



FASHION
JEWELER ADAM NEELEY TAKES
DESIGNING TO ANOTHER LEVEL

WORDS

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Renowned American designer Adam Neeley is reshaping the contemporary jewelry landscape, setting new standards for high jewelers. A master metalsmith, Neeley's bench-trained expertise has spawned a distinctive genre, captivating a global audience of discerning collectors. His creations harmonize traditional craftsmanship and modern innovation, fusing rich artistry with cutting-edge techniques, and groundbreaking materials. Since establishing his flagship atelier in Laguna Beach, CA, in 2006, Neeley has garnered acclaim for bold designs, technical mastery, and innovative metallurgy. As an award-winning designer and American Jewelry Design Council member, he elevates jewelry to an art form. Neeley's aesthetic showcases extraordinary gemstones in modern, graceful forms, featuring distinctive suspension mounts and award-winning laser construction. A GIA Graduate Gemologist, he excels in celebrating unique specimens and rare stones, utilizing custom gold alloys to unlock signature colors. With a nod to old-world techniques and modern alchemy, Adam Neeley continues to redefine the boundaries of jewelry artistry.

Currently, The Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach California is celebrating the designer's artistry with an exhibition entitled *Modern Alchemy: The Fusion of Art and Nature in the Jewelry Designs of Adam Neeley* that is currently on view until July 29, 2024. I recently sat down with the designer to discuss his early roots, inspiration, his unique process, and what we will learn about his work through this new exhibition.



Calla Violette, titanium, white gold, garnet, diamond. 2020.



Camila, RevaGold, garnet, diamond. 2023.

AS IF: The Laguna Art Museum's latest exhibition is, *Modern Alchemy, the Fusion of Art and Nature in the Jewelry Designs of Adam Neeley*, I mean, that says it all! It features over 100 works from throughout your life—not just your career—and is the first exhibition of its kind to feature a jewelry maker as an artist. What are viewers going to learn about you through this exhibition?

Adam Neeley: One of the key ingredients in the exhibition is what makes a piece of jewelry a piece of art, and what differentiates art jewelry from commercial jewelry. I don't design for mass market consumption. My pieces are oftentimes inspired by nature, they are one-of-a-kind small sculptures made of precious gems and metals. The exhibition explores my process from the beginning of my career where I started rock collecting, then moved into stone cutting. There's a portion at the beginning of Lapidary Art that shows the evolution of my work from age 10 to age 20.

The Modern Alchemy portion of the exhibition highlights my creation of custom colors of gold and ombré gradients, a technique I developed that hasn't been done before to the extent that I have engineered, particularly with SpectraGold. One of the main narratives of the exhibition is being a modern alchemist, creating certain metals and utilizing them in design work that complements the stones and tells a story.

The exhibition culminates in a curated selection of my award-winning pieces, the first being the 2007 Tahitian Pearl Trophy winning design Fiore Del Mare ring.



Through the Looking Glass, VeraGold, tourmaline, pearl, diamond, 2021

While reviewing the brochure of your exhibition I was able to just see your evolution and noticed a real shift starting around age 16 when you started combining different metals and different stones, and you were also playing with asymmetry.

Absolutely, yes.

Today you still engage with combining different stones and metals, but you've taken it to another level by creating your trademark metal process, as the exhibition highlights.

The technique and ingredients I use to create various gold metals are very complicated and laborious, particularly for SpectraGold which takes a minimum of 80 hours and that is why my work cannot be mass manufactured.

Tell me about your different golds.

The solid gold colors are AlbaGold, VeraGold, and RevaGold. AlbaGold is a warm, peachy gold that has a rose gold element, with a warm yellow and champagne tone. VeraGold has a subtle green tone, like the color of an aloe plant.

My latest color is RevaGold, which is a red gold that has a graphite component to it and is deeper than rose gold. I enjoy pairing it with gray moonstone due to its graphite component. Our audience loves the unique colors.

The gradient gold, we named SpectraGold, has an ombré effect fading from warm yellow to cool white. By independently alloying 7 different ingots of gold, some with up to thirteen ingredients, I can create seven shades of gold. I then fuse together the ingots with pressure & heat. The moment of fusion is difficult because each ingot has a different melting temperature, everything has to arrive at its melting point at the same time to complete the fusion. This is the most laborious of all the metals and I feature it prominently in my High Jewels collection. The labor involved and the challenge of working with the material is proprietary but the ombré effect is universally appreciated and admired.

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"Modern Alchemy" exhibit, Laguna Art Museum.



"Modern Alchemy" exhibit, Laguna Art Museum.

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be a jewelry designer and what inspired you to pursue this field?

It started from rock collecting with my father, and just being a kid searching for treasures in the ground. Being the first person to hold that treasure is an amazing feeling. That was followed by the curiosity of what's inside, and that led me to lapidary work and polishing the stones. Eventually, my mother said, you've got all these gorgeous, polished stones, what if you made me a piece of jewelry? So, I started learning from local artisans how to do silver work, soldering, and stone setting.

How old were you at that point?

Twelve. Amazingly, the local artisans took me under their wing. It wasn't an official class; it was just out of the kindness of their hearts to spend the time with me.

This is why it was important to me to include educational programming for different age groups in the museum exhibition that will include stone cutting, silversmithing, and rock collecting.

I participated in my first art show at fourteen in Telluride, Colorado, where my supportive family helped me realize this could move from a hobby to a business. That was a pivotal moment in my life.

You were raised in Colorado where you developed your aesthetic, which is reminiscent of the landscape. It's so organic. Can you describe your aesthetic?

When I first started my aesthetic was Southwestern and evolved into something more contemporary. Today I play with finding balance in asymmetry. I enjoy pieces that have a clean modernity to them, that have a beautiful use of line and curves.

My aesthetic evolves with the inspiration from the stone while the Adam Neeley voice is the cohesive thread between all the pieces. I find there is a beauty to simplicity and strive to create a harmony between the setting and the gemstone.



Captive, SpectraGold, white gold, Tahitian Pearl. 2012. 2012 MJSA Vision Award. In private Collection.



Moonlight & Caviar, white gold, South Sea pearl, white and black diamond. 2012. 2012 MJS Vision Award. In private collection.

“My mission is to create jewelry that are pieces of art that can contribute to our historical moment at this time, that will make an impact in the jewelry world with my unique voice and gold alloy innovations.”



Temptress, white gold and blackened white gold, ruby, diamond. 2019.



Reflections, SpectraGold, blackened silver, moonstone. 2017. In private collection.

Two of your pieces I find particularly fascinating are your fossilized pinecone earrings you created in 2019 called Piñoli, and your Magma necklace that looks as though lava is continually pouring over stone and it feels like it's still in motion. Your work also includes pearls that appear to be suspended in air, gradient golds that seem to seamlessly change colors as if your eyes are playing tricks on you, and we see unconventional color pairings such as purple with green and blue. Your work is about pushing boundaries.

Thank you, that was beautifully spoken. The Magma piece that you just mentioned is made with RevaGold; it has that molten metal feel to it, and I had a collection of the spectra light stones for probably eight years before knowing what to do with them. Oftentimes, I have a piece that waits until the perfect moment. One morning I woke up and had Magma completely designed in my mind and that is when I created it.

For me, creating something that has different colorings and complements the unique metals is a focus. I love color, I love combining colors, and although I work with diamonds, my primary love is color and pushing the boundaries with color. As far as cutting edge, a lot of cutting edge happens when I push the boundary technically because there's an element of the mad scientist and that's where the modern alchemy has come in.

Do you have a favorite gemstone?

I love them all, but I would have to say tourmaline because it comes in over 70 different hues. As an artist who loves to paint in gemstones and metal, tourmaline gives me every color that I want to play with, and sometimes multiple colors at a time. It's also a gemstone that can form larger so you can get better clarity.

What do you think is the most undervalued stone?

Probably one of the most undervalued stones would be Zircon. It also comes in different colors; however, people confuse the name with the synthetic version, cubic zirconia. Natural Zircon has dispersion like a diamond, where it refracts light into multiple colors of the rainbow. Very few stones do that. Consequently, I think that consumers have a hard time differentiating, which is a shame because Zircon is such a beautiful gem.

Are you needing to address sustainability in your work yet?

Sustainability is a touchy subject in the jewelry world. There are a lot of people that will focus on it and not carry through. We will use recycled gold whenever we can, and in regards to mining, we try to work with dealers that are following good mining practices. We don't source in trouble zones.

What is your mission?

My mission is to create jewelry that are pieces of art that can contribute to our historical moment at this time, that will make an impact in the jewelry world with my unique voice and gold alloy innovations.