

Metalsmith



FALL 1991
VOLUME II NUMBER 4
\$7

Thomas Gentile

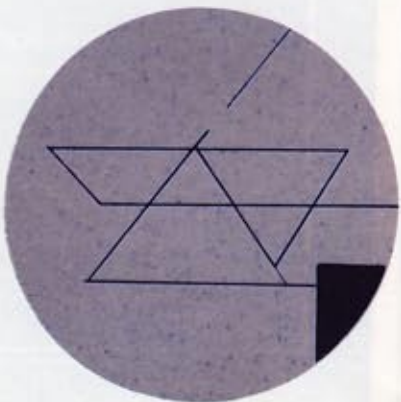
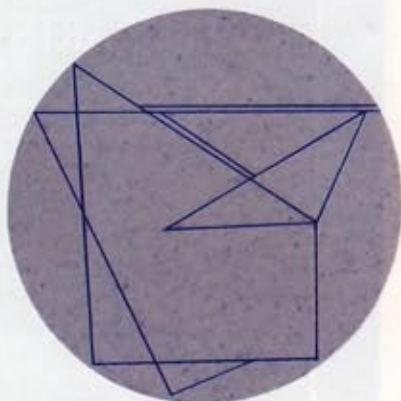
The Permanence of the Ephemeral

by Vanessa S. Lynn

Although Thomas Gentile has the distinction of having a black ceramic glaze named for him, it is his little-known recovery of an ancient eggshell surface for jewelry that marks for him an emblematic achievement. Eggshell, the skin of the egg, the universal symbol of potentiality, captures all that Gentile seeks. Medieval man thought of the egg as container of both matter and thought. So it must be for Gentile, who desires a monument to that most fleeting of potentialities, creativity. The inherent worthlessness of the material, the strain of the detailed technique and the surface dematerialization build to a crescendo as his lifelong concerns. To take the most fragile and ephemeral of natural materials and restructure it, resurrect it, in a permanent form of his own creation is the essence of what he seeks to achieve as an artist.

The time-consuming process involves thousands of eggshell fragments painstakingly laid and permanently affixed to a hand-carved armature. The material is emphasized through his control of the scale of these calcified chips and by the surface application of one or more pigments. The colors lodge only between the myriad slivers of shell, emphasizing the irregular geometry that is the patchwork surface.

Six years to research and three years to complete the first eggshell armband: it is understandable that Gentile is reluctant to share his technique. Yet, because the eggshell surface is the essence of so much that is his, it is doubtful that anyone could use it as effectively. For over 30 years, Thomas Gentile has occupied a small and diminishing corner of the artist/jeweler community. Although, like many peers, his work is truly his *raison d'être*, he, in contrast, must often be coaxed to bring pieces out of seclusion for viewing. Instead of opportunistic self-promotion and grandstanding, he has been known to keep his work out of potentially profitable venues and discourage sales to people whom he feels misunderstand his intention. His work celebrates technique yet avoids flashy, trendy pyrotechnics. He could spend six years researching a process; he has spent 10 on the completion of a single necklace. In the past, his path has sometimes paralleled and sometimes diverged from that of mainstream jewelry developments. But more often, in his isolation, he seems to have been several steps ahead. The result is a focused, exacting oeuvre, combining a modernist sensibility with old-world craftsmanship that seems at times in opposition to prevailing art world practice.



Pins, Surel,
ultramarine blue pure
pigment inlays
with metallic particles,
8.6mm d.

Photos: Karen Bell

Pin, wood burl,
eggshell inlay,
11.5 x 6.9 x 2.3mm deep.
Photo: Karen Bell



*Pin, 18k gold, pearls,
approx. 5.5mm d.*

His life fits the art world stereotype of the practicing, passionate maker. His cramped urban flat, piled with a lifetime of paraphernalia, serves as living and working environment. Here he keeps his needs to a minimum, concentrating on the vision, the work. Eliminating peripheral distractions permits a disciplined life devoted to a slow, steady investigation of the things that make him passionate: geometry, tonality and materiality.

These preoccupations, so apparent in his mature work, seem well defined by an early date. From the outset, he preferred a two-dimensional format. This provided the most receptive plane for him to explore issues of nonobjectivity. He respects the inherent beauty and clarity of pure form and employs it in his austere compositions. He uses geometry to explore issues of perception, reality and illusion. Similarly, he revels in color for its own sake and for the evocative power released through juxtaposition. He favors two extremes of palette: primary, unmodulated tonalities and light-refracting, shimmering hues that dematerialize in the viewing. In the service of each of these concerns, Gentile lavishes attention to detail.

The latter is not a skilled craftsman's indulgence but part of a philosophical framework. At the core is his pursuit of permanence, his need to make only what will endure. This need prods him to seek both a physical and esthetic immortality. It underlies the structural systems that become solutions for the conservation of ephemeral materials. The cold-connection acrylic sandwich, to take but one example, serves as protector to the host of delicate materials, gold leaf, feathers, glitter or hand-dyed silk. Gentile will not incorporate them until he is confident they will not disintegrate in time.



The desire for permanence not only underlies his attraction to innovative materials, it offers another explanation for his attraction to geometry. Geometry provides a language that is both universally understood and transcendent of its time and place. The issues of geometric abstraction can only be pinpointed to the 20th century. Using it allows him to keep company with the artists to whom he is most responsive, from Mondrian to Halley. But geometry provides an advantage beyond timelessness. It offers the opportunity to wed the exploration of the above issues to the investigation of the even larger motivating passion.

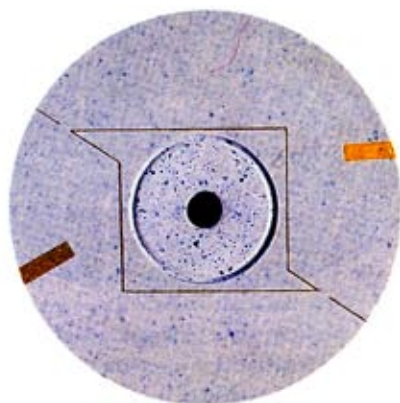
Gentile is maniacal about material. He has made his task as an artist to identify, enhance and release a material's integrity. His quest has not been for "the elevation of the inexpensive," although he has been conveniently categorized in the "alternative material" camp. His search pre-dates the precious metal market frenzy of the 70s. In 1958, his last year as an undergraduate at the Cleveland Institute of Art, he chose to conclude his three years of training as a painter/sculptor by a year of jewelry study with John Paul Miller. He was, henceforth, a painter/sculptor pursuing fine art goals with unconventional materials. He gained notoriety by using ebony to carve a brooch; its application in metal studios was heretofore reserved for holloware handles. He was the first student at Cleveland to do a bronze casting in jewelry. And, true to his passion for exploring new materials, he took the initiative that resulted in the establishment of the first glass-blowing facility at the school.

Gentile's early work incorporates a variety of precious materials, which even then were used in unconventional ways. He laid silk into carved ebony channels, inlaid dental amalgam into a domed gold pin, and granulated 24k gold for hairpick embellishments before anyone told him it was technically impossible. He used feathers in acrylic inlays, and invented a wax on wax casting technique, which Oppi Untracht asked him to detail for *Jewelry, Concepts and Technology*. Always, as when he cemented tiny pearls in pockets and made raised walls of gold for their protection, the design and technique are intertwined in the service of permanence. He invented a pure-pigment inlay technique that is now taught in high schools internationally. The pleasure and passion of this pursuit, of not only knowing and conquering a method or material, but then actually inventing one's own, drives him to be experimental. At the same time, he has ultimately shared many of his discoveries, and in the process lost credit for initiating them. This is because he has been negligent in documenting his work, remiss in photographing, dating and recording his own sales and exhibitions. It remains for the next researcher to confirm that his long love affair with acrylic sheet developed independent of the published examples coming from Europe in the early 70s, but it seems highly likely that such is the case. More important than the chronology of acrylics is his advanced explorations with them. He has learned to maximize the intrinsic properties of acrylic and then alter them to create and control a new set of colors, textures and light-gathering properties. In so doing, he frequently manages to assemble a combination of techniques that defy expectation and render the alien matter with humanist sensibility. Gentile is able to bring a life force to that which we think of as inert.

He is capable of doing this because he is very clear about the driving force behind his continuing investigations. He believes that the less precious the material, the more difficult it is to locate its integrity, its "soul." And therein lies the challenge. "You can bite into 24k gold and create something beautiful." Acrylic, dental amalgam, paper foil, thread and eggshell offer no such easy answers. It may be romantic, yet it may well be this hard-won understanding that underlies Gentile's unique achievements with these materials. It involves extracting essentiality. Too many jewelers chose a material simply because it is there. Their compositional need for a pale, flat passage in an assemblage, for example, may just as easily be fulfilled by gold, plastic, bone or enamel. A found object or material, in other words, may be used simply because it has been found. When at its best, Gentile's use of a particular material insinuates itself within a composition as the only choice and the only manipulation to provide an effective result. Remove *that* material, and the integrity of the entire piece disintegrates. A late armlet (1989) of mother-of-pearl, ebony and Colorcore provides a handsome example. The graphic composition calls to mind Ilya Bolotowsky's *Small White Tondo* of 1960 (Yale University Art Gallery), with its use of close white and off-white tonalities, rhythmically punctuated by black lines and gray planes. Gentile has used the intrinsic grain in the pearlized surface to exceptional advantage, placing each in juxtaposition to its neighbor so that each captures and refracts light independently. Consequently, each becomes a different color; Ad Reinhardt's black canvases also come to mind. This symphony of whites further benefits from the introduction of a truncated, rectangle of matte-gray Colorcore placed at a 45-degree angle to the pearlized rhythms. The density of the synthetic material and the finality of its flatness serve to intensify the visual unpredictability of the organic surface. The narrow ebony divisions also used here share the properties of both; organic by definition, their grain compliments the pearl at the same time that their dense color resonates with the laminate. It is not just the unexpected harmony of the natural/synthetic juxtaposition that makes this work so powerful; it is the artist's ultimate ability to understand each material. Gentile's handling of the mother-of-pearl grain results in a tonal and textural complexity rivaling the power of the brushstroke in the best monochrome painting.

To extract the essence of each material in this way is, in a sense, to reduce it. To strip away the literal and figurative surface distractions is to proclaim the material's purest facticity. The same impetus accounts for Gentile's structural reductivism in his mature work. As his progression with materials went from the precious as primary to irrelevant, he reduced his dimensional vocabulary (by the 70s) to the essence of geometric perfection, the circle. With rare exception, the circular brooch or circular, planar armlet became the essentially flat canvas for all his work. Yet, as he points out, he works his flatness three-dimensionally.

Just as he seeks to get "inside" a material, so too he parallels its construction in his composition. For example, his constructed brooches use their $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch depth in two ways. First, surface skin is penetrated and something—color, space, light, dark or texture—is revealed within. He creates apertures through which we may peer to find a greater truth. Through that revelation, the entire structure is altered, and so too is our understanding of the piece. The most dramatic illustration of this is a series of 20 round, bronze brooches, each of which had a central square worked upon it. The circular surface of each was treated uniquely, as was the handling of the square. One might be cut out, a second might be inset with ebony, a third could protrude in sandpapered plexiglass. They call to mind a jeweler's homage to Josef Albers's *Homage to the Square*. But Albers's 40-year series explored the calculated interaction of color and straight lines through his square-on-square formula. Gentile expands the experiment by increasing the controlled parameters. By adding variation in material, texture and density to his own square-on-circle equation, he explodes our preconceptions of each material in each juxtaposition as well as our understanding of nonobjective figure/ground relationships.

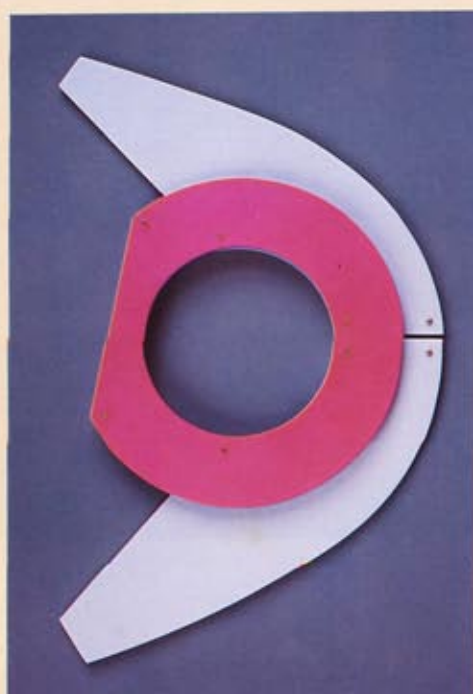
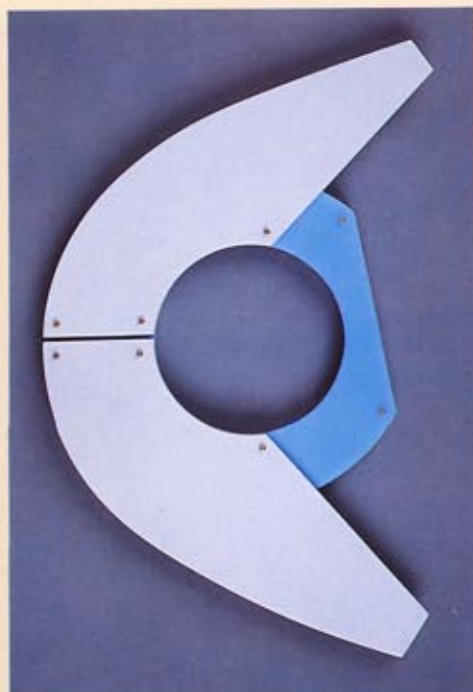


**Pin, Surel,
pure pigment inlays,
10.5mm d. x 6mm deep.
Photo: Karen Bell**

The second way in which the pins and armlets take advantage of depth is the fact that both sides bear complete compositions. In the case of a pin's verso, this is not a romantic secret between artist and patron. Each is a complete composition, including the consideration of the width of the pin stem as it relates to the angle and font of the artist's signature. In the case of a flat armlet, the piece reads as two entirely different compositions, depending on whether the arm is up or down. Like Gentile's obsessive exploration to find the inner truth of a material, and his structural sandwiches whose layers expose formal, textural or tonal secrets, these completely self-sufficient "alternative faces" use the strict vocabulary of geometric abstraction to defy that modernist dictum, "What you see is what you see!" In the case of Gentile, what you see is never all there is.

Vanessa S. Lynn is a writer living in New York who frequently contributes to Metalsmith.

Square in Circle Pins, 3 variations from a series of 20; top: bronze, chemical patina; center: solid copper, heat and chemical patina; bottom: bronze, pink marble cube, chemical and heat patina, each approx. 7.1mm d. Photos: Karen Bell



Armlet, front and back, acrylic, 22.8mm l. Photos: Karen Bell