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Michael David Sturlin

Michael David Sturlin is a studio jewelry artist, educator, and an award winning goldsmith.

In addition to his studio practice Michael is a respected teacher, offering jewelry classes, goldsmithing workshops and professional development seminars. Michael is a member of the faculty of the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts, the Society of North American Goldsmiths, and the Jewelry Design Professionals Network.

From Michael:

'Working in the studio is a passion for me as much as it is a vocation.

It is a meditative process that is both compelling and sustaining.

My minimalist jewelry isn't influenced by trend or fashion, quality and design make it enduring and collectible.

I create jewelry that is engaging, sophisticated, inviting, well crafted, and beautiful."

<http://www.goldcrochet.com/>

<http://www.michaeldavidsturlin.com/>

1. Tell us a little about you and what attracted you to the jewelry field.

I was born in Jackson Hole Wyoming in 1955. I grew up on my grandparent's Appaloosa horse ranch, a mile and a half south of Wilson Wyoming, at the foot of Teton Pass. In the 1960 census the little town of Wilson had a population of 36 people. There was a post office, general store, filling station, the Stage Coach Bar, and a rodeo arena.

From a very early age I was involved with the accoutrements of horse training and ranch work, both of which entailed many handicrafts and a lot of dexterity. I became adept at things like leather work and making rope from horse hair for weaving and braiding saddle cinches, halters, and bridles. My grandmother taught me knitting and crochet, beadwork and macramé, gardening and baking.

Ranch life in general involves constructing and repairing all manner of things. Working with my hands seemed very natural and comfortable. I especially liked helping my grandfather shoe the horses. I was attracted to the activity of adjusting the size and shape of the horseshoes with the hammer and anvil, and filing the edges of the hooves even with the shoes once they were nailed in place.

One very significant occurrence in my inclination towards jewelry was the good fortune to have Mr. Phillip Morton, a founder of the Society of North American Goldsmiths, as a neighbor for a few summers when I was a lad. Seeing his studio and his jewelry made a lasting impression on me. I think that is probably where my trajectory into goldsmithing began.

2. What type of training have you had? From the ground up - how did you get your start? Give the progressive steps that got you where you are today.

I had my first class in fabricating silver jewelry in high school. Regrettably, the teacher was basically uninspired and disinterested. There wasn't very much instruction or equipment available for the students to work with. Frustrated by the lack of direction and meager facilities, I bought a few tools and some silver and I started off on my own.

I was primarily self taught for the first decade and a half of my career as a goldsmith. I began in the early 1970s by constructing simple jewelry from silver sheet and wire. I next added lapidary skills to my repertoire, cutting cabochons and doing intricate inlay work. I made jewelry of many types and styles from western belt buckles and bolo ties to very contemporary inlaid rings and bracelets.

I became very proficient at working with silver. Making large and complicated jewelry items is a very good way to learn to anneal and form metal and it provides the means to develop fluency with the materials. The more ambitious the jewelry became the more I learned about the working properties of precious metal.

As I started to incorporate larger amounts of gold into my work I endeavored to learn more about the metal itself. I bought a rolling mill and some draw plates and I began to alloy my gold and to cast ingots with torch and crucible. That is when I started to produce all of my own mill products and sheet and wire in the studio.

At this point I realized that the most fascinating and compelling thing about the art of goldsmithing was the ability to control the entirety of the process. I embraced the traditional European approach of making everything from scratch, which brought a new aesthetic value into the act of creating jewelry. This was a transcendent moment for me.

I learned primarily by doing. I became versatile at fabricating many kinds of traditional jewelry items and I produced specialty work for many other designers and artists in addition to my own evolving body of work. At one point I had a commission for an item which would require creating multiples of a single design. It was a project best approached by executing the original model in wax, so I learned to work in wax using an additive sculptural process. I followed that with mold making and casting, also self taught. Afterwards I did specialty casting for the trade in addition to designing and creating my own work.

In 1986 I learned about the Revere Academy of Jewelry Arts in San Francisco. Finally, a place to take some formal training in goldsmithing! I went to California and met Alan Revere and was inspired by his school and his faculty, as well as by his fabulous jewelry. My first two workshops were week long classes in advanced goldsmithing taught by Evert De Grave in 1986 and Jeffrey Fillmore Thompson in 1987.

At each of those first formal classes I learned more in 5 days than I had in the previous 5 years. My experiences at Revere allowed me to see that I was on the right track; I had just taken the long and circuitous route by being a self taught goldsmith. Realizing the advantages of formal training, I budgeted and saved in order to take additional classes and workshops whenever I could. (I took my most recent class at Revere this past March, 2007.)

In the late 1980s I began to focus more and more on my own designs and I chose the technique of hand crochet as the main emphasis of my work with gold. The nature of my work is very labor intensive, in addition to being quite substantial in precious material content. It took me several years to design and assemble a representative body of work sufficient to make an entry into the marketplace.

I was fortunate also in 1987 to marry a wonderful person from the Kingdom of Thailand. Praparatt, my wife, is a formally trained award winning culinary professional. She attended a renowned culinary arts college in Bangkok, founded by the 5th Thai Queen in the 1800s. Praparatt established a private cooking school here in Arizona in 1989 and she also travels and teaches extensively. In the soon to be 20 years we have been married, I have spent several years cumulatively in Thailand where I have studied and observed the Thai and Chinese goldsmiths at work. I learned a great deal from the way they work with very high karat gold which I have since incorporated into my studio practice.

In 2004 at the suggestion of Dana Singer, executive director of the Society of North American Goldsmiths, I was invited to give a presentation for MJSA Expo New York at the Jacob Javits Center in Manhattan. Following that, Alan Revere asked me to join his faculty and to teach the Marketing classes at the Revere Academy in San Francisco.

In the recent several years I have often been asked to make presentations at national events like JCK Las Vegas and AGTA Tucson. This fall I will be a presenter at CLASP in Denver. I now devote the majority of my time to teaching. I present classes and workshops at a variety of national events and venues, in addition to offering private instruction and small intimate classes in my studio.

The fulfillment that comes from teaching is very rewarding, and I enjoy working with students of all ages and all levels. It really is a very different activity than the creative energy I expend at the bench in the studio, and it is also my way of paying it forward for all of the help and direction I have received along the way in my career.

3. If you had the chance what would you do differently...more formal training? less? wider range?

Given the opportunity to do things differently I would undertake formal training much sooner, I would definitely say the sooner the better! I would also strive to learn about the business and professional development aspects of art as a profession, as soon as I began my career.

These are the two most crucial areas for success in this type of career, and unfortunately, they are also the two most neglected by those who pursue it.

I might also be more proactive about entering competitions and contests. I have not actually entered very many, because it can be rather expensive to participate, but is very worthwhile if you win something. I have been the fortunate recipient of a couple of major awards, one from the World Gold Council, for a specific item of jewelry, and another from the American Jewelry Design Council, for a larger body of work.

4. We all have one aspect of our job that we like most...what is your favorite part of the jewelry making process?

My absolute favorite part is watching an item of jewelry placed on the body and seeing how it lays and moves with the wearer. Since the whole point and purpose of what I create is for it to be displayed on the human form, experiencing this moment is the culmination of the process for me. This is the final

completion of the work itself.

5. You have a very recognizable style...what tips can you give someone who is trying to develop their "style"?

My belief and my experience is that style and creativity come forth through fluency with the material, combined with the skillful application of tools and technique.

A definitive style evolves with time and intent and dedication. It isn't often something that expresses itself from the start, it is usually something which develops and matures over a period of concentrated activity.

Finding what a person has resonance with and focusing in on it. Refining and paring it down to the core essence of what it is, then building and expanding that into a cohesive body of work.

6. What or who inspires you?

I am a minimalist; I am attracted to minimalism in the essence of design, as well as in the application and execution of the work, in the process itself. This is how I approach my own work and also what inspires me in the work of others.

The qualities and attributes I recognize are directness, simplicity, efficiency, practicality, and effectiveness. Individuals who do things, and illustrate through action, those are the people who inspire me.

In the field of jewelry and goldsmithing I admire Friedrich Becker, Donald Friedlich, Alan Revere, Michael Good, George Sawyer, Michael Zobel and Peter Schmid, Angela Hubel, Georg Spreng, Georg Bunz. That is just a very short list. Most of them are European, or were trained in Europe.

7. Who are your mentors and what trait do they exhibit that you find inspiring?

My mentor is Alan Revere. His endless creativity and originality inspires me a great deal. His ability as a teacher, his unending desire to learn and grow and stretch, how much he wants to impart to and nourish in others, all of this inspires me. The fact that he is my friend is really an extra added bonus.

The same is true of Charles Lewton-Brain, another friend and a person whom I very much admire for his boundless energy and his inquisitive mind. I think Charles is one of the most inspired and inspiring people I have met.

Both of these fellows have such excitement and enthusiasm for our field, which is quite contagious and beneficial to be exposed to. I highly recommend taking any opportunity to attend a workshop with either of them!

8. What is the one piece of advice you wish you had received at the beginning of your career as a jewelry artist.

People who succeed are successful because they understand what it takes to succeed. Success is an aesthetic accomplishment of living and working harmoniously, as well as engaging in profitable activities.

9. While we are on the topic of sharing information...you are known as a "marketing wizard" and you teach the topic at the Revere Academy in California. In your opinion, what are the first steps toward starting a new jewelry business?

Determining that this is what a person really loves to do is the first essential component. Realizing that the fulfillment and reward of making jewelry are not tied solely to being a financial success is the second. It is an important consideration to ensure that the work itself is enjoyable. When you enjoy what you do and others enjoy the result, the process can be satisfying and rewarding, and creative and sustaining.

It is necessary to enjoy the process and to be willing to work diligently and dedicatedly, because that is what it will require to own and manage a business. A person will need to learn how to be a good business person and also how to be a professional in their chosen field. This is what successful artists do. Those who don't are seldom successful.

Art is a business, just like any other business, except that it usually involves creating and marketing what is primarily a luxury product. The reality is that almost no one is going to perish if they don't buy a piece of jewelry. Some people might think they will, and these people make very good clients and collectors, but no-one has to have jewelry in order to survive. This makes it by nature a category which requires very good business acumen and committed professionalism.

If a person is only interested in the financial benefits and compensation which a career in jewelry can provide, my suggestion is to become highly skilled and well employed.

10. There are a lot of people crocheting wire, why do you think that your business has been so successful?

I made a very conscious decision to focus on a specific technique as the primary foundation of my work. It was tied into the aspects of design which I personally had resonance with, and it incorporated the aesthetic qualities of the processes which I appreciate and enjoy in goldsmithing.

It was a gamble in many respects because my application of crochet is very labor intensive to produce, and the materials I use in my jewelry are very expensive. Apparently many people also find my design sensitivities very appealing, perhaps that has helped it to be successful.

Although there might be others who occasionally used this technique, I know of no one else who has invested the same degree of time, energy, and resources to create an equivalent body of work, or to promote it as effectively as I have.

The self imposed hardships which I designed into my product have made it much more challenging to place and to sell than many other jewelry products. The benefit of my promotional activities and how that has helped achieve recognition for what I do and effectively market my product, is something I share with my marketing students in the professional development classes I teach.