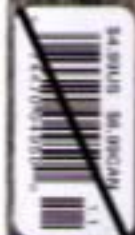


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golden boy

WHY THE HELL ISN'T ERIK STEWART FAMOUS YET?

BY CYNTHIA REED

In one design, a platinum band curves around an imaginary finger to form an abstracted uppercase "G," while a diamond floats in between. Another features the eternal spiral of a nautilus: 18-karat, yellow gold coils to kiss a colorless diamond or South Sea pearl. These rings doubt the laws of physics, but the amazing part is that Arizona-born jewelry designer and gemologist Erik Stewart patented both designs when he was 16. Now 25 and bursting with talent, it's even more amazing that he's not as famous as Gauthier or Cornelis Hollander. Yet.

Stewart started designing accessories at 13. His mother, a jewelry-making teacher at a Tucson recreational center, dragged him along to her adult-level classes. There he pierced his first pendent out of sheet silver, but "only mildly enjoyed it," says Stewart.

It wasn't until he made \$3,000 at a San Francisco art show that he saw the potential. "I liked creating something with my hands, seeing customers smile, then them paying a lot of money for it," he says. Stewart started his certification at the Gemological Institute of America (G.I.A.) and then missed classes in high school, crisscrossing the country with his partner/mom selling their designs. At the age of 20, Stewart finally split with his mother ("Mom had a big spending habit") and eventually moved from Tucson to Tempe, where he currently lives.

That same year, Stewart also coined the term "art for the body," which perfectly describes his innovative style. Stewart's women's collection ranges from ethereal and ornate to unisex contemporary, while his men's collection invokes stark industrial design that gives way to organic curves and surprise flashes of bling. Many of Stewart's pieces display a sense of humor — colored diamonds peek from hidden slits, giving his jewelry an anthropomorphic quality. And of course, he's always available for custom work.

Even as a child, Stewart worked exclusively in the finest materials. "Mom let me work with gold. I had a vision and was very stubborn about what I wanted to show," he says. His preference for 950 Platinum and 18-karat gold over the "typically American" 14-karat gold restricts the enjoyment of his jewelry to true ballers. In addition to being elite, these choice materials allow for the inclusion of intricate detail. Democratically

accommodating all "\$30,000 millionaires," Stewart will be launching two silver lines at the November 18 Artfest of Scottsdale.

Naturally observant ("My dad's an architect, so it's in my genes to pay attention," he says), Stewart mines inspiration from nature, travel and Mozart. "When I listen to music, I see things," Stewart says. "You hear the notes of a piano, a French horn ... pow, that's an image." He even sees ideas in fast food. The design for the wavy woman's ring "Pickles" came to him as he picked those green discs off his hamburger.

Master jeweler and mentor Keith Stevens describes Stewart as "exceptional in terms of creativity; his highpoint is not what he can personally do with his hands, but what he can do with his mind." This skill set complements Stewart's career goals, which won't require him to toil away on a work bench. Instead, Stewart will create an international brand of fine jewelry, which he will design and others will carry out. Until then, Stewart crafts everything independently; using computer-aided design (CAD) to transform his sketches into 3D models, which he then casts, fabricates, assembles, sets and cleans. And how does he mount those gravity-defying diamonds? Through ingenuity not magic. "They're normal settings, just seen in a different way," Stewart explains.

Celebrating his first anniversary as an independent designer, this certified graduate gemologist is still working to escape the ranks of starving artist ... "But I'm not that starving," he says. "If I can afford a jewelry business, then I can get by. I'm not a painter."

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