

JEANNE JOHNGREN

DESIGN



Newsletter From the Studio 10/06

Some Thoughts on Objects Great and Small

by Jeanne Johngren

For me, inspiration for new designs comes from cumulative experiences, observations and much thought. I am inspired and energized by uncovering the essence of things, and am always on the hunt for the telling detail. The telling details about JJD jewelry are dedicated attention to elegant harmonious color, appealing textural combinations and balanced intriguing proportion. But how did we get to these essential design ideals? I'd like to address one element of our design philosophy – changing scale in order to gain insight.

I thought I would share a formative experience that I had with a fantastic architect that shaped how I see the world and how I came to our design viewpoint on this topic. Early on, in my first career as a filmmaker, I had the opportunity to meet a man who is a legend in his own time, Frank Gehry. I had always loved Gehry's work, because it was large scale public architecture that didn't take itself too seriously. There were always comic elements in his work that were bemusing or just made me laugh. There were always elements of intrigue – how does that fish dance on its tail in the middle of crazy downtown Kyoto?

Gehry's advice that day, back in the early '90's was to "always change the scale of things to get to new ideas." He said that while sitting at his desk, holding up a piece of common, crumpled, yellow lined paper. After meeting in his office, we walked around his studio and examined that same piece of crunched- up paper (or at least an exact replica of it) in an early CAD/CAM machine. Then we walked by an 18 inch version, then a 4 foot version and finally a 9 foot version out on the patio of his Santa Monica workspace. I had never seen so many nuances, shadows and planes in a crumpled piece of refuse before. My perspective on the paper had suddenly changed. Now I was the size of a bug in relation to this piece of paper and I saw it differently.

At 9 feet tall, that wrinkled yellow-lined sculpture took on a decidedly comic but also menacing feeling – it was large evidence of a forceful destructive gesture. People crumple up pieces of paper when they are frustrated and wrestling with ideas. The idea of frustration during the search for inspiration was now larger than the human form, larger than life. The representation of that idea was now art. It was also funny – so much effort had been put into something that was literally, "throw-away."

Kafka-esque experiences aside, the lesson of changing scale in order to attain insight is one that I think about all the time as I design jewelry. When I moved from making film and TV to making jewelry I left a public medium which is larger than life for one that is handled at the 10x magnification level. Jewelry is often part of the intimate interplay between people. Jewelry is

personal. But jewelry has as much emotional power as film. The scale changed for me, but the idea of creating a repository of meaning did not.

For me, making jewelry is about creating a repository for emotion that can be accessed by the wearer at any time. It is an art form, a small-scale sculpture, created to sustain the individual.

When someone gives jewelry as a gift, it very often signifies love, imbuing the jewelry with a complex ideal. When someone buys jewelry for themselves, the jewelry often symbolizes the desire of the wearer to feel beautiful, stately, regal, languorous or whimsical, among other things. The jewelry is an object that holds these feelings in reserve for the owner. Jewelry is often a projection of one's self-perception. In my opinion, jewelry needs to be iconographic enough to stand up to all of this. It must be pleasing and have integrity so that it is worthy of being a safe place to put these larger-than-life, emotionally-charged, but exceedingly personal expectations.

In its extreme smallness, jewelry as an art form has the advantage of portability over large-scale installation sculpture (or going to a movie theatre!) You can take it with you. By wearing jewelry, a person can invoke the feelings associated with the jewelry wherever they may be. In this way, jewelry is a small-scale portable icon, a small object that can tell a big story.



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