

THOMAS GENTILE

Fellow

A THOMAS GENTILE BROOCH is at once compressed and expansive, instantly recognizable and ultimately mysterious. Over a few square inches, one of Gentile's pieces might present something like tilled pastureland, only in bright yellow and burnt red instead of green and brown, or a miniaturized high-rise tipped on its side, or Arctic water showing through cracked ice. They demand further study of the geometry of the lines, the interplay of the hues.

The 81-year-old Gentile, who lives in New York City, grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland, where his high school teacher Clay Walker introduced him to art, taking him on field trips to the Cleveland Museum of Art and teaching him painting, woodcut printing, and papier-mâché. Gentile adapted quickly to different materials – a flexibility that became a defining characteristic of his later work – and went on to study at the Cleveland Institute of Art under Joseph McCullough, who had studied with Bauhaus legend Josef Albers. McCullough passed along secrets about color that couldn't be gleaned from instruction books or standard theory. "Mixing the color is one thing," Gentile says, "but understanding the soul of color – that's where Albers came in."

Albersian juxtapositions have been at the heart of Gentile's work throughout his more than five decades at the vanguard of jewelry. Employing his trademark unconventional materials – he opts for wood, pumice, paint, or bone far more often than gold or silver –



he creates and manipulates tension. "I might lay one value against another if I'm trying to have something come forward and something recede," the artist says. "I use [color] subconsciously all the time."

Despite the expertise evident in his finished brooches – his preferred format – Gentile says making jewelry has never



come easy. "I decided this was for me because it was fighting me back," he says of his early years, "and painting and sculpture never fought me back." He wears the scars of his work proudly, like badges of honor. "These fingers," he says, holding up his hands, "this is all work-induced arthritis from holding, clamping down. When I clamp, my fingers are straight ... so what looks like a deformity is actually a great tool."

The emotional and physical effort that goes into a new brooch often pays off, but not always. "One hopes that one makes a good piece all the time; it doesn't always happen," Gentile says. "If it's not good, it just doesn't get seen. I have a box full of those."

Portrait: Barbara Bordnick / Pin photos: Joe Gold



Challenge is an essential part of the jeweler's work. "I stopped doing soldering a long time ago because soldering got so easy for me," he says. Making a piece work on a technical level is only half the battle; the other part is aesthetic. "The question is: How do I make the connection of the different materials without making it look like a connection, without it being the most important thing?" Working in a range of materials, including his signature eggshell inlay, offers him a ready supply of problems to solve. "You learn that it's never-ending," the artist says. "It was one of the reasons why I started with it, because there's always another question about jewelry." ♦

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Pin, 20th century, copper, 14k gold, 2.8 in. dia.

Pin: Eggshell Inlay, 21st century, eggshell inlay, 3.75 x 3.5 in.

Pin, 21st century, maple, polychrome metal, 6 x 1.4 x 1 in.