

Jewelry Designs Come to Him in a Kind of Dream

When he wakes up, Adam Neeley said, “I have the piece perfectly imagined in my head like it’s already done.”



Adam Neeley's Nautilus earrings, made of the alloy SpectraGold, which he invented, on display at the Laguna Art Museum in an exhibition, "Modern Alchemy: The Fusion of Art and Nature in the Jewelry Designs of Adam Neeley," through July 29. Jackie Russo for The New York Times

By **Victoria Gomelsky** March 6, 2024, 5:01 a.m. ET

You could almost see the gears in Adam Neeley’s head turning. The jeweler from Laguna Beach, Calif., was holding a transparent case containing more than 38 carats of gemstones — bright green peridots and pale pink morganites — cut into large, tapered baguettes.

It was late January, Day 2 of GemFair, a wholesale event at the Tucson Convention Center, organized by the American Gem Trade Association during this Sonoran Desert city's [annual gem shows](#). Mr. Neeley and his husband and business partner, Zach Rollins, had just purchased the stones from Stephen Avery, a well-known lapidary.

As Mr. Neeley angled the case to catch the light, he gazed admiringly at the loose gems. "I've seen that color combo in beautiful floral arrangements before, but I've never seen it in a combination of stones," he said. "I'm tempted to decide whether they go with a green gold or a pink gold. I'm going to get home and kind of envision on it."



Mr. Neeley, 40, realized his passion for gems and jewelry as a young child growing up outside Colorado Springs during rock hunts with his father. Jackie Russo for The New York Times

Mr. Neeley, 40, designs much of his work in a kind of dream state. “When I do this successfully, when I wake up from that dream, I have the piece perfectly imagined in my head like it’s already done,” he said.

The semi-mystical approach is in line with Mr. Neeley’s reputation among his gem and pearl suppliers as something of a wizard, adept at transforming metal and stones into radiant jewels sought after by some of the world’s most astute collectors. In the wider jewelry community, however, Mr. Neeley’s work, which he sells at his Laguna Beach gallery, has remained largely under the radar.

“Modern Alchemy: The Fusion of Art and Nature in the Jewelry Designs of Adam Neeley,” an exhibition at the Laguna Art Museum that runs through July 29, promises to change that.

A bejeweled journey through the milestones that have made up Mr. Neeley’s nearly three-decade career — with a big emphasis on his invention and use of SpectraGold, a gradient gold that consists of seven custom gold alloys, from a rich yellow to a cool white, fused to create an ombré effect — the exhibition marks the start of a new, more public-facing chapter. It coincides with Mr. Neeley’s recent debut of a high jewelry collection of 16 pieces featuring top-quality examples of tanzanite, tourmaline and other high-value colored stones in SpectraGold.



Some of the displays in the Adam Neeley "Modern Alchemy" jewelry exhibition at the Laguna Art Museum. Jackie Russo for The New York Times

Timothy Adams, an art historian and Fabergé expert who curated the exhibition, said that while he wasn't familiar with Mr. Neeley when Julie Perlin Lee, the museum's executive director, asked him to work on the exhibition, he was impressed by the caliber of the jewelry.

"When I saw it, I said to myself, 'Fabergé would be really impressed with this guy,'" Mr. Adams said by phone recently from his home in San Diego. "The first thing I thought about was his balance of materials. It's not about giant diamonds, but about how everything works in harmony."

Mr. Neeley, who grew up in a small mountain community outside of Colorado Springs, has been cultivating that sense of harmony since he was a child. When he was in kindergarten, he began to accompany his father, a real estate agent with a passion for rock hunting, to nearby Lake George to hunt for smoky quartz and amazonite.

“Getting to dig, dig, dig and then hold one of these crystals, like you’re the first person to ever see this — I was hooked,” Mr. Neeley recalled during an interview in late November.

Over time, Mr. Neeley began to frequent the rock shops in town, and learned how to cut and polish his gems into cabochons. He was 12 years old when his mother asked him to make her a piece of jewelry.

“I worked on soldering and learning how to make the bezels,” Mr. Neeley said. “For Christmas, I told my parents I wanted a torch. And mom and dad were like, ‘Well, as long as you don’t burn the house down.’”

A singed eyebrow or two did nothing to extinguish Mr. Neeley’s enthusiasm for jewelry. By age 14, he was participating in art shows across Colorado, including one in Telluride, where the actress Daryl Hannah bought a piece from his first collection.

It was around this time, in the late 1990s, when Mr. Neeley paid his first visit to the Tucson gem shows and met Mr. Avery, the lapidary, a fellow Coloradan.

In Tucson early this year, Mr. Avery reminisced with Mr. Neeley about that first encounter, when the young rock hound purchased an aquamarine. “I remember your father was with you,” Mr. Avery recalled. “You picked the least expensive piece that I had, but it was really beautiful, and of course, you gravitated right to it.”

Mr. Neeley’s appreciation for colored stones — from the hard stones of his Colorado youth to the pearls and fine faceted tourmalines, sapphires and rubies that distinguish his jewelry today — only deepened at the Gemological Institute of America, where he earned a graduate gemologist degree in 2003.

His real-world training, however, took place in Florence, Italy, where he moved in 2004 to study design and advanced jewelry techniques at Le Arti Orafe, one of Europe’s top goldsmithing institutions. In January 2005, Mr. Neeley began to apprentice under the master goldsmith Giò Carbone, the school’s founder. “Adam was an out-of-the-ordinary student, meticulous, curious, creative,” Mr. Carbone wrote in an email.

Mr. Neeley said that Mr. Carbone taught him to be painstaking about his finishing techniques. He also inspired him to consider custom-making his own gold alloys. “In the U.S., we usually buy our alloys from a big supplier,” Mr. Neeley said. “It’s pre-mixed yellow gold. And they have maybe one or two shades, but that’s about it. In Europe, they’re usually alloying themselves.”

After Mr. Neeley returned to the United States in 2005, he began to experiment with a gradient gold that Mr. Carbone had shown him in Florence. The trouble with Mr. Carbone’s alloy was that it was too soft; he had challenged Mr. Neeley to figure out a way to harden the material so it would be suitable for thinner pieces and better withstand daily wear.

It took four years and 185 trials to create SpectraGold. “Normally, you solder two pieces of metal and you have a solder line that has a delineation,” Mr. Neeley said. “Spectra doesn’t. There are seven metals that I custom alloy; each has a slightly different recipe and a different melting temperature.

“You’ve got to heat them to the perfect moment where they all bond and fuse — one second longer and they turn into one color of butterscotch gold and at that point I scream and cry. The process is 80 hours minimum for one SpectraGold jewel and easily 120 to 140 hours.”

Ever the alchemist, Mr. Neeley has also perfected three solid gold alloys — reddish gray RevaGold, peachy-champagne AlbaGold and minty green VeraGold — that he pairs with gemstones to achieve just the right complementary or contrasting look.

In addition to the unusual golds, Mr. Neeley’s style features curved lines, asymmetrical silhouettes and unconventional gemstone cuts, many of them supplied by Mr. Avery. To date, he has won 32 design awards from organizations such as the American Gem Trade Association, the Cultured Pearl Association of America and the Manufacturing Jewelers & Suppliers of America.

“My goal is to make pieces that are history changing, like JAR,” Mr. Neeley said, referring to [Joel Arthur Rosenthal](#), the Paris-based American designer who in 2013 became the first living jeweler to have a retrospective, “Jewels by JAR,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. “He’s helped define a movement and that is what I hope to contribute to.”