

metalsmith

ART DESIGN JEWELRY METAL

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Denise Betesh A Golden Bond

BY ANDREA DINOTO

FOR DENISE BETESH, who has been working in buttery 22 karat gold for the past 20 years, “what’s important is making jewelry that’s not a fashion statement but

something to be cherished and honored.” Working from her Santa Fe-based home studio, Betesh produces all of her pieces by hand with the help of one hard-working bench assistant. Her matte-textured jewels evoke the classical examples and techniques in which she was trained, albeit with contemporary flair. Woven chains, heart-charm earrings with interchangeable drop elements, and gem-set rings are among her timeless designs.

Betesh, 58, studied jewelry making in the 1970s at the Museum School of Fine Arts in Boston, where she was able “to access pieces in the museum’s ancient jewelry departments and study design, technique, and engineering.” She became adept at granulation and chain weaving, noting: “It was authentic. We alloyed the gold, milled it, pulled it to wire, wrapped it around a dowel, sawed the coil, closed and fused the links, interwove them.” Betesh further perfected her skills at the Jewelry Arts Institute (formerly Kulicke-Stark) in New York.

Making a chain, says Betesh, is “a time-consuming labor of love” that demands anywhere from 15 to 30 hours of work—each link is fused rather than soldered. She regularly makes “a dozen different versions” of each chain design, producing them in light, medium and heavy weight. In some, the ends of the toggle bars are set with small diamonds; but stones play a more dramatic role in her designs for rings, earrings and, recently, green sapphire bead necklaces with gold toggle closures. “I usually introduce new designs after the [annual] Tucson gem show,” she says, “which sets the tone for my palette.” Betesh sells about 500 pieces a year in a

price range of around \$600 for charms to upwards of \$3,000 for chains. “We probably produce another 100 pieces for inventory,” she explains, with her assistant handling



Chains
22k gold

all aspects of bench work, while Betesh does most of the finishing, stone setting, developing new designs, not to mention invoicing, shipping, making QuickBooks entries and other office tasks. “We do work a lot!” she says, emphasizing that she never fails to reinvest her earnings back into the business, which from the start has been self-sustaining, “growing steadily year after year.”

Betesh’s path to fine jewelry was, admittedly, a bit eccentric. In the sixties, she crocheted vests and sold them to the New York department store Henri Bendel. She also dabbled in stained glass and basket weaving, but it was her macramé wedding rings woven from gold wire that caught the attention of Cartier’s Aldo Cippullo (designer of the store’s signature “love” bracelet). Betesh was only 16 when he commissioned her to make similar elements for pendant necklaces that were sold at the posh emporium. (She made them on the subway going to and from school). Cippullo encouraged her to pursue a jewelry career, which led to her training at the MFA, but Betesh delayed launching a business; instead, she spent ten years cutting hair at the Vidal Sassoon salon in Manhattan. “It wasn’t until I moved to Santa Fe in 1989 that I actually settled on becoming a jeweler,” she says, noting her good fortune in selling her entire first small collection to a boutique owner whom she met while on vacation in San Francisco. “She admired my earrings and bought all my pieces.” Similarly, at the first show Betesh did with Accessory Circuit in 1997, the upscale Japanese retailer



Jeweler Denise Betesh consulting with client in her Santa Fe studio.

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Takashimaya bought her entire case for its Fifth Avenue flagship store. “I was the first fine jeweler they brought in, and I’ve been very blessed,” says Betesh. Indeed, she is one of a handful of art jewelers for whom the escalating price of gold has, ironically, proved to be a boon for her business. “People actually feel they’re making an investment now,” she says, “and I don’t want to see the price go down, to have the pieces devalued.”

In recent years, Betesh has been selling directly at three or four ACC shows where she enjoys interacting with customers and observing how they respond to her work. She is also represented in over a dozen stores around the country, and one in the UK,

which together generate about 60 percent of her annual sales. Despite her success, Betesh resists branding because, she says, “I savor the process of discovery. I think of myself as a person, an artist, a jeweler—not a brand.” She accepts commissions and enjoys working with clients—“designing with parameters”—through stores, or directly as with a recent piece she made at her father’s behest for her mother’s 75th birthday. Betesh created a chain-mail bracelet of 576 fused links with “75 plus one-for-good-luck” linked-on, bezel-set diamonds that came originally from a necklace that had belonged to her grandmother. “It took an obsessed week to make,” says Betesh adding, “I have not yet done another.”

Andrea DiNoto is a New York-based writer on art and design.

Mesh Bracelet, 2011
22k gold, diamonds

