

John Iversen

An Aesthetic of
Fragmentation

Carl Little

John Iversen's "crackle" pieces created over the past two years have gained critical notice. The work earned the Easthampton, New York-based artist best in show at the 2010 Smithsonian Craft Show and a Herbert Hofmann award at the annual Schmuck exhibition in Munich last March. German exhibition curator Dieter Dohr praised Iversen's "aesthetic of fragmentation," and writer Ellen Berkovitch, reviewing his show at the Patina Gallery in Santa Fe last summer for the online Art Jewelry Forum, mused on the work's "gestalt of making that is a masterpiece of form."

Other people, Iversen reports, are puzzled by the new work. They inquire as to how it was made, whether it is leather—"all sorts of things," he reports with a chuckle. Looking at the fissured surface, some viewers see shattered glass or ice, others, dried riverbeds. "I like that type of natural phenomenon,"

Iversen avers, "where something just happened and that's the way it is and it's beautiful."

Iversen, who was profiled recently in this magazine (*Ornament*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2008), recognizes the newness of the bracelets and brooches that have brought him acclaim, but he is quick to point out that such a development does not arrive out of the blue. "There's an impression that you wake up one morning and you have a great idea and then you have a breakthrough like this," he explains, "and that's really not quite how it happens."

Asked how the new series came about, Iversen describes a continuum in his art that has led him to the present. He can trace the current work to some of his earliest pieces, created in the late 1970s when he moved to New York City from Hanau, Germany, where he had been studying at the Staatliche Zeichen

HONESTY IN DREAMS BROOCH of fourteen karat red gold, eighteen karat yellow gold, 7.9 x 7.4 centimeters, 2010. *Collection of Marion Fulk.*
All photographs by R. Hensleigh except where noted.

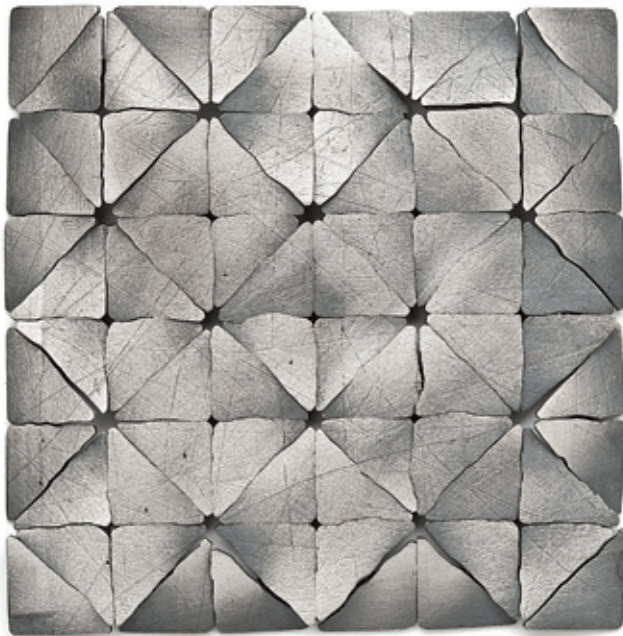


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Academy’s College for Jewelry Design and Manufacturing. He rented a workshop before he had tools, then found a bench, a saw and some silver. He also took life drawing classes at the Arts Students League.

At the time, Iversen observed that the lines made by the saw blade were not that different from those made by a pencil. He also noticed that a drawn line always has a width and edges no matter how fine it might be. He subsequently began to use the saw-cut as a decorative element, and it became a part of his design vocabulary.

Two oxidized sterling silver pendants and a pair of cut and laminated soapstone disks dating from around 1979 offer evidence of Iversen’s early explorations of the linear. In the former, the saw-cut line is used to delineate figural shapes. The soapstone pieces, quite different in look, are nonetheless also the result of sawing. “I took the stone and cut it and then



CROSS OVER BROOCH of oxidized sterling silver, eighteen karat yellow gold, 7.6 x 7.6 centimeters, 2010.



FOGGY HEXAGON BRACELET of oxidized sterling silver, twenty-one karat yellow gold, fourteen karat white gold, 6.6 x 18 centimeters, 2008.

put it back together,” Iversen explains, a process that is similar to what he practices now, albeit on a far simpler scale.

Of course, Iversen notes, one does not know at the time that such work might be the seeds of future art; “I liked the drawing and I didn’t think much farther than that,” he recalls. Thirty years later, however, he can see how the saw-cut idea was always there and how it is now coming to the fore—“to full force.”

Foggy Hexagon, a sterling silver bracelet from 2008, was a transitional piece on the way to the newest work. Iversen was exploring geometry, in this case a grid of hexagons, some halved, within a rectangular format. The look is formal, the saw-cut lines quite clean and tight. The geometric look also marks another transitional piece, Cross Over, a sterling silver brooch, but the lines that form the triangular and diamond shapes are less precise. Cross Over was inspired by a pin the jeweler had designed and sold. “I think I was mourning it so much,” he recalls, “I decided to make another.”

Iversen’s principle tool for all these pieces is a jeweler’s saw, “really a very primitive saw,” he notes. The saw has been around in one form or another for centuries. He uses the thinnest blade he can find—8/0—“almost as thick as a hair.”

“You have this tiny saw blade and you try to make it go straight and of course it rarely does,” Iversen recounts. He forgets about trying to cut a perfect line and instead guides the blade one way or the other, following a pattern he has drawn on the surface of the silver, which is about a

millimeter thick. The process produces a beautiful fragile line. “The lines are, in a way, designed,” Iversen points out, based as they are on a simple grid.

To produce Square Cut Chaos, Iversen worked from a rough preliminary drawing of the surface design. After the drawing was transferred to the back of the silver, he set out to follow the lines with the saw, “which doesn’t always go one hundred percent,” but gives him something “to aim for.” While the brooch is a square format, the lines no longer make exact geometric shapes. A bit of chaos has emerged.

To create surface effects, Iversen glues the piece of silver to a piece of wood, sets it in a vise, and attacks it, employing all sorts of sharp files and engravers, plus “huge grinders,” to carve up the surface. He calls the approach aggressive. “I’ve always said that if an abstract-expressionist painter were to make jewelry, he would probably go at it that way,” he remarks. The surface treatment works well with the expressive lines, which are fast and head in different directions.

The texture effects also hark back to some of Iversen’s work in his early New York City days. Back then, he made metal collages with saw and silver. He would then go at the surface with a belt sander borrowed from a neighbor, using the roughest sandpaper he could find. The sander, he remembers, made beautiful textures in the surface, yet he learned quickly that he could only grind for a few seconds—the metal would be cut away “before you knew it.”



SQUARE CUT CHAOS BROOCH of sterling silver, eighteen karat yellow gold, 8.9 x 8.9 centimeters, 2010.



PRELIMINARY DRAWING FOR SQUARE CUT CHAOS (below), mixed media, 24.1 x 13.3 centimeters, 2010.

For the new work, the silver plate is sawed into pieces, as many as three hundred. “It looks like a puzzle,” Iversen notes, “but it actually isn’t.” As he cuts out each piece, he numbers it so he knows where it goes. When the cutting is done, the major creative work is complete. He then hooks it all together, adds the clasp, and completes the piece.

A crucial element of the new work, both in design and structure, is the hinging. “That was really a breakthrough,” Iversen explains. The transitional pieces featured a frame underneath and around them. Then a light bulb went off: the artist realized he did not need the armature, but instead could go “totally free-form.” Of course, he is quick to note, in order to have that light go off, you have to have been at the work bench for thirty years.

The pieces are hooked together with fourteen karat white gold and then are soldered with eighteen karat yellow gold. The solder joints are small multicolored dots or points. Iversen reports that people often ask if they can wear the piece in reverse. “You have the silver or the metal tone with all these little eighteen karat polka dots,” he says. The back side of the piece is not pre-conceived in terms of design and intention: “The hinges fall where they have to fall,” Iversen states. “It’s sort of a fun thing,” he adds: “The wearer will know how beautiful the back looks, but the viewer won’t directly see it—it’s sort of a secret.”

Asked about the origin of the titles for his new work, Iversen says they usually come to him as he is working on the individual piece. He thought Witchcraft would be a great title for a bracelet he was designing. How was the piece made, someone might ask. By witchcraft, he might reply, the process

WITCHCRAFT BRACELET of fourteen karat red gold, eighteen karat yellow gold, fourteen karat green gold, fourteen karat white gold, 6.4 x 17.8 centimeters, 2010.

PRELIMINARY DRAWING FOR WITCHCRAFT, mixed media, 8.9 x 21.6 centimeters, 2010.



of transforming materials (by way of craft) into something new and spell-binding.

Witchcraft and the brooch *Honesty in Dreams* are a second evolution of the crackle design. Like the other pieces in the group, they are first cut into, with three or four different layers of surface treatment, one atop the other. Where the previous saw-cut patterns were more or less straightforward—“very beautiful, yet rigid” is how Iversen describes them—in these new pieces they become much more complex.

Another interesting element of the newest work are small gaps in the surface where Iversen has cut off little points—“for air,” he says, and to add energy to the piece. These gaps are not thought out ahead of time; indeed, they do not appear on the preliminary drawings. They are a part of that aforementioned “aesthetic of fragmentation,” a term Iversen embraces as descriptive not only of his new work, but of earlier series as well, such as the leaf pins.

In his 2008 *Ornament* profile Iversen spoke about the line between art object and piece of jewelry; he noted how he usually started with an art impulse, but always had “a great piece of jewelry” in mind as his final goal. With this new series, he feels like the two came together—simultaneously work of art and ornament.

Iversen continues to balance the creative focus of one-of-a-kind pieces with the economic necessity of production. A number of his signature pieces, including the pebble earrings, remain strong sellers. His livelihood has its realities, which he must deal with from day to day. One of his major gallery accounts, Takashimaya, recently closed shop, so he is keenly aware of the market—and marketing.

The Smithsonian Craft Show and Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show have been an important part of Iversen’s identity as a jeweler for more than twenty years now. They

help motivate new work, and he appreciates the recognition he has received from them over the years. The galleries and department stores, too, provide him with support that allows him to pursue his work, to push forward. Last but not least, he acknowledges the crucial role collectors and critics play in judging his achievements—and inspiring him to explore new territory.

Iversen felt the recession coming on in 2007 and took the brunt of it the following two years. Paradoxically, it was the economic downturn that allowed him to do the crackle pieces; there was more time to experiment. “Out of that sort of upheaval and turmoil comes something actually very positive—and that was my new work,” he says.

Iversen compares an artist’s body of work to that of a writer. “They write several books,” he notes, “but the core doesn’t really change that much.” He adds: “You don’t change your world perception; you write a different story.” Part of the artist’s struggle, he notes, is to find his or her DNA. “I don’t think it’s just the fine arts,” Iversen concludes: “It’s the human struggle to find a voice—a longing to find what that voice is.”

SUGGESTED READING

- Busch, Akiko.** “Forces of Nature: John Iversen,” *American Craft*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (June/July 1999): 38-41.
“Exhibition in Print 2003,” *Society of North American Goldsmiths, Metalsmith*, Vol. 23, No. 4: 48.
- Friedman, Jane.** “Jewelry in the Realm of Art,” *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2001: C2.
- Little, Carl.** “John Iversen: The Artistic Impulse,” *Ornament*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2008): 40-45.
- Meilach, Dona Z.** *Art Jewelry Today*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2003.
“Schmuck 2010,” exhibition catalogue, *Handwerksmesse Munchen*: 45, 85.
“State of the Art: Contemporary Sculpture,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 2009: 130-131.