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Connecting Souls: THE DESIGNS OF DAWNA GILLESPIE

by Amber Demien

For those who appreciate “hand-fabricated, wearable, statement artwork that tells the story of a life and connects one beautiful soul to another” ... those who “want to defy a world inundated with mass-produced accessories,” look no further than the adornments of jewelry designer and metalsmith Dawna Gillespie. Less than 10 years ago Dawna was an undergrad at Texas Tech University focusing on acrylic painting, but when she took a metalsmithing class everything changed. She felt pulled toward the medium, and when she picked up a jeweler’s saw for the first time she knew there was no turning back. As Dawna explains, “The connection I feel to sawing is a meditative and sensual process. Sawing is where my soul begins to recharge and flourish.”

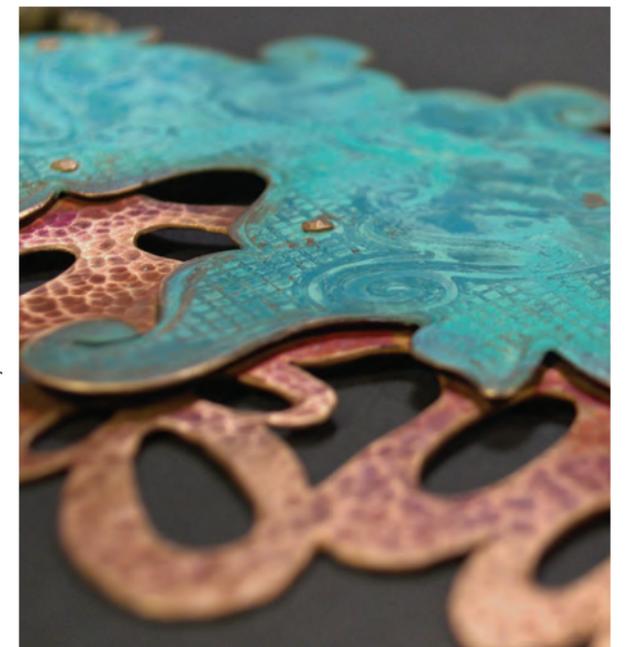
Dawna’s journey began like many artists’ — as a creative child with an obvious penchant for art. Her mother enrolled her in classes to develop her natural talent, and eventually she made plans to attend college in Philadelphia to pursue architecture and interior design. But life is full of surprises, and during her senior year Dawna met and fell in love with the man who is now her husband. Subsequently, the Philadelphia plan was replaced with Texas Tech University, where she discovered her metalsmithing destiny.

Today Dawna lives in Lubbock, Texas, devoting her time to the things that matter most to her, and her 4-year-old son is at the top of that list. Pursuing her dream of being a full-time metalsmith is motivated by her desire to be a stay-at-home mom. “[Our] son has given real purpose to my dreams — to leave behind a legacy of reverence to craft, craftsmanship, and individuality,” Dawna shares. “Through the day-to-day with our son, I am able to teach him the extraordinary process of making something with your hands.” ♦♦





Finding your own style in a world of artistic expression is often challenging for up-and-coming artists, and Dawna initially struggled to find her own voice. But making her mark proved to be easier than she thought, as she realized that the majority of the jewelry she was seeing was based on trends, and she couldn't have cared less about trends. "I wanted to create from a place of authenticity," she explains. "My pieces are 100 percent a reflection of me: my voice, my story, my mind, my vision, and my soul. I have learned to trust the sensual and terrifying process of being completely vulnerable to my artwork." Her clear artistic vision allows her to block out what others are doing, what is trending or in style, and create from a place she describes as real and raw. Time has also given her a confidence and understanding of every step that goes into her creations. "Today, I can say I have a much deeper and profound grasp as to what I am trying to say with every step in my process and with every detail in my work," she says. ♦





Stepping away from the trend-based, mass-produced tendencies in jewelry design has enabled Dawna to create pieces that do more than simply adorn the body — she provides people with pieces of jewelry that enable individual expression, allowing them to make a statement about who they truly are. Dawna also sees a higher purpose in her work: “My pieces are meant to protect the heart and soul of the wearer. I believe when a person places a piece of my art on their body, or in their home, our souls [become] forever joined through the energies of shared space and time. This is the very reason I came up with my tagline, ‘From the Soul, For the Soul.’”

Dawna’s wearable artworks include medium and large statement necklaces, as well as cuffs, earrings, and brooches, fabricated from raw copper and brass. She employs a variety of techniques, such as patina, oxidation, etching, hammering, forming, forging, stamping, and cold-connecting. When describing her process, Dawna references a quote by Paul Klee: “The work of art is above all a process of creation.” She explains that the process is the most important aspect of what she does and the driving force behind why she does it. ➔





Each piece requires 30–80 hours of work from start to finish and without the help of machines. Every step is completed by hand, highlighting once again the importance of the process. When Dawna enters her studio she typically has an idea of what she will create, but that inevitably changes once she puts pencil to paper, which she has learned to accept, explaining that “When I try to control what the piece ‘should’ be telling, it always turns into frustration and angst, and I end up struggling with the piece for days.” She turns to her trusty design book, every artist’s best friend, to draw and plan out the design, and then she picks up the tool that started it all: a jeweler’s saw. Because her creations are meant to be worn, she pays painstaking attention to filing and sanding each shape after it is cut from sheets of copper or brass to ensure the edges are smooth for the wearer. To help her endure this long and tedious process, Dawna reminisces on the words of Earl Nightingale: “Never give up on a dream just because of the time it will take to accomplish it. The time will pass anyway.”



What follows is the step that Dawna considers the most thrilling: etching. She draws the very detailed designs onto the metal using an ultra-fine Sharpie. According to Dawna, she prefers the density of the lines achieved with this tip because it produces etching that is “erratic, irregular, broken, incomplete, and vulnerable, [allowing] for the openness in the density of life to be portrayed.” The big reveal occurs when the pieces emerge from a ferric chloride bath, which transforms her drawn lines into deeply textured and dimensional designs that symbolize the stories she is trying to communicate. Even more texture and color are added through various techniques, from hammering and stamping to the application of patinas. The addition of her maker’s mark and a protective finish precede the final cold-connection assembly, and the finished adornment is ready to be packaged and passed on to the next unique soul. ♦

This magical transformation of metal into art occurs in Dawna's studio — her sacred space — which is a converted bedroom in her home that opens to the backyard. She works in her studio twice a week during the day while her son attends preschool, otherwise she can be found creating into the wee hours of the morning, from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. It can be a struggle making time for all aspects of her life, and Dawna is thankful for her very supportive husband. She shares that “trying to balance family life, marriage, sleep, and professional and personal goals is a challenge; sometimes I succeed and sometimes I fail. But I keep on going, and I wouldn't change any of it!”

Dawna's creations can be found on her website, and they're included in various exhibitions across the U.S. Every year she participates in her hometown event Take in the Local Color: Lubbock's Artist Studio Tour. In order to reach more of her target audience, she plans to pursue fine-art craft shows in the future, such as the Smithsonian Craft Show, which she applied to for the first time this year. Other professional goals include showing her work in more galleries and boutiques, as well as teaching metalsmithing workshops, putting a jeweler's saw into the hands of others who might also find their creative destiny.



For those just beginning their own journeys, Dawna has some tried-and-true advice: “Don't be so thirsty for opportunity that you drink from every cup handed to you. It is tempting to take every opportunity that comes your way, [but] don't settle for an opportunity if it doesn't align with your overall vision and goals.” In this digital age when inspiration and the opinions of others are only a keystroke away, she encourages other creatives to follow their instincts and ignore outside influences — no matter how crazy or illogical it may seem. To illustrate her words of wisdom, Dawna shares the equally wise words of Neil Gaiman: “Do the stuff that only you can do. The urge, starting out, is to copy. But, the one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision.”

To see more of the hand-fabricated adornments of Dawna Gillespie, visit dawnagillespie.com and Instagram (@copperdstudio).

Photography by Dawna Gillespie.