

A Really Good Goldsmith

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There are different kinds of jewelry. It seems everybody is a bit confused about this, and there's a natural tendency to think of all jewelry as being more-or-less alike. And yet, even the most unreflective person would distinguish costume jewelry from precious jewelry, at least for insurance purposes. The material value renders these two kinds of jewelry quite different. So why not make other distinctions?

This business of distinction-drawing is especially useful in order to understand a contemporary studio jeweler like Pat Flynn. His work is emphatically not costume jewelry: inexpensive, glitzy, usually mass-produced, and designed to coordinate with fashion. Nor is his work what gallery-owner Helen Drutt calls "social jewelry": highly conventional objects like engagement rings that are designed to communicate in ordinary social codes. And his work is not exactly "art-jewelry": objects specifically designed to be compared to cutting-edge visual art, and that hold an extended discourse with history and theory.

This last distinction is especially important in the current craft-world, because the kind of craft that aspires to the condition of art is typically deemed to be the most significant. It's this kind of work that is most often collected by museums, reproduced in books, written about in magazines, and featured in solo exhibitions. Many times, the particular "craft-ness" (my neologism) of art-jewelry is suppressed in favor of something that looks and feels more like art. As a result, you'll see jewelry that can't be used in any traditional way; that incorporates some of the familiar motifs of current art like text, photographs, or pointed social critique; or that shade into art formats like installation or performance. The craft world frequently selects this kind of work for its highest honors. One could think of Dale Chihuly and Thurmon Statom in glass, Peter Voulkos and Adrian Saxe in ceramics, or Lisa Norton and Myra

Mimlitsch-Gray in metalsmithing. And while some of this work is very good, all the attending hoopla has the unpleasant side effect of making other, less art-oriented work seem less interesting. At worst, too much enthusiasm for craft-as-art can demote more traditional work to a lower order of quality.

Pat Flynn doesn't harbor great ambitions to an "Artist", in the sense of current artworld movements. He deliberately calls himself a goldsmith, because that term, with all its connotations of skilled work, most accurately describes what he does. Correspondingly, the kind of jewelry Flynn makes is classical goldsmithing, but in a modern taste. He is a highly skilled technician, with years of experience working in the trade, and more years of developing his signature mechanisms, finishes, and settings. His jewelry is highly considered and refined, worked out in series in which each piece is subtly different. His sense of the traditional goldsmith can also be located in his intentions about how his jewelry will be used: he truly wants his jewelry to be worn, rather than to be displayed as an art object. It's his attention to technique, his cautious development, and his insistence that the proper home for his jewelry is on the body that makes him a goldsmith, but these same qualities also make the craft-as-art crowd suspicious.

However, he is very much a contemporary goldsmith. Unlike traditional jewelers who were content to execute designs given to them by artists or taken from pattern-books, Flynn makes his own creative decisions. He has a specific set of goals, and is thoroughly self-conscious about his intentions. His sense of form is thoroughly contemporary, influenced by the twentieth-century ethos of abstract design. These ideas of artistic self-direction, self-consciousness, and abstraction are all markers of Modernity. So, Flynn has one foot in the traditional sense of the goldsmith, and the other foot in Twentieth-century Modernism. But to demote Flynn's work to a lower level of quality than "Art-jewelry" would be a mistake. To my way of thinking, he

doesn't make Art-with-a capital-A, but he is a very good jeweler. They are two different enterprises, and one is not inferior to the other.

At first, the attributes I just mentioned might not seem very special. On consideration, however, the creative goldsmith is necessarily a cultural critic. For instance, Flynn has to resist the idea that all things good and useful must be mass-produced, and thus he stands in opposition to everything the mass-market stands for. On the other hand, he opposes unimaginative craft, where handwork is placed in strict service to the bottom line, and ultimately comes to resemble factory work. For Flynn, the best object is made carefully and slowly and in limited numbers. Such a position refutes the assumptions of both big-money capitalism and socialism - a political position that I won't pursue. But it's there in his work.

Flynn also refuses to be cynical about his audience. He sees his customers as essentially like himself, and does not criticize them for being insensitive, philistine, or bourgeois. (Such accusations are a staple of the artistic avant-garde in this country.)

Furthermore, Flynn has no sense of the ironic distance that has become a necessary ingredient of Postmodernism. His jewelry is utterly sincere: here's a guy who *really* means what he does. When he alters one of his designs, he sincerely believes it will be more beautiful; when he sells a piece of jewelry, he sincerely wants the new owner to love the thing. There's nothing of the tongue-in-cheek, have-it-both-ways sensibility that informs some of the biggest art-stars of the past two decades, from David Salle to Damien Hirst. In his direct honesty, you can detect his opposition to the glitz, showmanship, and hypocrisy of the bigtime Art-with-a-capital-A business.

But Flynn's identity as a goldsmith is not just a collection of refusals. It also represents a series of assertions, many of which are wrapped up in his attitude about jewelry. For instance, Flynn says he loved to do repair. (He

used to do repair as part of his livelihood, but now he only repairs his own work.) Inside the trade, jewelry repair is often regarded as a necessary evil, an apprenticeship that ambitious jewelers endure only at the beginning of their careers. Usually, they want to stop doing repair work as soon as possible. It's a tough job: demanding, repetitive, alternately tricky and tedious. But Flynn enjoyed the technical challenge of doing repairs, feeling that the work kept him on his toes. In addition, he says he likes to practice, something I have never heard another jeweler say. Flynn draws an analogy to a musician, who must rehearse the same piece constantly, and even perform simple exercises like playing scales, just to stay in condition. For Flynn, repair work was just another way to hone his skills, so that they were sharp when the need arose. These are the attitudes of a man who is passionate about his craft, and for whom labor is never a burden.

He also likes the idea of making worn-out and damaged jewelry useful again: extending its life, so to speak. The idea of the "life" of jewelry is crucial to Pat Flynn, and it's crucial to understanding him. Flynn says that he can't think of anything better than having somebody wear out his jewelry. At first, this might seem peculiar: asserting that his highest ambition is to have his work destroyed. But to have a piece of jewelry wear out, it must be worn, constantly, for years. It can't be set aside for special occasions, and it can't sit in a jewelry box. It has to become part of a person's daily routine, and that means it has to become intimately connected to that person's identity. Jewelry that is filled with meaning wears out, and the damage is proof that someone really cared about it.

Flynn bears witness to this process. For instance, when he did repair work, he noticed that people were full of anxiety about their jewelry. Sometimes this was concern that their precious gems would not be stolen, but more often it was the concern of somebody who had attached a great deal of feeling to the object, and was afraid of losing it forever. Flynn still welcomes these

feelings, and he designs his jewelry to attract them. He knows clearly that the care that he invests in his work will pay a dividend: people will make their own investments, too. They come to love his jewelry; they fill the objects with stories.

We all invest inert objects with personal significance. Everybody has souvenirs and mementos; everybody traces the trajectory of their lives with their collection of things. These objects can be anything, of course: from tools to shoes, from clothes to small appliances. Typically, people tend to think of these personal meanings as being sentimental, low-grade emotions, and therefore as having no artistic value. But if that's true, why do real people value their most sentimental objects so highly? (It is said that most people, if pressed to decide what to rescue from a burning house, will choose the family papers and the family photo album. The family jewelry would probably come third.) The problem, I think, is that some will favor theory over actuality; meaning in a book over meaning in somebody's life. Pat Flynn comes down firmly on the side of life-as-lived. He prefers the meaning of his jewelry to reside in the heart, not in a library.

But I digress. Jewelry, with its diminutive size and ongoing contact with human body, is particularly well equipped to receive personal meanings. Flynn is attentive to these possibilities, and provides a range of visual cues that invite personalization. For instance, it's easy to see that Flynn's jewelry is invested with an unusual amount of care. Edges are burnished just so, hinges mutate into visual accents, two otherwise similar pins might be set with stones in completely different patterns. Every aspect of Flynn's one-of-a-kind jewelry is minutely examined, and every detail is resolved. Flynn now makes his mechanisms, instead of buying commercial findings. This intense degree of scrutiny may not be apparent if you see only one piece at a time, but it becomes more obvious when a grouping of Flynn's jewelry is seen all at once. There are series of plain nail pins, nail pins with gems or pearls, shield pins,

and so on. Each series is line of inquiry. Subtleties become more apparent, and you can see how he works variations on a single design idea. All of this - care, resolution, variation - work together to create an object that embodies its maker's love of his craft. This might sound mushy, but I think it's true: the object that has already been loved by its maker, more easily becomes loved by its owner.

This is one reason why people respond to Flynn's jewelry. (It's also why mass-produced consumer goods will never fully displace craft.) People recognize the care and deliberation that is concentrated in his work, and they respond in kind.

Flynn has other ways to invite personalization. He is determined that his jewelry be both beautiful and sensuous. The beauty is easy to see in his craftsmanship, materials, and play of contrasts. Furthermore, he arranges his forms so that there is a rightness to them, a quality that is best perceived if the work of a lesser jeweler is placed next to Flynn's. Inferior work will have generic forms, while Flynn's shapes will be carefully modulated. In mediocre jewelry, different forms will be stuck together clumsily, while Flynn's will be placed elegantly. There is nothing reflexive or commonplace about the way Flynn designs, and it shows.

The sensuousness of Flynn's jewelry cannot be determined by eye: you must handle the objects to find out their weight and balance, their plays of textures; or the way they move on the body. To give only one example: when I first looked at one of his black nail brooches, it appeared to be prohibitively heavy. But when I picked the thing up, it was magically light: Flynn has gone to the trouble of hollowing out the back of the nail. I was delighted with this discovery. Significantly, my pleasure was accessible only through my body... and this was entirely by design. Flynn orchestrates a complex experience of

eye and sense, of beauty and sensuousness. People are seduced. And once seduced, they get attached.

You can also see how he plays his jeweler's eye for detail against his (rather restrained) sense of rawness. The crusty black surface of the nails the carefully abraded finish on his gold, his slightly funky forms: all these contrast beautifully against the perfect mechanisms and the hard glitter of gems. But the crusty surfaces and irregular shapes have two other purposes. First, Flynn wants to create an element of uncertainty, where we cannot be completely sure these are contemporary objects. There is an air of antiquity about his jewelry, as if they had been found at an archeological dig, and were records of a lost culture. In our era of mass-merchandising, we are constantly assaulted with the new and the newer. This barrage of bright shiny things has the curious effect of making old, worn-out things more stimulating to the imagination. New things have the scent of manipulative hype; old things have the scent of history - and mystery. We cannot truly know the past, especially as it becomes more distant, and thus old things become the site of all kinds of imaginative projections. Some of these projections are sadly misinformed, but some of them express an authentic longing for a life where we are not subject to so many lies and deceptions. Looking at things that have the aura of age, people imagine a life in small villages, without advertising, TV, or election campaigns, locked into the rhythm of the seasons. It's this sense of longing that Flynn recalls.

Secondly, Flynn uses all those irregularities to remind us that his jewelry is not made by machine, but by hand. The machine-made surface is usually perfect, free of flaws, blobs, or crusts. Even when a mechanically reproduced object attempts to replicate the funkiness of handwork, each different object is exactly the same. There is no variation. They're cold. It's hard to detect a living, breathing person in such perfect things. So, I believe mechanical perfection and the absence of variation are qualities that resist the investment

of meaning. In contrast, the natural irregularities that come with handwork, along with variations from one object to the next, invite it. In other words, people detect the presence of another person in handwork, and something like a relationship ensues. The object becomes a receptive screen for the projection of meaning.

However, the trace of handwork can be overdone. Flynn complains about a certain kind of craft-show jewelry in which the makers cover their surfaces with "art-marks" - usually a collection of squiggles, x's, zigzags, and ersatz brush strokes - that are intended to be authentic artist's gestures. The trouble is, they aren't. Usually, they are little blips and dashes that are churned out without thought, and certainly without any revisions. (Remember that most "expressive" of New York School action paintings were often rehearsed and revised extensively, as in the work of Willem De Kooning or Franz Kline.) The artmarks that Flynn criticizes are not records of the difficult struggle to get it right, they're icons. They're elements in the grab-bag of popular culture, and can be sprinkled like pepper all over bad jewelry.

Flynn is adamant that he makes the real thing. He is deeply concerned about his "touch" (another term from action painting), which is to say that there are certain things he does to the metal that can't be designed ahead of time, and must be done during the process of making the object. Anybody who has worked metal for a while knows about these processes: there are some techniques that only an experienced hand can manage. Flynn's surfaces are a case in point. He will sometimes imprint a sheet of metal with paper, to leave a faint texture. He'll continue to build a complex surface: filing; sanding; and burnishing. In the end, the finish changes from one part of the object another, lending subtle emphasis wherever Flynn thinks it's needed. That's one of the fabulous things about Flynn's work, especially the gold brooches, because you see the surface going from bright to matte, or from velvety to raspy. This the touch of a really experienced goldsmith.

All these qualities add up. The best of Flynn's jewelry (and his cups, I might add) are carefully wrought, signaling his intense concern. They are beautiful, they are surprisingly sensuous, they are easy to wear. They have an air of mystery, and they bear the trace of an expert craftsman's hand. Each of these qualities is calculated to invite the projection of meaning, and to accumulate memories. Flynn's ultimate purpose is not just to make a pleasing object: his goal is to make something that a person can invest with their own significance. Each piece of jewelry is an empty vessel, so to speak, waiting to be filled. And, as far as I can tell, they really work.

Regrettably, we no longer regard this process of accumulating meaning in ordinary people's lives as a suitable quality of Art. Nor do we regard the kinds of objects that invite it - jewelry like Flynn's, for instance - as Art, either. Perhaps we make this discrimination because almost everybody participates in the process of adding and inventing meaning, and we still want Art to remain an exclusive precinct. This is the nasty side of elitism - the impulse to exclude ordinary people from the aesthetic experience. Or, perhaps we demand a certain reflexive self-consciousness about the whole project, and we want Flynn and all the craftsmen and women like him to explain themselves.

Either way, the craft of making objects that ordinary people can invest with meaning is still vitally important. Consider the wider world of our material culture: everything we buy, use, and consume. We constantly encounter anonymous, machine-made objects, including everything from toilet paper and soda cans to automobiles and buildings. All these objects speak to us, but what do they say? I think everyone reading this essay has experienced enough of bland institutional spaces and disposable consumer goods to come to the same conclusion. In fact, the manufacturers of consumer goods seem desperate to make anything that people will relate to: consider Michael Jordan sports shirts or oversized sports-utility vehicles. Each of these designs

represents an attempt to stimulate sales by offering the consumer something they can identify with: sports heroes or a fantasy of outdoor adventure. But further consider how unreal these gestures are.

In contrast, handmade objects like a Pat Flynn bracelet embodies something genuine: the disciplined work and careful scrutiny of a particular man. To some degree, these qualities are present in all handmade work, even the worst of it. But, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details. The refinement of a hinge or stone-setting on Flynn's jewelry cannot be simulated by a careless worker, nor can his inexhaustible variety be reproduced in mass-production. The man is present in his work, and people recognize it.

In the end, it's a quality-of-life issue. I think our culture hungers for objects in which we can still detect a human presence. We need objects that somebody has already loved, so that we can more easily love them ourselves. By doing so, we find meaning in our lives. We need objects that have been carefully made, and come to us without hype and hollow fantasies, so that we can touch something honest. In doing so, we are reminded about the difference between what's real and what's not. Pat Flynn's jewelry can do these things. The jewelry may be small, and there may not be many of them around, but I think people really need them.

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