

Negative space is the hallmark of a technique that will grow in the next decade.



Barbara Heinrich uses negative space in her airy earrings to pack a big punch with less gold. Ford/Forlano's "Calder Flower Pin #3" (opposite page) combines polymer clay with sterling silver and gold leaf.

LIGHTER BRIGHTER BOLDER

Take a look at the future of art jewelry, and the designers who have already brought it to life

By ETTAGALE BLAUER

The future of jewelry making is already here. Contemporary goldsmiths have been experimenting with new metals, new materials and new techniques to create appealing works that “look like craft but last like jewelry,” says San Francisco, Calif., artist Sarah Graham. Customers want to feel like they are wearing something precious, regardless of the materials. Jewelers haven’t given up on gold or diamonds, but they have found ways to reduce their dependence on these pricey materials while maintaining the integrity of their styles.

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Success in New Materials

Graham has been ahead of the curve throughout her career and is well known for her two-tone combination of gold and blackened metal—a wonderful hypoallergenic material called cobalt chrome that she oxidizes. Customers are eager to accept new materials, as long as they come in a beautiful package. “People seem more interested in really knowing what this metal is,” Graham says. “They like the fact that it’s used in the medical industry.”

The success of alternative materials in jewelry stands on the quality of the make. “We are in the fine jewelry market,” Graham says. “No matter how cool and wild I make my jewelry, it has to be made right. It has to work and last.”

Alternative materials have been widely embraced by the wedding market, once considered among the most conservative segments of the jewelry world. Graham

found her way into the bridal business inadvertently. When orders were coming in with wedding dates indicated on them, Graham says a light went off. “I realized a bride is picking out four stacking rings. We were doing bridal and didn’t realize it. It’s the alternative wedding band market.”

Alternative Marketing

Boulder, Colo., jewelry artist Todd Reed, president of the American Jewelry Design Council, also found that his unique ring designs—a mix of rough and faceted diamonds set in palladium—appealed to the wedding market. “Palladium is less than a third the price of platinum,” he says. “And the look is way sexier.” While he still offers the entire line in gold, Reed finds that many men prefer the palladium.

The bridal collection already existed, he says, it just wasn’t offered as a “collection.” By grouping the rings and giving them a title on his new website, he says, “we started doing ‘collections.’ But the designs didn’t change.” This is a case of “alternative marketing,” or simply acknowledging customer ingenuity. Reed now finds it difficult to get some of the rough diamonds he helped make popular, so he has turned to “funky colored diamonds,” which he pairs with brilliant cuts. This “new material” is one of the oldest in the world, refashioned by a designer’s eye into a contemporary, forward-looking design.



Todd Reed’s impressive brooch (above) is hand-forged and fabricated from 18kt gold, rose cut diamonds and raw diamond cubes. Sarah Graham’s “Radiolarian” stacking rings (left) are made of gold and blackened cobalt chrome. Polymer clay and sterling silver marry in a reversible “Pillow Cascade Necklace” by Ford/Forlano (opposite page).

- negative space
- goldsmiths
- Fordite
- alternative materials
- ingenuity
- blackened metal
- openwork
- contemporary
- polymer clay
- future
- cobalt chrome
- precious
- rough diamonds
- metal clay
- palladium
- integrity
- Bioblu 27

Innovations on the Horizon

Even more unusual materials are already in the mix, says Cindy Edelstein, president of the Jeweler’s Resource Bureau. “Scott Kay is using a material called Bioblu 27, a cobalt alloy intended to replace tungsten carbide.” This jazzy sounding metal is bright white and very durable. It can be cast or milled, and offers an extremely inexpensive alternative to traditional wedding bands. As the metal maker moves into alloys compatible with gem-setting, this material will likely grow in popularity.

Edelstein also points to precious metal clay as a contender in modern jewelry, as well as an amazing material called Fordite. “It’s really layers and layers of auto paint (hence the amusing name) that are swirled into a usable material,”

Less Is More

Negative space is the hallmark of a technique that will grow in the next decade. With the price of gold hovering around the \$1,000-an-ounce mark, designers have been forced to stretch their artistic muscles. By opening up the spaces within their designs, jewelers can have their gold and keep their prices in line. Pittsford, N.Y., artist Barbara Heinrich, known for her solid gold designs, now creates cage-like earrings that offer huge

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—Sarah Graham, jewelry artist

she says. The ultimate effect is a gemstone look-alike. Evanston, Ill., artist Tamra Gentry is a pioneer in the use of this intriguing material.

The Philadelphia, Pa., team of Ford/Forlano has been pushing the boundaries of materials in their forward-looking jewelry designs for more than 20 years. Steve Ford and David Forlano’s latest work forces you to reconsider any assumptions you had about polymer clay. Their deeply textured-polymer pieces, set in sterling silver, re-imagine the use of color, pattern and surface in forms reminiscent of seed clusters, shell formations and flower buds.

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Photo: Forlano