

Philip Sajet Surreal Beauty

BY ANDREA DINOTO



Shard Ring, 2008
glass, niello on silver
2 1/4 x 1 1/16 x 3/4"



Boulettes (necklace), 2009
iron, gold
diameter approx. 8"
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Le Rock (necklace), 2009
smoky quartz, mother of pearl,
water buffalo horn
diameter approx. 9 1/2"



Le Mariage (necklace), 2009
pearls, gold, tourmaline, beach pebbles
diameter approx. 6 1/8"



Broken Blood (necklace), 2010
glass, gold
diameter approx. 5 1/2"

The poetic is the opposite of the expected; it is spontaneous—a crucial criterion for the surrealist notion of the marvelous, that which unexpectedly arouses wonder when we chance upon it.¹

IT'S NOT THAT Philip Sajat aims for beauty. In fact aesthetic perfection is hardly a predictable outcome, given the Dutch jeweler's penchant for rough edges and raw materials—glass shards, animal horn, clam shells, and rusted metal, not to mention beach pebbles and faux diamonds. Yet many of his strangely compelling creations—boldly scaled and often vibrantly colored—appear as wondrous, shocking, and surreal, qualities inherent in a kind of subversive beauty that provokes and delights.

Although Sajat produces jewelry in what appears to be a hugger-mugger of conflicting styles—aggressive, sensual, humorous, even elegant—his body of work is unified by a respect for traditional jewelry forms, notably the necklace of linked elements designed, he says, “to be very near to the throat.” As he explains, “It has to do with protection, standing. It's very simple. A piece has to touch the skin, so the stakes are very high.” That a wearer allows herself to be touched on the skin is “an achievement,” he says. “There the marriage between owner and piece is total.” Sajat, then, is engaged in a grand seduction—of the body, surely, but the eye and mind as well—in which his jewelry functions as an invitation to intimacy both physically and conceptually, in some cases as a dare to the wearer.

Sajat's eclectic approach results in immensely varying designs: *Le Rock* (2009), a classically composed necklace of smoky quartz nuggets, mother-of-pearl slabs, and segments of water-buffalo horn, suggests a power-invoking tribal object, while *Le Mariage* (2009), a triple-strand collar of pearls, gold, tourmaline chunks, and beach pebbles, impresses as a playful take on conventional costume jewelry. Then there is *Broken Blood* (2010), a necklace comprised entirely of nine lethal-looking, walnut-sized red glass shards linked in gold. Does the title imply the blood of the wearer? “No! Definitely not!” insists Sajat. “I have a high respect for blood. I think it should stay where it belongs.” The glass itself comes from a factory in Saint-Étienne, France, that produces large architectural tiles in different colors. “I buy one, shatter it with a hammer, and wash it under water, bouncing the shards up and down in my cupped hands, so as to eliminate the sharpest edges,” he explains, adding, “after some time they become harmless.” He calls the provocative title “a form of theatrical exaggeration. How can a fluid break? But it makes sense . . . it evokes images, tragic images . . . of something which has happened, which should not have happened . . . a form of complaint against injustices.” Despite the maker's conceptualizing, the necklace more persuasively suggests a surreal dream—an image dredged from the unconscious. In that sense it resembles another fantastical design from 2009, seven lovely, buff-colored goose eggs linked with pearls to form a soft, fragile collar whose ovoid wholeness depends entirely on the wearer's caution.

The incomparable *Boulettes* (2009) is more installation art



Rubies on the Soles of My Shoes (necklace), 2009
rubber, gold, rubies
diameter 8 1/2"

than necklace, comprised of ten antique iron cannon balls (each about 2 1/2 to 3 inches in diameter), which Sajat discovered in the attic of a house he was living in in France. “I saw it as a treasure,” he says of the trove, noting the etymology of the French word *boulette* (ball), which became “bullet” in English. By joining the rough and crusty *boulettes* with gold links and a clasp made from a halved cannon ball he artfully de-weaponized them, transformed them into “beads,” and arranged them in the context of fine jewelry so that the piece acquires beauty by implication. He worked the same alchemy, but whimsically so, with *Rubies on the Soles of My Shoes* (2009), a necklace of hard-rubber heels from women's flats inlaid with tiny rubies, a

concept inspired, says Sajat, by a Paul Simon song (“Diamonds on the Soles of My Shoes”). Using ten of the tongue-shaped heels, linked in gold and joined with an exquisite gold ball clasp, he produced a cartoonish flowerlike circlet, reminiscent of anime design, in which a banal manufactured product aspires to beauty via symmetry and embellishment.

Invariably, Sajat's response to a material's symbolic potential is never at the expense of its aesthetic value, as in the case of rust. He has used rusted bottle caps and jewelry findings (jump rings from a found collection) as elements in pendant earrings (hung with slender iron nails), necklaces (together with crystal nuggets, faceted stones, and enamels), and rings, mounted in gold and set with accent diamonds. “Rust is the symbol of decay or of transience,” he says, “it's fragile, at the same time it's from iron, which is strong.” While Sajat respects the ambiguity of rust, he is equally “fond of this color combination of bright yellow and dark light consuming brown.” Sajat's fascination with and openness to all materials extends as well to colored stones but especially to diamonds, real but mostly faux. His *Cullinan 2 Replica* (2007), named after a legendary South African diamond, the largest ever found, is a sparkling faux gem, set in an open-back gold mounting. It provides the glittering centerpiece for a necklace of red glass shards and white quartz nuggets, which, though comparatively valueless, suggest uncut diamonds. Sajat loves the prismatic quality of diamonds—“the idea of an object breaking light”—and the fact that as a “dense closed substance” a diamond is

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Rust (earrings), 2008
iron, gold
3 x 1 1/4 x 1/8"



Red House (ring), 2005
glass, 18k gold, ebony, ivory
2 1/8 x 1 x 1"

By introducing this element of chance into his designs, he achieved “enormous freedom to be free of taste.”

“completely transparent.” When he first started using replica diamonds, he would order ten or more “at random,” telling the dealer to “just send me a couple.” He found this “very

exciting as I didn’t know what I would get, nor the names.” He did this, he says, “in order to avoid trying to create beautiful rings.” By introducing this element of chance into his designs—he initially produced about fifty such rings—he achieved, he says, “enormous freedom to be free of taste.” But not free of beauty, as the results attest.

Sajet’s love of color led him to enameling, a technique in which he is skilled and with which he has produced bright, symmetrical necklaces of utter refinement, as well as playfulness. In one example, a circle of nesting green laurel leaves surrounds the wearer’s throat—but with a halo of projecting, touch-me-not gold stems. In another, brilliant blue-on-gold geometric elements form a delicate retro-like bracelet, and in yet another, flattened cartoonish *saucisson* (sausage) links appear to suggest we not take jewelry all that seriously.

Sajet is also a master of niello, the black-metal technique that yields a slightly roughened sooty surface. He uses it to great effect for necklace elements—sometimes raw, pierced irregular forms—but also for dramatic rings in which high-projecting glass or crystal shards are mounted on a sturdy niello-on-silver washer-shaped base. Occasionally, rather than a raw shard, he uses a faceted stone or an open metal form constructed to resemble a table-cut diamond, some of these bristling like cacti, with thorny gold rods. In every case, the effect is once again of surreal drama, with the stone sitting high on its circular mounting—a thing that shouldn’t be able to exist, but does. Several of Sajet’s designs for high rings incorporate an architectural element, a small open-sided peak-roofed house, in the manner of Renaissance-era Jewish wedding rings. (Although admittedly not a particularly religious person, Sajet, who is Jewish, admits to playing “with the values of my culture.”)

Born in Amsterdam in 1953, Sajet attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam and studied privately in 1981 with the noted goldsmith Francesco Pavan in Padova, Italy. Sajet was impressed with “the power, the strength, the sizes” of Pavan’s work—one memorable piece contained 200 grams of gold. “His work is audacious,” says Sajet, “and I am happy to have seen that at such an early moment in my learning.” Audacity seems to have come naturally to Sajet, who, in his earliest forays into metalwork fancied himself “a small-time desperado” who wanted to become a counterfeiter of coins. He now lives in Hanau, Germany, where his wife, the jeweler Beate Klockman, teaches at the Staatliche Zeichenakademie. The family moved there recently, after a sojourn of “exactly 50 months,” as he puts it, in France which he had chosen “for the quiet” and to concentrate on his work removed from the distractions of exhibitions and

Cullinan 2 Replica (necklace), 2007
rock crystal, gold, glass
diameter 7 7/8"





Laurel (necklace), 1990
enamel, silver, gold
length 10"



Sausage (necklace), 1996
enamel, silver, gold
diameter 7 1/2"

such. During this period, he reports that his jewelry became “bolder, cruder . . . a little like the rugged mountains and the at times 100-mile-an-hour winds.”

In 1986, Sajat was invited to mount his first solo show as a jeweler by Galerie Louise Smit in Amsterdam, for which he made twenty-five pieces, each one different from the next, an approach, he says, “considered as a negative” at that time. Instead of caving to a trend, Sajat determined to make this “handicap” a strength, and the resultant work, over three decades, demonstrates how a singular sensibility can prevail despite an artist’s chosen eclecticism. Sajat’s multiform approach is dramatically demonstrated in two widely dissimilar pieces: *Psyche* (2012), a group of seven niello butterfly rings², the insect forms touched with gold and precious stones poised on blue enamel bands; and *Clams* (2011), a monumental pendant neckpiece made from two vertical rows of five large, polished clam shells that hang side by side from a gold ring. The latter piece—especially as photographed by Beate Klockman on Sajat’s workshop assistant, Fanny—might be viewed as a meditation on Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, the iconic Renaissance painting in which the goddess appears naked, a paragon of beauty on a scallop shell. Deviating from his usual circle-necklace form, Sajat here presents the shells nestling between the wearer’s breasts, from throat to navel, evocative variously of the sea, sexual love, and the voluptuous configurations to be found in female anatomy.

With astonishing ease, Sajat turns his hand from, say, the provocative sensuality of the clam neckpiece to the soulfulness of butterflies; from the rationality of geometric forms (cubes and disks) to the random configuration of shards; from the moody tones and textures of niello and rust to the vibrant tones of enamel and the brilliance of diamonds. To Sajat, his pieces are all of a kind, simply diverse expressions of “the wonder of life, the wonder of creation.” One’s aim as an artist, he believes, is “not to pay homage to a tree or flowers, but to be like a tree, to grow in innocence without opinion, and just be.” An overview of his work in all its quirky multiformity suggests nothing less than an existential frolic, an ode to the joys of any and all materials, and an immersion in varieties of aesthetic experience born of a beautiful, if unpredictable, mind.

Andrea DiNoto writes on art, craft and design.

1. Mary Ann Caws, ed. *Surrealism* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2004).
2. Sajat made an eighth ring at the request of his daughter Nina, for whom he has made a piece of jewelry for each of her twenty-four birthdays. In 2011, an exhibition of her twenty-three birthday jewels—including ice-cream-cone earrings and a necklace of beach pebbles—was held at the CODA Museum, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, as part of a Philip Sajat retrospective. Psyche, the goddess renowned for her beauty and the beloved of the god Eros, is often depicted in ancient art with butterfly wings.

All photos courtesy of Philip Sajat and Ornamentum Gallery.

Furthermore:

www.phillipsajat.com

Marjan Unger. *Sajat Jewelry* (Amsterdam: Galerie Marzee, 2011).

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Clams (necklace) 2011
18k gold, clam shells
18 x 7 x 1"



Psyche (7 rings), 2012
niello, enamel
each 1 3/4 x 1 3/8 x 1"