



October 5, 2008

Jewelry artists gain ground for bold designs

Three local jewelry artists find their innovative designs put them at forefront of high-end scene

Mary Chao
Staff writer

Rochester may be known as the Flower City to regional folks, but it has gained a reputation in the art world as a hotbed for emerging jewelry artists.

That's because it is home to one of the premier schools for crafts in the world, says Leonard Urso, a metal professor at Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Crafts. The metals program has about 30 students who ultimately find work with jewelers or strike out on their own as fine artists, Urso says. Graduates include Barbara Heinrich, who operates her studio with a team in the Rochester area while selling her work at galleries around the country.

"I go to national jewelry shows, and the talent in Rochester surpasses elsewhere," says Colleen Griffin-Underhill, manager of Memorial Art Gallery's gallery store. Jewelry is the top-selling category at the shop, she says.

The demand for sculptural art-to-wear is growing, Griffin-Underhill says, crediting RIT with the burst in local talent.

So Young Park

Life and death have been heavy on the mind of So Young Park ever since nine of her friends and close family members in Korea died either by suicide or natural causes. "I asked myself: 'What is life, what is death?'" says Park, 35.

Her jewelry art mirrors her dark ponderings. Popular pieces include sterling silver hand-carved in eggshell shapes with tiny pearls embedded in the shells, signifying a sense of birth.

Much of Park's commercial work is based on what she calls "nativity." Little sprouts emerge from her jewelry pieces such as pendants, earrings or brooches. To create the look, Park heats up the wires to make balls at the end of the wire. Then she drills little holes in her jewelry pieces that allow her to put the wires through. The result is an abstract look that resembles a flower about to bloom.

A native of Ul-san, Korea, Park came to the United States in 1999 to expand her experience as a metalsmith with her second master's of fine arts degree at RIT. She met and fell in love with Robert Manley, who was also an RIT student. They married and live with three cats in Henrietta.

Rochester is recognized by fine crafts artists as a welcoming place for the arts field, Park says, noting when she travels to shows, other artists would comment on how friendly the arts patrons are.

Her silver pieces range from \$200 to \$400 for earrings, \$500 to \$600 for brooches and \$700 to \$1,600 for necklaces. Park also works in gold, which accounts for about 35 percent of her current work.

This past year, Park expanded her business into wholesale, attending trade shows to sell her wares to retailers. Sixteen galleries around the country now carry her jewelry art.

Myung Urso

Art and fashion are key elements in Myung Urso's designs. Urso, 48, of Brighton, combines her love of textiles with contemporary art in her metal pieces. She hand-sews silk fabric around podlike metal shapes to create an eccentric centerpiece for her hand-made chains in oxidized silver.

"Everything I sew is from my head," she says.

Urso began her career as a fiber artist, with a master's of fine arts in fiber arts from Hongik University in Seoul, South Korea, and then went on to work as an editor and reporter for a monthly craft magazine. She earned a master's degree in gallery management from City University in London, which was followed by a stint as a gallery curator and a retail store owner. In 2006, Urso moved to Rochester and is married to Leonard Urso, the RIT metals professor.

Her style is often unpredictable, using lentils set in resin in one piece with a silver leaf or a black and white Korean calligraphy centerpiece in another. She describes her jewelry as an artistic expression of fashion. The look is bold and contemporary, often featuring geometric shapes.

Most of her one-of-a-kind pieces are \$500 to \$1,300, though her repeated design necklaces start at \$120.

Urso has established a following at shows in Boston and Chicago, as well as fine art galleries, but she has only a few collectors in Rochester, explaining the aesthetics may not be complementary.

"My clients are people who want to be different," she says.

Liaung Chung Yen

Liaung Chung Yen tells the story of his own personal struggles through his art. In his piece, *Past, Future, Here I Am*, the brooch's center stone, a clear quartz, is half-polished and half-rough cut.

"It is the place I am right now," he says.

Yen, 36, grew up in Taichung, Taiwan, and moved to the United States in 1998 to attend the Savannah College of Art and Design. After graduation, he landed a job working for Heinrich's Rochester studio, which crafts high-end contemporary art jewelry.

Nowadays, Yen continues to keep his day job working for Heinrich while carving out his own niche with his line of jewelry, mostly in 18-karat gold. Yen is experimenting with making fun, colorful rings out of plastic bottle caps, which allows the wearer to change the ring's look by unscrewing the cap. He lives in Henrietta with his wife, Shuching Yang, and 1-year-old son, Ethan.

"One (job) makes money and the other loses money," Yen jokes.

Yen treats his jewelry as sculptural art, except it is wearable. His ring *Space for Hidden Treasure* is not for the faint of heart, with the gold sculpture rising almost 2 inches above the finger with an onyx treasure set in the center with a gold bead.

His work in 18-karat gold ranges from \$2,000 to \$3,000, with his highest-priced piece at \$9,000 for a gold necklace called *Petals* that resembles petals on a flower. Yen is exhibiting in group shows and sells to galleries around the country and at the Memorial Art Gallery store locally.

MCHAO@DemocratandChronicle.com
