



Randy Stromsoe

Luscious Materiality

Jo Lauria



HAMMER RACKS / STROMSOE DESIGN STUDIO, Spring 2014. Photograph by Sean Stromsoe.

“develop organically, in a natural state,

without being rushed, without taking shortcuts.”

For more than four decades, California artist Randy Stromsoe has created seductive, exquisitely handformed jewelry that demonstrates his modernist aesthetic of elemental forms, fluid geometries and formal elegance. Stromsoe’s designs arise from his vast knowledge of jewelry traditions and from learning what his hands and tools can do in unison. After working forty years at the bench, Stromsoe has attained the level of master craftsman in hollowware, flatware and jewelry. He can work with precision in silver, gold, copper, and pewter, and has mastered other techniques used in jewelry fabrication, including the lapidary processes of stonecutting and setting, and woodturning and carving. Having worked in forms as large as presentation trophies and liturgical chalices, Stromsoe knows how to make metal follow his exacting commands. But it is in the jewelry that one can see,

on intimate scale, the most dramatic engagement with materials and greatest freedom with form; Stromsoe is at his most nuanced and boldly imaginative when designing ornament for the body.

Stromsoe’s path along the metalsmithing journey can be characterized as a series of serendipitous occurrences. He was first introduced to jewelry instruction in a crafts workshop class at Los Angeles Valley College taught by Zella Margraff. Stromsoe enrolled believing it was a class where he could learn furniture-making and woodcarving. Initially “devastated” when he realized he had been misplaced in a jewelry/metals class, Stromsoe soon discovered that Margraff was a “fascinating teacher who had a rich life as an artist designing and creating art jewelry.” Margraff was a European-trained jeweler whose work was internationally recognized. The focus of her class was to teach jewelry fabrication techniques, as

well as the history and appreciation of contemporary jewelry to both beginning and advanced students. Stromsoe had a natural gift with orchestrating the movements and flow of hammer, saw and solder, and he began to love metalsmithing.

Margraff was Stromsoe’s initial link in the chain that brought him closer to his avocation as she was the first to acknowledge his talent—as evinced in the craftsmanship he demonstrated in the first class project of a ring—and encouraged him to follow this path. Stromsoe enrolled in Margraff’s class for three semesters, progressing through the levels from beginner to advanced. Furthermore, Margraff was responsible for introducing Stromsoe to the revered silversmith Porter Blanchard on the occasion of a class field trip to Blanchard’s workshop, a metalsmithing business modeled after an arts and crafts studio. As is etched in

Stromsoe’s memory, it was during that fated field trip that the distinguished Blanchard gathered all the students in his workshop and inquired if any of the young men would like to try their hand at raising silver. (Stromsoe was nineteen years old, and Blanchard was eighty-three years old at the time.) With hammer in hand, Stromsoe remembers that he struck a few well-placed blows on the sheet of silver, and that Blanchard seemed excited by his skill. In fact, so impressed was Blanchard that he asked Stromsoe to return the following week to begin work as his apprentice. And so began Stromsoe’s apprenticeship in 1970 working at the side of Porter Blanchard, helping to fill large orders of handcrafted production tableware and presentation pieces for both private clients and prestigious retail stores. Ornate gold and silver fish platters, tea and coffee sets, caviar dishes, gold trophy racing cups, and



STROMSOE DESIGN STUDIO/CLASSROOM.
Photograph by Sean Stromsoe.

ceremonial monstrosities were some of the more challenging orders executed by the Blanchard studio. At night, Stromsoe would work on his own jewelry designs, as the Blanchard studio did not create jewelry for either private commissions or retail stores. Stromsoe found that the same techniques he was using during the day to shape hollowware—forging, file carving, repoussé, and chasing—could be translated into jewelrymaking. Stromsoe improved his hammer techniques and perfected his proficiency in forging, and successfully adapted these skills to craft expressive jewelry forms. The same handskills required to forge a fork could start the bend in a bracelet, and the fluid, lyrical movements that produced hollow spouts and handles could be repeated to shape sculptural dimensions in neckpieces and collars. Although there were other directions in the arts that Stromsoe could have taken, he chose to stay the course as first outlined by Magraff—to map his territory in the metalsmithing field and develop a signature line of jewelry.

As Porter advanced in age and his health failed, Stromsoe assumed more responsibilities in the Blanchard studio and worked even more intensely with Porter. On an intellectual level, Stromsoe would deliberate with Porter on ways to streamline studio practices to make handcrafting production more efficient; and on a physical level, Stromsoe would assist Blanchard in raising silver for large pieces, prompting

Porter's praise, "Two minds with a single thought, working in syncopation." However, Stromsoe's mentorship ended in 1973 when Porter passed away and the shop was transferred to his son-in-law, Lewis Wise, who, after two years retired and sold the business to a group of investors. The business entity that became Porter Blanchard Silversmith's Inc. eventually closed in 1993. Stromsoe had remained with the Blanchard studio during its many transformations, first learning to forge flatware and then working in the capacity of the shop's superintendent until Stromsoe decided to leave in 1980 due to a change in artistic direction. Sometime after the ultimate demise of the business, Stromsoe was offered the opportunity to buy the metalsmithing tools that belonged to the original studio of Porter Blanchard. Stromsoe felt very strongly that it was important to "preserve the history of the tools." These hollowware and flatware tools now form the core of his own studio equipment, and Stromsoe says he is "humbled and appreciative" when he looks around his studio and realizes he owns the same handmade tools that were

used by his mentor, including the hammer and anvil that belonged to Porter's father, the legendary arts and crafts silversmith George Porter Blanchard.

It was a life-changing experience when Stromsoe moved from Los Angeles to the Central Coast of California to establish his own studio in 1980. The first location in which Stromsoe settled was the coastal city of Cambria where he became known as the area's premiere metalsmith. For twenty years Stromsoe specialized in making custom wedding rings, including a set for himself and his wife Lisa when they married in 1981. The Stromsoes became very entrenched in the community, as Lisa co-owned and managed the Quicksilver Gallery, representing



LEAF RING of ebony and sterling silver; constructed, carved, 6.99 x 5.4 x 3.178 centimeters, 2011.

over a hundred artists from all craft disciplines. But in 1999 a purchase of a modest ranch near Paso Robles presented the optimal location to build a combined workshop and home. All energies were focused on converting the dilapidated barn into an upstairs living space (the family had grown with the arrival of two children), a fully functioning workshop downstairs, a vineyard, orchard and organic garden. This is now the



DECO RING of sterling silver, ebony; constructed, chased and file carved; 3.81 x 3.178 centimeters, 2013.
Photographs by Ron Bez unless noted otherwise.



SANTA FE SUNRISE BANGAL of sterling silver; handforged, file carved; 8.3 centimeters diameter.



SUNDIAL RING of sterling silver and peridot; 3.2 centimeters diameter, 2014.



HUG RING of constructive sterling silver and handcut turquoise; 4.45 x 3.178 centimeters, 2014.



LOW TIDE RING of sterling silver and handcut turquoise; constructed, chased and file carved; 3.5 x 2.54 centimeters, 2013.



CENTER TWIST COLLAR of sterling silver; handforged, anticlastic; 14 x 16.5 centimeters, 2014.



KELP CUFF of sterling silver; handforged, file carved; 7.9 centimeters diameter, 2012.



POISON RING of sterling silver, ebony; constructed, chased, file carved, carved, 4.45 x 2.54 centimeters, 2013.

destination of the Stromsoe Studio, a workshop staffed by two: Randy designs, handcrafts and finishes every piece, and Lisa, who has assumed the role of studio manager, handles all daily operations.

Classically trained as a metalsmith in the arts and crafts tradition has taught Stromsoe a commitment to technical excellence, but for inspiration, he draws from the wells of various streams. Stromsoe's intellectual curiosity and his passion to originate designs lead him to a wide range of source materials. He may look to information derived from art and design research or a direct connection to nature and contemporary culture for the spark that ignites his creativity when he sits at the bench. Consider Stromsoe's Poison Ring: he creates a contemporary form that acknowledges the past tradition of poison rings while making a relevant and dramatic statement of the present by crafting an abstract, progressive design. Vessel rings, a category to which poison rings belong, originated in Asia and India and are classified as having a hidden compartment under a raised stone. In this compartment, a substance can be stored—and released—when the stone is lifted. Stromsoe's Poison Ring is both sculpture and container; the file-carved

sterling column with the center opening becomes a miniature freestanding totem with stylized floral finial, and when the abstracted ebony finial is raised, a hidden compartment beneath is revealed, presumably to contain a secret substance. With this ring, Stromsoe demonstrates the synergistic mixture of a contemporary visual language with a traditional inflection, reaffirming one of his long-held beliefs, that jewelry should reflect its time while also honoring history.

Ways in which Stromsoe strives to make his jewelry distinctive are by creating pieces that echo his own passions and personal aesthetics, which, by his own assessment, is a blending of the Bauhaus, Arts and Crafts and Scandinavian Modern movements. The compelling points of tension that Stromsoe constructs within the design can identify one of his branded jewelry styles. Exemplar are the pieces Center Twist Collar, Side Twist Neckpiece, and the cuff Taffy Pull where the silver is coaxed into sinuous acrobatic bends and twists that stretch and torque the metal in ways that belie its material properties. Other common traits of Stromsoe jewelry are geometric refinement and elegant simplicity; pieces are reduced to their most essential forms. Circles, triangles, circles within triangles, circles intersected by

rods, and circles bounded by channels; wide angles against thin, textured surfaces against smooth; these are the geometric shapes and varying textures that Stromsoe manipulates along with the sculptural considerations of volume, weight and scale. In the process, the whole design must be evaluated and perfected for visual appeal, tactility, strength and comfort. Before any jewelry piece is stamped R. Stromsoe it has been through many design trials. Stromsoe may play with design concepts for months, sometimes for years, as he refines them over time. He wants the concept to “develop organically, in a natural state, without being rushed, without taking shortcuts.” When a piece of jewelry does leave the studio, the design is resolved, the craftsmanship is flawless, and the jewelry is assuredly wearable.

After four decades of working with hammer and anvil, torch and stake, Stromsoe's engagement with the material still feels “relevant and fresh.” In return for the gift he considers he has been given, Stromsoe is passing on his knowledge of silversmithing through a series of workshops he is personally teaching at his studio. The first group of students arrived in Fall 2013, and these sessions of personal instruction with this master craftsman are intended to be ongoing,

offered three or four times per year. In preparation for the workshops, Stromsoe designed and built individual jeweler's benches so that each participant had a workstation. Stromsoe offers intense training in vessel forming, repoussé, chasing, anti-clastic raising, basic-to-advanced forging, and construction and forging techniques for flatware and jewelry. All lessons are taught with an emphasis on hammer skills and a reverence for the handmade. In so doing, Stromsoe believes he is continuing the teachings of the arts and crafts tradition of handcrafted metalsmithing, and thereby completing the circle that was opened for him by mentor, Porter Blanchard. And that suits Randy Stromsoe just fine, as circles have been one of the geometric forms he has used to the greatest dramatic effect. ☐

SUGGESTED READING

Vidor, Michael. “Feeling Randy: Artist on Top.” *Central Coast Magazine*, Jan/Feb 2005: 27-34.
“Illuminations.” *Western Art and Architecture*, April/May 2014: 46-47.
Monroe, Michael W. *The White House Collection of American Crafts*, New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.
Stapleton, Constance. *Crafts of America*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988.
 Citation for all quotes: Oral history interview with Randy Stromsoe, June 4-6, 2013, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, conducted by Jo Lauria. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-randy-james-stromse-16093>.