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As told to René Kladzyk, 2369 words.

Tags: Jewelry, Design, Business, Production, Collaboration, Money.

On the power of saying no

Jewelry designer Hannah Jewett discusses trusting your instincts, learning to negotiate, moving past mistakes, and growing at your own pace. **I'm curious to hear what you're up to in Florence, Italy, right now.**

Being immersed in a place that's famous for its jewelry and artisans—I came here wanting to build my collection here, and I've been getting more than I bargained for. I'm fully in love with it. I actually extended the trip by a couple of weeks.

You're there working on a new collection alongside other jewelry designers?

I'm working on my own pieces, and everyone that I'm working with collectively at this studio is working on their own pieces as well. So I'm not collaborating with anyone here, but I'm part of a community where there's a conversation that's happening constantly, which is amazing. And it's also really rare for me because my normal day-to-day in New York is pretty isolated. I feel my practice is very singular. So that's been an inspiring takeaway for me, just kind of understanding the importance of having a community.

I'd like to go back to the beginning now. Do you remember the first piece of jewelry that left a strong impression on you, or an item of jewelry that you encountered as a young person that kind of stuck with you in some way?

The majority of my early jewelry memories come from family. My grandmother specifically had a really amazing jewelry collection. And from all different eras, heirlooms from the Victorian era, for example. And she actually had this one locket that was so amazing. It was a memento mori piece with braided hair inside.

Now it feels kind of goth, but at the time, it was just this super beautiful, ornate, amazing locket. And it was a piece of jewelry that was also commemorating a person—literally including their DNA inside of the piece itself, which was such a cool concept to me.

You have such a particular aesthetic to your jewelry. Can you tell me a bit about how you arrived at that?

I've always been inspired by science fiction and fantasy worlds and things like that. That's been a big source of inspiration for some of the liquid metal pieces that I've been doing for years now.

I remember seeing you visit the H.R. Giger Museum [on your Instagram], and I was like, "Oh yeah, I see that connection 100%."

Totally. It's definitely there. And sometimes it arrives through other artists, like Giger or maybe it's movies from my youth. I will never forget Alex Mack, when she turns into liquid metal.

That kind of thing is burned into my memory.

But yeah, the Giger stuff was cool. I feel my work is obviously really distinctly different from Giger, but I think there's a little bit of this edge that I am always chasing that he just does so beautifully.

There's kind of two sides of the forms I usually work with, and one is bubbly, optimistic, fun, goofy. And then the other is (more harsh), sort of sharp weapons almost.

From the outside it seems you've done an incredible job of carving out this niche for yourself in building your business. Can you tell me the backstory on the business side of things, in terms of making this a viable company that you could grow?

For me, I started by making stuff and putting it on the internet, as a lot of aspiring designers do. You have to start somewhere. I was coming from a background in sculpture and art and didn't really have any jewelry experience. So I wasn't really doing this for anyone. I didn't study business or fashion. I didn't have this idea of what my customer was going to look like or what I wanted a business to look like. I just started making things and putting them out there, (and) listening to the response. I also got some enjoyment out of the process of image-making as well. So social media is a good outlet for me, because it was a good way to share what I was doing.

As things progressed, as I started getting into stores and things like that, a lot of this process was really intuitive. It's kind of "Do I want to be working with this place or not?" "How much can I actually produce right now?" Facing problems for the first time and trying to make decisions for myself that would lead me in the right direction. And for the most part I think a lot of people have a similar sort of trajectory.

It hasn't been until maybe the past year or so when I've had a little bit more advice, a little bit more assistance. It was just me for a really long time, kind of navigating this industry alone. And so I feel pretty much self-taught as a business owner. There have definitely been moments where I wish I had had some more advice or guidance in the beginning. But I also think that's kind of part of it, and part of the level of growth that I needed as well. The pacing of how my business has evolved is actually better for me than having all of the resources that you need to kind of go forward from the beginning. It's good to not know sometimes and just grow at your own pace and not too fast.

What does your team look like now? Is it still you producing all the jewelry?

I actually never really produced the jewelry myself, even from the beginning, because I didn't have formal training. I managed production, but I wasn't physically making the pieces—at least not the traditional silversmith stuff. I wasn't making that myself. I have a team of casting fabricators in the Diamond District. And then I have one production assistant who's great. And she is full time helping me run things: everything from administrative to shipping orders, to overseeing production and that kind of thing, which has been tremendous.

Building your team is seriously so important. I went through probably three or four fabricators until I found the ones that I really liked. And I think that's a major part of it. You have to really trust the team around you and they have to trust you. And it's this sort of symbiotic relationship. It's kind of weird getting to a point where I'm now facing a decision of, "Do I change my method of production?" Because I've worked with people that I like for years now. And so that decision is difficult.

Because of the need to scale up?

Yeah, that's pretty much it. It's hard to produce things in New York on a large scale. That's why a lot of designers end up outsourcing. And as much as I love it, being able to go visit the factories that I work with. It's just a realistic problem at a certain point. So I'm weighing the options right now. We'll see what ends up happening.

It's interesting to hear that you come from more of a sculpture background and not really a traditional jewelry background, and I'm curious if you could describe some of the ways that background in sculpture has influenced your approach to jewelry design?

I think it's influenced it a lot. A lot of the forms that I work with are not traditional forms that you see in jewelry necessarily. And I think that when I'm designing, I tend to think of it as an object before it becomes a final piece. It's more about the shape and the form that you're seeing before this is going to be a ring or this is going to be a necklace. I tend to work that way. And then the final product reveals itself.

My background in art is probably responsible for that way of thinking. I'm taking jewelry classes for the first time of my life pretty much right now. And seeing the difference that would have made for me, if I had started a business from a jewelry background, knowing all of these techniques and stuff—it's like you really are thinking about, "This is what the band is going to look for the ring?" And, "This is how you cut it out of a sheet of metal." Stuff like that. Those things, these really formal techniques, I never had any of that. So I'm really thinking about this more sculptural object.

I think with any creative medium, there's pros and cons to not having to unlearn some of the formal rules that you don't need, but at the same time wishing you knew certain things sooner that would have saved you headaches. Are there any particular things that come to mind that you wish you would have learned earlier? This doesn't necessarily have to be limited to the mechanics of jewelry.

Yeah, I wish that I had learned how to negotiate earlier. I think that's something that I had to learn over time and I feel that applies to so many different parts of owning a business or being a designer. Defining boundaries is super important in this industry and anywhere you're independent or you're the owner of something. I just think back to when I first started working with wholesalers and I didn't have as much experience, so I didn't really know what was okay to negotiate or to talk about with them. I felt at that point everyone was just kind of giving me a shot, because I was so new to it.

And I kind of wish that I had maybe just exercised a little bit more assertiveness or actually weighed out, "Is this going to be good for me? Or is this going to be worth it?" That kind of thing. I feel that's important to understand, even when it is early days.

I think the most important part is to just trust your instincts. And sometimes that does come with experience and failing. But sometimes you know even before then. Like, "Can I deliver this outrageous request that someone's making of me?" Yes or no. I think that people are afraid to say no a lot of the time. And it is totally understandable. Turning down opportunities seems crazy sometimes, but it can be counterproductive to say yes to things if A, you don't want to do that or B, it's going to be more trouble than it's worth. I think saying no can sometimes be the best thing you can do for yourself.

Continuing in the realm of advice, what is some of the best advice that you've received that's affected how you approach doing this work?

I really respond well to just "keep the faith," because this is an industry where things can change so quickly. The highs are really high and the lows are really low. And there's been a lot of moments where I doubted that this was something I could continue with. At many points, especially in the beginning where it was just like, orders were inconsistent, and I was still trying to find my stride in terms of the process, how I was producing things and marketing them and everything. If people are going through those low points, it's kind of just important to remind yourself, "Just keep on going." Because it's just like that.

I remember one time I was running around the Diamond District, so stressed out, so frustrated, something had gone wrong at plating or whatever. And I ran into this other designer who was just, he was just chilling, but he could see the stress on my face. And he was just like, "I know exactly what you're going through. This is my Monday through Friday. It's just how it is." And it's not to say you should just let yourself be stressed all the time. That's not a solution, but it is just sort of a perseverance thing. I think mistakes are going to happen and it's not the end.

Can you talk a bit about what the future holds or what some of your goals are for the coming years?

Yeah, definitely. I mean, for this particular collection I've been embracing some new technology. Technologically-driven ways of designing that I think are going to influence what I make a lot. I'm learning a lot more about different methods of design. I'm learning different programs. I'm using AI to generate forms that are kind of serving as this source of inspiration—a starting point basically. And so that's definitely driving this new collection. I'm just kind of letting a little bit more spontaneity into the work. I think that's been really helpful. Trying not to, I don't know, overthink these designs too much and just really letting them kind of go where they need to go. I think it's going to be a much looser collection.

Hannah Jewett Recommends:

HR Giger bar (Gruyères): In the middle of quaint Gruyères, Switzerland there's a demonic bar where you can drink a cocktail inside of an alien skeleton. One of the best travel experiences of my life!

How It's Made (Discovery channel): I watched this as a child and still fall asleep to it every night. It's basically if "oddly satisfying" was a series, plus there are a healthy 32 seasons with approx. 72 episodes each.

Ugliest Homes in America (HGTV): I really enjoy the homes featured on this show, even though the title tells me I'm not supposed to. It features kitschy/"outdated" houses that are all competing for a makeover. I had to turn it off when they started demo day, it hurt too much to watch a 1980's mirrored bathroom with a heart-shaped tub get destroyed.

Coffee breaks: Working in Florence got me into the habit of sitting down, sometimes with a friend, for a proper 20 minute coffee break every day. A to-go cup at my desk just doesn't feel right anymore.

The International Design Yearbook: This book series is my go-to for design inspo; it catalogues all the best furniture / home products from late 80's through Y2K.

Name

Hannah Jewett

Vocation

jewelry designer, business owner

Fact

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