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A Snapshot of some of New Zealand's Finest



JESSICA WINCHCOMBE

FASHION JEWELLERY

Anne Hudson takes a look at the work of a gifted New Zealand jeweller, whose talent has taken her from Queenstown to Milan.

Jessica Winchcombe's work exudes the haptic pleasure of making. Carefully pleated or woven leather necklaces and folded metal earrings are the product of careful time and labour, their simplicity belying the dexterity and skill required to make them.

However, unlike knitting and crochet these works demonstrate a complexity of conceptual thinking that lies behind their creation. The weaving provides a yin and yang interlocking of threads of love and life, an intertwining or juxtaposition of male and female, light and dark. The pieces are not whimsical but bold, almost sculptural yet light, and while designed to be worn with comfort, they make a statement.

Jessica uses recycled materials, old leather and metal, and strives to keep the form of each piece minimal so that the patina of age is still evident. The recycled material already has a history, so Jessica gives it a new start. Some of her pieces are elevated by the wear of their owner, settling in to a new life separate from the maker.

In collaboration with mentor Warwick Freeman, she has used horsehair and beads to create a new range of earrings, bracelets and neckpieces. Horsehair has a tradition of use in jewellery, but is usually woven into a bracelet or placed in a locket as a memorial to a particular horse.

The pairing of hair and pearls may seem unusual, but Jessica is again playing with the almost opposing materials to imbue an added layer of meaning into her work. The horsehair, I read, comes from the horse's tail and is a long, strong fibre ideal for this purpose. The strength of that fibre and its obvious animal source puts it in stark contrast to the subtle warmth of pearls.

In another of her woven or pleated neckpieces, pearls are set into the folds, giving a nod to their traditional presentation while creating new and edgy work.

Jessica has been invited to show her work overseas at the Milan Fashion Show, as well as at exhibitions in Germany and the Netherlands. The Milan Fashion Show invitational exhibition Artistar Jewels is

carving out a reputation for showcasing excellence in contemporary jewellery design, and featured Jessica's work just this year. The show, which features 200 creations selected for their high artistic relevance and embraces both tradition and innovation, placed the Kiwi jeweller in a sophisticated arena of not only makers, but also marketers.

Jessica lives in and works from a studio in Queenstown and runs workshops around the country through which she shares her expertise with her students. She is happy working in her studio, meeting the demands of the galleries that support her and seeing what the universe might throw at her.

Her jewellery definitely falls into a fine art category; one where the artist is at one with her materials and has a mastery of the skills required to create fully resolved, original pieces. These pieces are aesthetically pleasing while also demonstrating that they are the completion or the evolution of an idea. The pieces display well in the vitrines of galleries and museums but take on another life when worn by their happy recipient.

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