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Japanese metal craft rings up to look like wood

By ANGELA JEFFS

Mary Fidler is pondering, wondering whether her logo as a designer, "mfide," rolls with sufficient ease off the tongue. It does, I assure her -- as long you know it sounds out phonetically as m-f-ide, and not m-fide.

Mary's second exhibition, which runs five more days until Dec. 21, is being hosted by Tokyo's RBR Center for Creative Arts in Moto-Azabu, for good reason. "It was because of courses taken there that I dared make a leap of faith, why I'm now a jeweler rather than an administrator."



Mary Fidler makes richly unpredictable jewelry using "mokume gane," a technique invented in the 17th century to decorate the handles of samurai swords with fine metals annealed and forged to look like wood.

From the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state, Mary was always keen to learn. Liking school, she was a good all-rounder. "It was my younger brother who was the designated creative person within the family. Always making things, he now works as a milliner in Hong Kong."

Mary's mother was an elementary school teacher who never claimed to be creative. Dad was a lawyer -- about as left-brain (logical, rational) as you can get. "I did a degree in rehabilitation counseling, for no better reason than I thought it a nice sensible useful career. But you know how one thing leads to another."

Already burned out after her internship on the psychiatric ward of a hospital, she followed her nose from one job to another: working in catering, as a buyer in a retail store, even assisting a commercial photographer. Then 16 years ago, she shook things up by coming to Japan.

"I could have moved to another city in the U.S., but thought: 'No, what's the point? That's too easy.' Also, I knew I could get work teaching English here. I never planned to stay or imagined I would meet anyone."

She was introduced to her husband, Kazz Ide, through mutual friends. At that time he was working for a Japanese company as an engineer, but now he is with a German firm in sales. "Like me, he's the kind of person who needs and rises to challenges."

After five years with the language school chain Britannica, where she rose to management level, Mary moved to Asia University, located in Misashiakai, running study-abroad programs between Japan and Washington state. She stayed there nearly four years before deciding to do something completely new and different.

"Having done the 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain' course at RBR, I decided to jump off a cliff. I enrolled at the Revere Academy in San Francisco, one of the most well-known jewelry and metalwork schools in the world."

During the drawing course, Mary had realized that all her life she had been questioning her passion. "I thought I could sink my teeth into cross-cultural and intercultural issues to achieve transformation. But Japan proved to be confining rather than liberating in these areas. Wanting more control, I began asking what I could lose myself best in."

For years, beading had been a hobby. "It was portable, required little space, but offered the color and texture I loved. Realizing this was what made me happiest, it seemed natural to take it to a different level."

Impatient at the prospect of four years of study, she decided to take an accelerated course at Revere. "It's breadth was staggering. With high-caliber teachers and facilities, the seven months passed by boom, boom, boom."

What Mary was most interested in was jewelry design, but first she felt she should learn all the technical stuff. "I had never held a saw in my life, let alone put on a visor and worked with a torch. Mastery of any craft is a long road. Even now, four years later, I know I'm only scratching the surface."

Scratching the surface is an interesting phrase, considering the technique that Mary has chosen to explore and develop. "Kazz found me a sensei, Naohiro Yamada, teaching 'mokume gane,' with an atelier just 10 minutes from our home in Nishiogikubo."

Mokume gane (literally "woodeye metal," a form of metalwork that looks like wood) was invented by Denbei Shoami, a 17th century metalsmith in Akita Prefecture, who used it to decorate the handles of samurai swords. It is an extremely difficult technique, requiring the fusion by heat and pressure of several layers of different-colored metals to make billets, which are then carved and finished to produce uniquely patterned metal stock.

"In America, craftsmen like George Sawyer and James Binnion have developed their own methods of making mokume gane, using modern tools and materials and speeding up the process. But still it is immensely time-consuming, and each piece I make -- a ring or pendant, whatever -- is a constant challenge."

Mary fuses layers of contrasting plates of gold and platinum or silver and copper. She uses a "togane" (chisel) to dig out the pattern, and must then anneal, forge and carve it five or more times before hammering out and putting it through a rolling machine for use.

"Yes, it's labor-intensive and time-consuming, but the end result is always a surprise. Mokume gane is fascinating because no two pieces are ever alike."

At her first exhibition in November 2004, held in Musashiakai, she sold and received commissions for some 30 pieces in sterling silver and 18-karat gold.

Go to RBR between now and Wednesday for a last-minute present, and on the walls of the lobby you will find examples of mokume gane -- rings, pendants, earrings -- suspended in small black boxes with mirrored interiors, so designs can be viewed from all angles.

Mary's road is solitary but freely chosen. "Five years from now I would like to be seen as developing strongly and surely as a jewelry designer and metal worker, with my mfide logo gaining recognition."

She believes anyone can make the leap to do something else, and in so doing, get closer to their heart's desire. But she accepts it helps to have strong emotional support. "I'm lucky to have Kazz. It helps that he believes in me, thinks I can do it."

"Looks Like Wood" jewelry exhibition, until Dec. 21 in the RBR lobby, opposite the South Korean Embassy. Phone (03) 5475-6171, or see the Web site and map at www.rbr-art.com

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