middle Earth. Sonoma artists Mischell Maldonado and Fritz Pearce aren't interested in making the "one ring to rule them all," but rather make their own fine art creations for display on the body, galleries or both, as they have for the past three years.

"We're what you call 'studio art jewelers.' The difference between a studio art jeweler and a more traditional manufacturing shop has to do with the one-on-one process of the idea and the materials and techniques," said Pearce, whose contemplative mien is underscored by his fiery beard, an adornment worthy of a classic sage or classic rocker.

"What's great about this way of working is that it's an individual work of art designed for an individual by an individual."

At 3Arts Studio, the duo's creative space located in a rural compound surrounded by myriad other artists, Maldonado and Pearce design pieces for their three collections as well as partner on a steady flow of commissioned work. Each has a distinct vision that melds seamlessly into the other's, not from a division of labor but from a cohesion of concept.

"We are a partnership and we collaborate together, but we all also have our own design aesthetic," explained Pearce, who studied both at the lauded Rhode Island



School of Design and at a master's program in Germany. The background shows in his penchant for refined line and Bauhaus-like penchant for evocative, yet minimal, design that nods to industrial design motifs.

By contrast, Maldonado, a Sonoma Valley High School alumnus who studied at the Gemological Institute of America, prefers a naturalistic approach to the work, devoted to the intrinsic elegance of organic forms.

"I like working with things that are more organic. I like to fuse the metal and be more spontaneous, more sensual. I'm very nature-driven. I'm from California, so I'm really inspired by Californian flora and fauna."

Maldonado said that she is influenced by the randomness of nature as much as the control she yields in the studio working side by side with Pearce.

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"It works out really well. We also live together. I think it works well for us because



we have our own space and our own jobs for the day. Then when we're working on pieces together - our work - we collaborate so much that we just kind of 'know,'" explained Maldonado.

Pearce agrees, pointing out how each facet of their relationship informs the other.

"It just kind of flows because our relationship is more than a business relationship. But I've also heard a lot from the other side - plenty of artists who are couples can't work together and need separate work studios and get defensive. We have our days when there is something that one of us is really adamant about, but we give each other that space. We respect each other as individual artists - and beings."

Ultimately, the process works because, as Pearce said, "We share in each other's visions."

Indeed, the artists' varied approaches are as complementary as they may seem disparate. Even on a conceptual level, Pearce and Maldonado fuse the divide between art and design through which jewelry sometimes slips.

"I would say that art starts with the inspiration and design is the process of refining that inspiration into something - breaking it down to its core," observed Pearce. "Some artists push that to the point where the work is un-wearable - that's their artistic vision, to challenge the stereotype of what jewelry is."

The emphasis at 3Arts Studio, however, is an exquisite admixture of form and function.

"We design our work to be - I don't want to use the word 'practical,' but wearable. It has to be something that can be worn, but not

necessarily every day. A lot of it is 'special occasion' jewelry," said Pearce. "Before we bring a design to the marketplace, Mischell will wear it around for a couple of weeks to see how it wears and from that process of design you get to know internally what will and won't work. The interesting thing about jewelry art is that it's a nice combination of science of art - there's metallurgy, math - the gems alone are a whole separate area of study in our trade; there's also a whole set of chemical properties involved with that too."

But ultimately, for Maldonado and Pearce, it's about the art.

"We both see jewelry as an art and are moved emotionally by it," said Pearce.

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