



John Iversen

Fracture Lines

BY PATRICIA HARRIS AND DAVID LYON

Hanging On (brooch), 2010
sterling silver, 18k yellow gold
3 x 3 1/2"

ALL PHOTOS: R. HENSLEIGH

Mark's Arm
(bracelet), 2010
oxidized sterling silver,
18k yellow gold
5 x 11"





Life Drawings
(pendants), ca. 1979
oxidized
sterling silver
top: 2 x 2"
below: 1 1/2 x 1 1/2"



Moon Stone (brooch), 1984
soapstone, epoxy, pigment,
sterling silver, nickel
diameter 2 1/2"

Landscape Stone (brooch), 1984
alabaster, epoxy, pigment,
sterling silver, nickel
2 x 2"

AT HEART, JOHN IVERSEN IS A ROMANTIC. Like composers from Beethoven to Mahler or poets from Wordsworth to Rilke, he makes an absolute link between emotion and aesthetic experience. In fact, he argues, "Like painting is an emotion, jewelry is an emotion." It is intriguing to consider that beyond the aesthetic pleasure prompted by viewing, handling, and wearing jewelry, the piece of jewelry itself is a form of emotional expression. Thus, a brooch can be a kind of quantum art: simultaneously noun (object) and verb (action).

Indeed, there is a place for a reinterpreted Romanticism in contemporary jewelry. The nineteenth-century movement, which rescued aesthetics from formulaic classicism, put emotional experience front and center. It laid the ground for all manner of later aesthetic movements, from Impressionism to Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism.

Iversen is a "creator working in the spirit of his time," to paraphrase German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's definition of an artist. Though hardly a slave to the past, he sees his work within an aesthetic continuum and freely rummages through the art history attic to adapt what suits him. He is known, for example, for his mastery of the eighteenth-century technique of "nature casting," in which he replicates organic objects in metal. His lines of multiples rely extensively on castings of hydrangea flowers and small ginkgo leaves. But he also makes larger oak leaf pins, each one of a kind. "The leaves are ready-made, like Dadaist objects. I translate them into metal," Iversen says. "The art impulse is that I think that the leaf is a pin."

The artistic inquiry is more implicit in Iversen's recent works, which appear deceptively simple yet are remarkably complex. The assemblages of irregular shapes and forms fit together as tightly as the crust of a *crème brûlée* lightly tapped with a spoon. He casually calls the brooches and bracelets the "Crackle" series.

Some familiar with Iversen's nature castings have remarked that the new series represents a split personality, but he doesn't see it that way. First of all, he says, "Throughout my work there is a small core of forms, shapes, and colors." Moreover, he adds, the basis of all the work is his own "world view," a term that carries heavier philosophical baggage in Iversen's native German than it does in English. (*Weltanschauung* refers both to one's viewpoint for perceiving the world and the philosophical framework by which one interprets and interacts with it.)

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The "Crackle" series was inspired by "thirty years of working in jewelry," explains Iversen, who studied at the College for Metal Industries in Dusseldorf and interned for four years with an uncle in



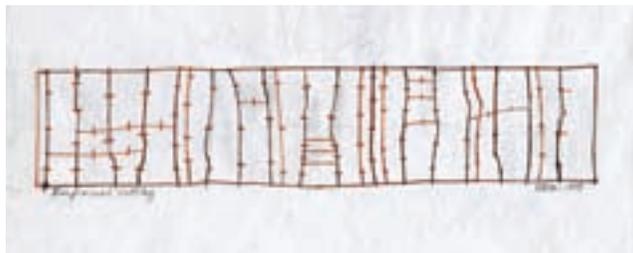
Joint Effort (bracelet), 2009
sterling silver, 18k yellow gold
2 3/4 x 7 1/2"



Empirical Cutting
(bracelet), 2009
sterling silver,
18k yellow gold
1 ½ x 7"

Vancouver. He moved to New York in 1978 and established himself as an independent jeweler two years later. "This work has been evolving ever since I started making jewelry, learning how to make saw cuts. The new work is all done with hinging and a saw." His years of honing his technical facility made it possible to bring together years of observing how things fit together, both in nature and on the bench.

Certain modalities do reappear in both Iversen's representational and abstract pieces. For example, his "Life Drawings" pendants (circa 1979) are irregularly curved badges with stylized but recognizably naturalistic drawings saw-cut into the silver. Their shapes—essentially ovoid in either 5:4 or 4:3 dimensions—have recurred in his work in



Preliminary drawing for
Empirical Cutting, 2009
mixed media
7 x 8"

the last three decades. His instrument for "Life Drawings" is a saw, the same basic tool that he uses on the "Crackle" series both to draw and to segment. Moreover, the surface of the silver on these early pieces is deliberately roughened. Patina is critical in Iversen's work. "If it is just shiny metal," he says, "it looks industrial."

By the mid-1980s, Iversen had largely abandoned linear representation in favor of a more sculptural approach to jewelry. *Moon Stone* (1984) is a disk of soapstone with a scarified surface that is cut just deeply enough to accept a yellow-ochre pigment. Much the same treatment is given to the alabaster of *Landscape Stone* (1984), where mere hints of color suggest a world in a single rock.

In his leaf pins, Iversen goes beyond suggestion to full-blown Aristotelian mimesis. Yet he must perform significant interventions to create the illusion of an exact copy of an organic structure in metal. The nature casting technique is similar to lost wax casting, and Iversen is required to reinforce edges and certain structural components on the back of the leaves prior to casting. "What remains of the original is the surface structure, the veins," he says. "The minute we touch the front, it is ruined. You can't improve on it."

Iversen's point of view, or *Weltanschauung*, sets him apart from the traditional craftsman making a copy of a natural form. His primary intention is not the replication

of a leaf in bronze, silver, or gold. Instead, he is executing his conception of a piece of jewelry; that the leaf form has a nearly perfect analog in nature is almost coincidental. The process suggests the Romantic notion of art capturing emotion, while simultaneously creating an object that is outside emotion. Virtually every leaf that appeals to him has both a natural grace and an imperfection—a wormhole, perhaps—that hints of its mortality. “It’s not that we cherish decay,” he says, “but we want to hold onto something. That is a key to art: trying to make the feeling last, trying to make it visible.”

Romanticism can embrace both representational and abstract forms. It is no contradiction when Iversen turns from naturalistic imagery like the leaf pins or his necklaces and bracelets of cast river pebbles to forms as specifically and clearly geometric as the hexagons in *Mark’s Arm*, a bracelet of oxidized sterling silver forms assembled with largely hidden 18k yellow gold hinges. Although the piece dates from 2010, it is a continuation of his geometric series from 2008.

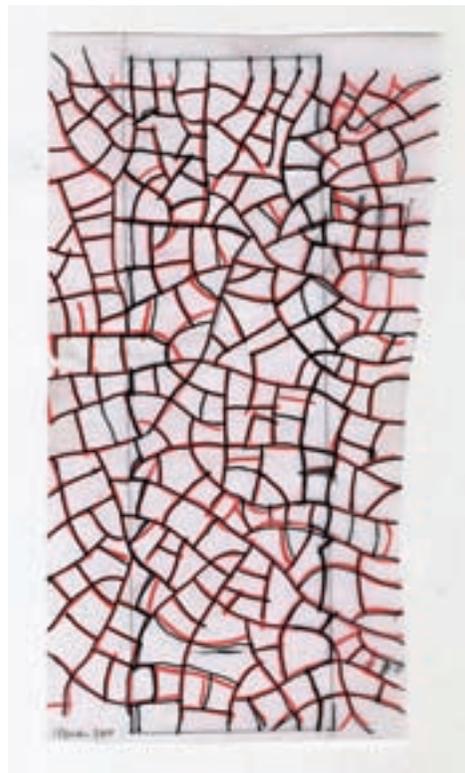
Formally speaking, the exquisite taper of *Mark’s Arm* is a technical tour de force that confounds the eye. Each hexagon appears to be regular and the same size, yet those fitting the arm closest to the elbow are necessarily larger than those fitting nearer the wrist. Like a leaf, its scale swells at one end and diminishes at the other.

Cutting Links (2008) appears to be a prototype of the “Crackle” series, revealing how Iversen develops a body of work. On close inspection, the 16 small silver patches joined into a square brooch have edges as irregular as pieces of torn paper. In a sense, Iversen is making a virtue of what he sees as a technical weakness. “The things I could do if I could make a great square....” he says, sighing. “I am not that great a goldsmith. I could never make a perfect sphere.” His strength, he suggests, is akin to that heralded by the Arts & Crafts movement, where emotive power derived from direct expression in metal. For all the control of his recent body of work, its genesis is more Dionysian than Apollonian: passion over order.

Iversen’s breakthrough in the “Crackle” series was his realization that he could discard formal geometry and still maintain an abstract complexity. “Inspiration is in the moment,” he says. “You see it and feel it and try to hold onto it.” He imagined the jagged, ragged patterns of shattered glass, and wondered how to translate them into jewelry.

The seemingly haphazard fracture lines of the “Crackle” series are anything but random. The preliminary drawing for his *Empirical Cutting* bracelet shows a plan of attack on the metal, complete with dozens of hinge points. The very title suggests a process of trial and error: testing the hypothesis of the drawing against the realities of composition once he began cutting. Measurement, of course, is impossible. As Iversen says, “Even a pencil line has two dimensions.”

The fractured forms of the finished bracelet are far more complex than the drawing. The way Iversen



Preliminary drawing for
Joint Effort, 2009
mixed media
9 1/4 x 5 3/4"



Cutting Links (brooch), 2008
sterling silver, 18k yellow gold
3 1/2 x 3 1/2"



Witchcraft (bracelet), 2010
14k red gold, 18k yellow gold,
14k green gold, 14k white gold
2 ½ x 7"

attached the separate elements is key to making the piece function as jewelry. Iversen has always been inventive in his assemblies. He is able to make numerous permutations of his “Hydrangea” series based on flower petals because, as he points out, it is only necessary to find three points of attachment for each floret. His ongoing “Jacks” series of gold bars and small pearls makes the connections central to the design. But he wanted something different for the “Crackle” series.

“From the beginning, I made an effort to make the

pieces flexible and fluid, but I did not want the structure to be visible,” Iversen says. Placing the attachments on the back gives him a certain pleasure. “I love the effect of having an intimate secret,” he says. “I compare it to finding a shell with a pearl inside. You get to keep it to yourself.”

In the end, he created hinges on all sides of each segment. Linking one piece to the next with a tiny loop gives the finished composition great flexibility in two dimensions, while allowing limited rotation.

That flexibility is essential to a bracelet, but is



potentially disastrous for a brooch. Iversen tackled the compositional challenge by organizing his cuts in an approximately radial pattern in *Falling Apart* (2009)—as if a meteor had fallen on a mud patch and left behind a crack-laced field. *Cutting Ahead* (2009) employs similar arcs in the composition. The individual adjoining segments are quite flexible, but by setting the arcs at angles to each other, Iversen creates a physically rigorous (and therefore wearable) composition. He further displays his mastery of form by leaving negative spaces in *Cutting Ahead*, a

compositional device that highlights the complexity of the brooch's architecture. As the title suggests, the hinged attachments are critical to *Hanging On* (2010), which reprises in flat silver some of the shapes characteristic of Iversen's pebble compositions. He breathes space and air into *Hanging On* without sacrificing his commitment to hidden attachments and his aim of overall flexibility.

In the sheer complexity of individual "shards" and the intricacy of their jigsaw-puzzle fit, the bracelet *Joint Effort* (2009) represents the logical development of the



Cutting Ahead (brooch), 2009
sterling silver, 18k yellow gold
3 1/2 x 3 1/2"



Leaf Pins, 2010
oxidized bronze
3 1/4 x 1 1/2-2 1/2"



Six Part Large Hydrangea
Earrings, 2010
oxidized 18k yellow gold
1 1/4 x 1 1/4 x 3/4"

“Crackle” series. All the elements of the series come together perfectly: intricate composition, chain mail-like shimmering movement, and the characteristic briskly pickle-white color of the silver. “My collection the year before was all oxidized gray,” Iversen says, almost offhandedly. “I thought that was getting depressing.”

Iversen has always deliberately left his maker’s mark on the metal. But he ratcheted up the abuse of surface for the “Crackle” series. “The finish on the new work is very aggressive,” he admits. “It is very ‘in the moment,’ with big movements and very physical. I gouge and cut the surface of the silver. I use a burr, I use a belt sander. An abstract expressionist who was a jeweler would have done it this way. Texture and surface are like handwriting.” The resulting surfaces are rich with fascinating detail, from macro scratches to almost microscopic traces. They prove his point that, at least in his work, polished surfaces are paradoxically dull.

Because each piece in the “Crackle” series is an abstract configuration within a bounded shape, Iversen is free to explore a variety of features of non-pictorial art. One of his most recent pieces, *Witchcraft* (2010), uses variegated surface texturing on each of the constituent pieces to suggest different strata and to create an illusion of depth. Iversen often creates running tracks and gouges that provide a continuum from element to element within a “Crackle” piece. In *Witchcraft*, however, they assume different angles, as if he were composing with stones taken from different geological strata.

The greatest departure from other “Crackle” pieces, however, comes in his choice of materials. Rather than employ sterling silver for most of the face pieces and

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restrict the use of gold to the hinges, *Witchcraft* is a mosaic of 14k red, green, and white gold with 18k yellow gold. His preliminary drawing for the bracelet only highlights the yellow gold, leaving the other

colors to be chosen as he composed the piece. *Witchcraft* also contains lacunae, or small voids, providing Iversen with yet another color for his palette: flesh. The subtle gradations of hue contrast markedly with Iversen’s occasional forays into enamel—those pieces have always been about color for its own sake. In *Witchcraft*, color is a compositional tool.

So far, Iversen has scouted a lot of new artistic territory with the “Crackle” series, and it is intriguing to see what will happen as he explores further. The use of rough-edged, saw-cut metal implies a kind of free expressiveness as he works at the bench, while the exquisitely careful compositions demonstrate a masterful level of control. The “handwriting” of his distressed surfaces provides him yet another compositional tool, while the juxtaposed colors of metal seem almost as if he is reveling in the sheer metalness of the gold. “Metal has a life of its own,” Iversen says. His task is to give it feeling.

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