

CONTEMPORARY JEWELRY IS NOT A “LOOK” -- IT’S A WAY OF “THINKING”

by Warren Feld, Jewelry Artisan

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“Canyon Sunrise”, Warren Feld, designer, 2004, Austrian crystal, glass seed beads, 14KT gold chain and constructed clasp, fireline cable thread, photographer Warren Feld

Abstract:

Contemporary Jewelry represents a specific approach for thinking through design. Making jewelry is, in essence, an authentic performance task. The jewelry artisan applies knowledge, skill and awareness in the anticipation of the influence and constraints of a set of shared understandings. Shared understandings relate to composition, construction and performance. These understandings are enduring, transferable, big ideas at the heart of what we think of as “contemporary jewelry”. They are things which spark meaningful connections between designer and materials, designer and techniques, and designer and client. Managing these connections is what we call “fluency in design”.

Jewelry Design is a professional discipline. Every legitimately defined profession has at its core a discipline-specific way of thinking. This includes core concepts, core rules, and core beliefs. And it includes professional routines and strategies for applying, manipulating and managing these. The good designer is fluent in how to think through design, and the good contemporary designer is fluent in how to think through design which earns the label “*contemporary*”.

But, the jewelry designer can only wonder at this with crossed eyes and bewilderment. As a profession, *jewelry design* balances a series of contradictions, most notably to what extent the practice is craft, art or design. This works against professional legitimacy.

Jewelry Design, as a *discipline*, is not always clear and consistent about its own *literacy* – that is, what it means to be fluent in design. Its core concepts, rules and beliefs are not well-defined, and often break down by medium, by operational location – (*visualize* museum, gallery, studio, store, factory, workshop, class, home), and by the degree of involvement and commitment to the profession of the jewelry designer him- or herself. The diversity of materials, approaches, styles and the like make it difficult to delineate any unifying principles or professional image.

As designers, we see, feel and experience the evolving dynamics of an occupation in search of a profession. But our profession is still in search of a coherent identify. Perhaps we see this most often in debates over how we come to recognize what jewelry we think should be labeled “contemporary” and what jewelry should not.

On the one hand, the idea of *contemporary* can be very elucidating. On the other, however, we are not sure what *contemporary* involves, how the label should be applied, and what the label represents. Yet, our sense-making search for its meaning is at the forefront of the professionalization of jewelry design. Our persistent questioning about “*What is contemporary jewelry?*” opens up thinking and possibilities for every jewelry designer, working across many styles and with many materials, both experienced and novice alike.

The term “*contemporary*” is defined as *something occurring in our time*, and that can be very confusing for the jewelry designer. We get caught in a major *Identity Crisis* for lack of a clear, agreed-upon definition of *contemporary*. How we resolve this *Identity Crisis* around a common understanding of “*contemporary jewelry*” can go a long way, I believe, towards developing a coherent disciplinary literacy and professional identity for all jewelry designers. Resolution can be very unifying.

Many conceptual questions about *contemporary jewelry* arise. We need to be very cognizant of how we think through our responses.

Does the label apply to every piece of jewelry made today? We see all kinds of styles, shapes, silhouettes, materials, techniques, fashions all around us. There appears to be no common denominator except that they all have been *created in our time*.

Should the label be applied to all this variation?

Could it?

Why would we want it to?

Does the label apply to a certain timeframe, with the expectation that it will be supplanted by another label sometime in the future?

What is *contemporary jewelry*?

“Contemporary” Is A Specific Approach For Thinking Through Design

I suggest that *contemporary jewelry* is not a specific thing. But rather it is a way of thinking through the design process. It is a type of *thinking routine*^[1] which underlays the universal core of contemporary jewelry design.

Contemporary jewelry is not every piece of jewelry made in our time. It is, instead, jewelry designed and crafted with certain *shared understandings* in mind – understandings about *composition, construction* and *performance*.

Contemporary jewelry is not associated with any particular color or pattern or texture. It is, instead, a strategy for selecting colors, patterns and textures.

Contemporary jewelry is not something that only a few people would make or wear, whether boring or outlandish. It is, instead, something most people recognize as wearable with some level of appeal.

Contemporary jewelry is not restricted to the use of unusual or unexpected materials or techniques. It is, instead, something which leverages the strengths or minimizes the weaknesses of any and all materials and/or techniques used in a project.

Contemporary jewelry is not a specific silhouette, or line, or shape, or form, or theme, but, instead, something which shows the artist’s control over how these can be manipulated, used, played off of, and, even, violated.

Contemporary jewelry is an integral part of our culture. We wear jewelry to tell ourselves and to tell others we are OK. It is reflective of the sum of all our choices about how we think through our place among others, our relative value among others, our behaviors among others, our preferred ways to interact, challenge, conform, question, organize and arrange.

The contemporary jewelry designer is especially positioned to serve at the nexus of all this culture. The designer’s ability to think through and define what *contemporary* means becomes instrumental for everyone wearing their jewelry to successfully negotiate the day-to-day cultural demands of the community they live in. Designers have a unique ability to dignify and make people feel valued, respected, honored and seen.

Think of all that power!

Each person stands at that precipice of acceptance or not, relevance or not. The jewelry designer has the power to push someone in one direction, or another.

If only we had the established profession and a disciplinary literacy to help us be smart about this.

FLUENCY^[2] IN DESIGN: Managing The Contemporary Design Process

Jewelry design is, in effect, an *authentic performance task*.

The jewelry designer demonstrates their knowledge, awareness and abilities to:

1. Work within our *shared understandings* about contemporary jewelry.
2. Apply key *knowledge and skills* to achieve the desired result – a contemporary piece of jewelry.
3. Anticipate how their work will be *reviewed, judged and evaluated* by criteria reflective of these same shared understandings.
4. Step back, *reflect*, and validate all their thinking to reject any misunderstandings, and *make adjustments* accordingly.

The better designer is able to bring a high level of coherence and consistency to the process of managing all this – shared understandings, knowledge and skills, evaluative review, and reflection and adjustment.

This is called “*fluency in design*”.

Shared Understandings^[3]

Shared understandings should be enduring, transferable, big ideas at the heart of what we think of as *contemporary jewelry*. These shared understandings are things which spark meaningful connections between designer and materials, designer and techniques, and designer and client. We need, however, to recognize that the idea of *understanding* is very multidimensional and complicated.

Understanding is not one achievement, but more the result of several loosely organized choices. Understanding is revealed through performance and evidence. Jewelry designers must perform effectively with knowledge, insight, wisdom and skill to convince us – the world at large and the client in particular -- that they really understand what design, and with our case here, contemporary design, is all about. This involves a big interpersonal component where the

artist introduces their jewelry to a wider audience and subjects it to psychological, social, cultural, and economic assessment.

Understanding is more than knowledge. The designer may be able to articulate what needs to be done to achieve something labeled *contemporary*, but may not know how to apply it.

Understanding is more than interpretation. The designer may be able to explain how a piece was constructed and conformed to ideas about *contemporary*, but this does not necessarily account for the significance of the results.

Understanding is more than applying principles of construction. It is more than simply organizing a set of design elements into an arrangement. The designer must match knowledge and interpretation about *contemporary* to the context. Application is a context-dependent skill.

Understanding is more than perspective. The designer works within a myriad of expectations and points of view about contemporary jewelry. The designer must dispassionately anticipate these various perspectives about contemporary design, and, bring some constructed point of view and knowledge of implications to bear within the design and design process.

We do not design in a vacuum. The designer must have the ability to empathize with individuals and grasp their individual and group cultures. If selling their jewelry, the designer must have the ability to empathize with small and larger markets, as well. Empathy is not sympathy. Empathy is where we can feel what others feel, and see what others see.

Last, understanding is self-knowledge, as well. The designer should have the self-knowledge, wisdom and insights to know how their own patterns of thought may inform, as well as prejudice, their understandings of contemporary design.

How the jewelry designer begins the process of creating a contemporary piece of jewelry is very revealing about the potential for success. The designer should always begin the process by articulating the essential shared understandings against which their work will be evaluated and judged. For now, let’s refer to this as *Backwards Design*^[4]. The designer starts with questions about

assessment, and then allows this understanding to influence all other choices going forward.

When designing contemporary jewelry, the designer will push for shared understandings about what it means to be worthy of the label “*contemporary*.” I propose the following five *shared understandings* as a place to start, and hopefully, to generate more discussion and debate.

These are,

1. ***Fixed Frameworks and Rules should not pre-determine what designers do.***

Rules do exist, such as color schemes or rules for achieving balance or rhythm. But rules may be challenged or serve as guidelines for the designer. In fact, the designer may develop and implement rules of their own.

Designers do not learn understanding if they are only able to answer a question if framed in one particular way. How the designer invents and applies rules for managing design as a process become of primary importance because they reveal design fluency and thinking. And this allows for a variety of approaches as well as an escape from any dominant definitions. Nothing is sacred.

2. ***Jewelry should extend, rework, and play with, or even push, the boundaries of materials, techniques and technologies.***

Contemporary designers are meant to ask questions, evaluate different options and experiment widely. They do this in order to leverage the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of materials, techniques and technologies used. Their jewelry should reflect this.

3. ***Jewelry should evoke emotions.***

The audience is an integral part of the success of contemporary jewelry. The viewer/wearer recognizes things in the piece and is allowed to, (*in fact*,

expected to), react and interpret. The designer’s goal is to achieve a level of resonance.

4. ***Jewelry should connect people with culture.***

Contemporary jewelry is not made for art’s sake alone. Contemporary jewelry is made to connect to the world around us. It is meant to assist a person in recognizing how they want to live their lives, and how they want to introduce their view of themselves into the broader community or communities they live in.

5. ***Successful jewelry designs should only be judged as the jewelry is worn.***

Jewelry is not designed in isolation from the human body. Its design should anticipate requirements for movement, drape and flow. Its design should anticipate the implications of the context in which the jewelry is worn. The implications for all jewelry design choices are most apparent at the boundary between jewelry and person.

Given that the designer “*backward-designs* ^[4],” he or she begins the process by anticipating those understandings about how their work will be assessed. The designer then is equipped to make three types of informed choices:

- A. Choices about *composition*
- B. Choices about *construction*
- C. Choices about *performance*

The designer determines (a) what *design elements* to include in the piece, and then (b) *rules for manipulating* them. The contemporary designer (c) measures these against our shared understandings about contemporary design. These measures are a continuum – degrees of contemporary, not either/or’s or absolutes. In any given piece of jewelry, some design elements may be very contemporary, and others might not.

GOOD COMPOSITION:

Selecting and Articulating Upon Design Elements and Their Attributes

Jewelry making is a constructive process. It makes sense for the designer to begin with something like building blocks, which I call *design elements*. Design elements include things like color, movement, dimensionality, materials, use of space, and the like.

Each design element, in turn, encompasses a range of acceptable meanings, yet still reflective of that design element, and which are called *attributes*.

These design elements can be arranged in different configurations.

The combination of any two or more design elements can have synergistic effects.

Working with design elements is not much different than working with an alphabet. An alphabet is made up of different letters. Each letter has different attributes – how it is written, how it sounds, how it is used. Configurations of letters result in more sounds and more meanings and more ways to be used.

A person working with an alphabet has to be able to decode the letters, sounds and meanings, as letters are used individually as well as in combination. As the speaker becomes better at decoding, she or he begins to build in understanding of implications for how any letter is used, again, individually or in combination.

This is exactly what the jewelry designer does with design elements. The designer has to decode, that is, make sense of a series of elements and their attributes in light of our shared understandings about jewelry design. The contemporary designer decodes in light of our further shared understandings about contemporary jewelry design.

The designer might, for example, want to select from this list of *design elements* I have generated below. I have arranged these design elements into what is called a *thinking routine*^[1]. The designer uses the routine to determine how each element might be incorporated into the piece, and how the desired attributes of each element relate to contemporary design. They might also use the routine to

look for issues of true and false. They might use the routine to rate each element as to importance and uncertainty.

| DESIGN ELEMENT | LESS CONTEMPORARY | MORE CONTEMPORARY |
|---|---|--|
| <i>Dimensionality</i> | Flat; Width/Length focus | Not Flat; Noticeable Width/Length/Height focus |
| <i>Movement, Moving Elements</i> | Little or no movement, either from the movement of actual components, or from how colors or patterns are used | Great sense of movement, either from the movement of components, or from how colors or patterns are used |
| <i>Color, Color Blending</i> | Follows color rules, resistant to violate them | Pushes color rules to the edge, or violates them |
| <i>Light and Shadow</i> | Little sense artist attempted to control light and shadow in a strategic sense | Great sense artist attempted to control light and shadow, strategically |
| <i>Negative and Positive Spaces</i> | Little sense artist attempted to control negative and positive spaces in a strategic sense | Great sense artist attempted to control negative and positive spaces strategically |
| <i>Point, Line, Plane, Shape, Form</i> | Conforms to expectations; comfortable working within basic parameters | Violates expectations; challenges basic parameters |
| <i>Theme, Symbols</i> | If used, themes and symbols are simplistic and readily identified | If used, themes and symbols have a complex relationship to form and structure, and stimulate debate and discussion to fully make sense of them |
| <i>Beauty and Appeal</i> | Primary goal of piece | Synergistic relationship between beauty and function to achieve designer’s ends |
| <i>Structure, and Support</i> | Little concern with movement, drape and flow; unwilling to sacrifice appeal for function | Considerable concern with movement, drape and flow, and a willingness to make tradeoffs between appeal and function |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Materials</i> | Materials are selected for how they look | Materials are selected for how they function; designer leverages strengths and minimizes weaknesses |
| <i>Craftsmanship</i> | Disconnect from Artist as if Artist was anonymous | Shows Artist’s Hand |
| <i>Context, Situation, Culture</i> | Pieces created for the sake of making something, or for the sake of beauty and appeal only | Pieces created in anticipation of shared understandings about contemporary jewelry |
| <i>Balance, Distribution</i> | Conforms to expectations; comfortable working within basic parameters | Violates expectations; challenges basic parameters |
| <i>Technique(s)</i> | Selected without questioning implications of how technique affects boundary between jewelry and person | Selected after questioning implications of how technique affects boundary between jewelry and person |
| <i>Texture, Pattern</i> | Conforms to expectations; comfortable working within basic parameters | Violates expectations; challenges basic parameters |
| <i>Reference and Reinforce an Idea, Style</i> | May or may not reference and/or reinforce symbolic meanings; if so, usually does so in a linear fashion, such as mimicking or repeating them | May or may not reference and/or reinforce symbolic meanings; if so, learns from them, and then, based on this learning, takes the references to another level |

Example of some choices I made using the routine when creating my piece
Canyon Sunrise:

Canyon Sunrise, Warren Feld, 2004

What are some things which make this piece “Contemporary”?



Dimensionality

Two layers of beadwork. The top layer overlapping the bottom layer, where the first row of the bottom layer is attached to the 2nd row of the top layer, forcing a curvature along the top. The pendant sits on top of bottom layer and in line with top layer.

Moving Elements

The two layers are only connected at their tops. As the wearer moves, each layer can move somewhat independently of the other.

Color, Color Blending

The piece uses a 5-color scheme, but increases the natural proportions of one color relative to the others. There are many gaps of light between all the beads which calls for a color blending strategy(ies). The piece relies heavily on simultaneity effects, as well as the overlapping effects of transparent and translucent beads.

Technique(s)

The bead woven strips are allowed to fan out from the top, thus better accommodating the wearer’s body.

GOOD CONSTRUCTION:

Applying Knowledge, Skills, Competencies for Manipulating Design Elements

Design elements need to be selected, organized and implemented in some kind of satisfying design. Towards this end, the artist, consciously or not, anticipates our shared understandings in order to make these kinds of choices.

These are the most visible choices the artist makes. We can see the finished piece of jewelry. We interact with it. We question it. We get a sense of whether we want to emotionally respond to it. We either feel its resonance, or we don't.

Most artists manage intuitively, learning to make good choices as they receive feedback and assessment, and adjust their decisions accordingly. The better jewelry designers, however, show “*metacognitive awareness*” of all the things they have thought of, anticipated, structured, and accomplished during the design process as these relate to larger shared understandings about contemporary jewelry.

Let's return, for a minute, to the analogy with building blocks and the alphabet. The design elements are building blocks. I compared them to the letters of the alphabet. Building blocks have attributes, and letters have attributes. Attributes further define them and give them purpose.

The novice designer learns to decode these building blocks and their attributes. With more experience, the blocks, just like letters, get combined and constructed into words and phrases and larger, meaningful ideas and expressions.

In essence, the finished piece of jewelry is an exemplar of the jewelry artisan's *vocabulary and grammar of design*. The fluency in how the artist uses this vocabulary and grammar in designing their piece should be, I would think, especially correlated with the success and resonance of the piece.

Often, artists implement their design element choices with attention and recognition to *Principles of Construction*. Principles of Construction are the rules or grammar for using design elements in a piece. Given the artist's goals for beauty and function, the artist is free to apply the rules in any way she or he sees

fit. However, we expect to find this grammar underlying all pieces of jewelry, whether the piece is contemporary or otherwise.

When we want to apply the label “contemporary,” however, we search for the choices and logic the artist has used for constructing design elements into a contemporary whole, and in anticipation of our shared understandings.

I suggest these 10 Principles of Construction. All Principles need to be applied, yet each is different from and somewhat independent of the others. For example, the colors may be well chosen, but proportions or placement not right.

| Principles of Construction | What the Principle is About |
|---|--|
| <i>Rhythm</i> | <i>How the piece engages the viewer and directs their eye</i> |
| <i>Pointers</i> | <i>How the piece directs the viewer to a certain place or focal point</i> |
| <i>Linear and Planar Relationships</i> | <i>The degree the piece is not disorienting; obvious what is “up” and what is “down”</i> |
| <i>Interest</i> | <i>The degree the artist has made the ordinary...”noteworthy”</i> |
| <i>Statistical Distribution</i> | <i>How satisfying the numbers and sizes of objects within the piece are</i> |
| <i>Balance</i> | <i>How satisfying the placement of objects (and their attributes) is</i> |
| <i>Forms, Their Proportions, Distributions, and Dimensionality</i> | Jewelry often can be structured in terms of segments, components or forms. How the pieces interconnected or amassed is of concern. |
| <i>Temporal Extension: Time and Place</i> | Any piece of jewelry must be acceptable within a certain historical, cultural or situational context. |
| <i>Physical Extension: Functionality</i> | <i>The degree the piece is designed so that it accommodates physical stresses when the piece is worn</i> |
| <i>Parsimony (something similar to but beyond harmony and unity)</i> | <i>There should be no nonessential elements; the addition or subtraction of one element or its attribute will make the piece less satisfying</i> |

GOOD PERFORMANCE:

Seeking Continual Feedback and Evaluation About Choices and Results

The jewelry designer brings *perspective*. The designer shows they can rise above the passions, inclinations and dominant opinions of the moment to do what their feelings, thoughts and reflections reveal to be best. And, at the same time, the designer shows that they can strive for a rapport, a sharing of values, an empathetic response, a type of respect deemed *contemporary*.

If we return to our alphabet metaphor, it is necessary, but not sufficient, for the artist to assemble a palette of building blocks, thus, design elements. It is necessary, but not sufficient, for the artist to apply a vocabulary and grammar for arranging these building blocks, thus for constructing a piece of jewelry.

Most importantly, however, it is *both* necessary and sufficient for the artist to anticipate how the piece of jewelry will be assessed prior to making any choice about design element or construction. The more coherent and aligned each aspect of this process is, the better managed. To the extent the artist can strategically manage this whole “*backwards*” design process, the more fluent in design that artist is. The more fluent in design, the more the finished piece reveals the artist’s hand and resonates.

So, there is a very dynamic performance component to design. The contemporary jewelry designer needs to think about what criteria their client and the general culture and market will use as *acceptable evidence* of “contemporary” and “good contemporary design”, when the piece is introduced. The artist needs to think about things like *connection, emotion, resonance, integrity, market*.

The designer needs answers to several questions at this point.

What is the designer’s process and routine for thinking about shared understandings and evidence of authentic performance?

How well have they anticipated these criteria of evaluation?

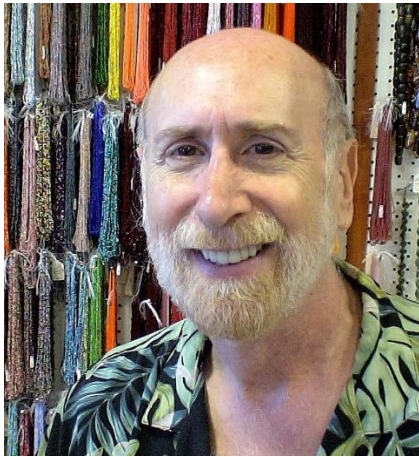
Has the designer created a continual feedback loop so that acceptable evidence is introduced throughout the full process of design?

To what extent will the eventual evaluation of the contemporary jewelry designer and their work be fair, valid, reliable, and a sufficient measure of their results?

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For Warren Feld, Jewelry Designer, (www.warrenfeldjewelry.com), beading and jewelry making have been wonderful adventures. These adventures have taken Warren from the basics of bead stringing and bead weaving, to wire working and silver smithing, and onward to more complex jewelry designs which build on the strengths of a full range of technical skills and experiences.

Warren leads a group of instructors at Be Dazzled Beads (www.bedazzledbeads.com). He teaches many of the bead-weaving, bead-stringing, jewelry design and business-oriented courses. He works with people just getting started with beading and jewelry making, as well as those with more experience.

His pieces have appeared in beading and jewelry magazines and books. One piece is in the Swarovski museum in Innsbruck, Austria.

He is probably best known for creating the international The Ugly Necklace

Contest, where good jewelry designers attempt to overcome our pre-wired brains’ fear response for resisting anything Ugly.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Thinking Routines*. I teach jewelry design. I find it useful to engage students with various ways of thinking out loud. They need to hear me think out loud about what choices I am making and what things I am considering when making those choices. They need to hear themselves think out loud so that they can develop strategies for getting more organized and strategic in dealing with information and making decisions. My inspiration here was based on the work done by *Visible Thinking* by [Project Zero](#) at *Harvard Graduate School of Education* .

² *Fluency*. I took two graduate education courses in Literacy. The primary text we used was *Literacy: Helping Students Construct Meaning* by J. David Cooper, M. Robinson, J.A. Slansky and N. Kiger, 9th Edition, Cengage Learning, 2015. Even though the text was not about jewelry designing per se, it provides an excellent framework for understanding what fluency is all about, and how fluency with language develops over a period of years. I have relied on many of the ideas in the text to develop my own ideas about a disciplinary literacy for jewelry design.

³ *Shared Understandings*. In another graduate education class, the major text reviewed the differences between understanding and knowledge. The question was how to teach understanding. Worth the read to gain many insights about how to structure teaching to get sufficient understanding to enrich learning. *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, 2nd Edition, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005.

⁴ *Backwards Design*. One of the big take-aways from *Understanding by Design* (see footnote 3) was the idea they introduced of “backwards design”. Their point is that you can better teach understanding if you anticipate the evidence others will use in their assessments of what you are trying to do. When coupled with ideas about teaching literacy and fluency (see footnote 2), you can begin to introduce ideas about managing the design process in a coherent and alignable way.