

Sam Shaw combines
beach stones with
gemstones for jewelry
with a nostalgic glow
and a satirical edge.



Found Memories

BY JENNIFER WHITLOCK

For most of us, rocks picked up from the beach are concrete memories of a pleasant day, preserved in jars on a windowsill, catching the light and gathering the dust. Samuel Shaw, however, transforms the stones strewn across Maine's rocky shores into jewelry that has put him through college, placed him in publications such as *The New York Times Magazine's* annual design issue, *GQ*, and *Vogue*, and kept him afloat in his home in Mount Desert Island, Maine. Elements of education, geology, tourism, humor, personality, philosophy, marketing, public relations, and casual charm swirl together and help Shaw sell his playful designs.

Shaw's passion for rocks all started when he traveled cross country at the impressionable age of 16. He was "blown away" by the southwest landscape, with all its mesas and mountains and monoliths. The experience resulted in a fascination with both the scientific and aesthetic side of the landscape he'd seen: Shaw attended Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, receiving a bachelor's degree in geology. He also took classes in jewelry making, and got a BS in metals.

After finishing school in 1976, he moved to Maine. "I moved to location rather than job," Shaw explains. "I decided that I wanted to live on an island off the coast of Maine. While I was up here, I got a job working in a jewelry store. I did that for a couple of years, and then I quit and worked in a boatyard as a cabinet maker for a luxury-yacht builder for a couple of years."

Shaw's creative spirit received a sharp nudge when he attended an Alexander Calder retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York City. The colorful imagery, the playfulness, the irreverence in Calder's paintings, jewelry, and sculpture was a revelation, one that eventually pushed Shaw to use those elements in his own jewelry designs. The first step, however, was seeing clearly what he still had to learn.

BELOW LEFT: A brooch of simply set beach stones carries its own value, completely divorced from the world of gem trade, and rich with nostalgia and personal associations, according to Shaw.

BELOW RIGHT: When set with gems, such as the citrine and quartz crystal in this brooch, Shaw's beach stones take on a satirical and revolutionary edge — "Equality of the stones!"

BOTTOM: For a Horizon brooch, Shaw takes four "lucky stones" and aligns them by their intrusions of quartz, creating "a sense of order where there isn't any."

OPPOSITE PAGE: "Boats are all part of my psyche and visual field," says Shaw. As a self-described "boat man," it's not surprising that Shaw depicts stylized boats in his jewelry.





For this ring, Shaw pairs a naturally polished beach stone with a faceted citrine, questioning how we determine value.

them on an altar that says they are important and worthy. Gemstones are stones too. All gemstones are free when they come from the earth. So we are re-defining what a gemstone can be. A humble piece of basalt may have a perfectly formed "X" of intruded quartz. That is very rare, and way less common than a diamond, and is worthy of our appreciation. I think of it as a political statement. Equality of the stones!"

As with his earliest fascination with the Southwestern mesas, Shaw's interest in his subject matter is not limited to their appearance; he's fascinated with the sharp contrast between the stones' appearance and their rocky history. "They're so soft and seductive and luscious, yet they come from the ocean beach on the coast of Maine. It's an incredibly chaotic and violent environment which can take a boat and smash it to splinters in hours."

Shaw says he doesn't use any special techniques when working with beach stones. "They're not cut or polished. These rocks are so smooth, the most we do to polish them is rub them against the sides of our noses. We're stone age. We use very basic jewelry-making techniques. It's all fabricated. We just solder, cut, and form. That's it. There's no raising, there's no casting, no electroforming. We use pliers, a torch, a saw, nippers, and a light bulb, and that's about it."

One of his favorite beach stone creations is the *Horizon* brooch. "I get four beach stones with intrusions of quartz into the basalt. Those are called 'lucky stones.' I line up the veins of quartz because it makes a sense of order where there isn't any. It's very hard for me to match the stones. Not only does the weight, the thickness, the uniformity of the lines, and the intrusions have to be perfect, but when you line them up, the brooch has to be a pleasing shape. The profile of the stones, when lined up, echoes the shape of the island I live on, where the horizon is the water line, and the bumps on top of the stones look like the mountains on the island. That was a happy coincidence."

Just because Shaw is so enthralled with beach stones doesn't mean he rejects more traditionally lauded gemstones. "I haven't met a stone I don't like. I like emeralds and sapphires and

tourmalines and opals." He likes them, just sets them in his own way. "I mix stones such as citrine, diamond, azurite, amethyst, and garnet with beach stones. I use a lot of nontraditional stones such as fossils and natural sapphire crystal specimens. I'll set things in quirky ways. I'll fill a glass tube with diamonds and put it in a ring, so instead of being set, they're floating around in a tube."

X MARKS THE SPOT.

Recently, Shaw has been scarfing up as many X-shaped Biwa pearls as he can. "Originally, they were farmed and seeded from Lake Biwa in Japan, but Lake Biwa has since become too polluted to produce any," Shaw explains. "Now the Chinese are doing them, but their quality isn't as good. I've been buying all I can come by the last couple of years. The prices have gone up, and the quality has gone down. I believe in another five years, the Chinese will have ones of suitable quality and [they] will become more available."

Shaw doesn't like his style to be too predictable. For one bracelet, which he informally calls the "Big, Chunky Mother," he determined to deliberately go over the top. "I set out to explore



Two brooches of beach stones, with a pearl thrown in for good measure. Shaw is fascinated by the stones' soft, smooth appearance and their turbulent history.

ROMANCING THE STONE.

Shaw is best known for his beach-stone jewelry. "I started doing this about four years ago," he explains. "I think a lot of people have a memory of walking the beach, picking up a pebble and putting it in their pocket. When they're doing this, they're on vacation, they're at the beach, the sun's setting, they're with their family. All nostalgic, comforting, warm associations. What we're doing is we're putting that fond memory into a talisman or an ornament that they can keep on their body in a personal kind of way."

Beach pebbles as gems? Sure, why not? "By setting something that is totally 'non-precious' in 22-karat gold, we are elevating its status. I'm putting

how big and bizarre and overdone it could be," he recalls. "I'm a minimalist guy, and I sometimes short circuit and make big, overworked things. I do a parody of myself. They're fun to do. Every part is movable and spins and twirls. It's like a carnival ride."

Also playful is the wedding of the beach stone and the cubic zirconia.

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"What we've got are these huge, half-inch-diameter faux diamonds. I mean, they're the size of your thumbnail. And we put them next to this black basalt. They're very striking in their purity and their simplicity. We're also sort of poking fun at the diamond solitaire. It's a grotesquely large fake diamond next to this pure, fabulous beach stone." The intent of the piece shifts suddenly from playful to downright satirical. "They're both worthless, but together, they're beautiful. The black and the white, and the cut and the smooth, and the found and the fabricated, and the real and the faux sets up a yin/yang duality kindred spirit thing." But lest too much meaning be read into this particular piece, "I'm making a whole collection, with earrings, rings, and pendants. One or two pieces really don't tell a story."

However, he can hardly avoid telling the story associated with his boat series. "Oh, this is a whole other kettle of fish," Shaw says as he shifts gears. "I live on an island. My house is right on the water. I look at boats every single day of my life. I commute to work by boat. I own about six boats. And I worked in a boatyard. Boats all over the place! So boats are all part of my psyche and visual field. I'm a boat

man." So, it's hardly a surprise if boats figure in Shaw's creative output. However, he didn't simply make jewelry that depicted the sea — he made jewelry *for* the sea.

"I started making sculptures, which I floated in the ocean in front of my house. It was sort of like harbor jewelry. I made abstract shapes and forms out of Styrofoam and wood and lead. I floated these things out in the ocean and tied them to anchors. I made a whole fleet of these boats — 20 of them. Sometimes they'd float away, and then I'd make more."

Shaw had been decorating the water for about 15 years. "Then, a couple of years ago, it made the move into my jewelry. The horizontal element in the brooches is the hull. The beach stones below are the keel. Sometimes there's a mast or fins. These pieces sometimes are more boat, sometimes more fish. Sometimes they're both at once. Obviously, boats and fish are shaped similarly. For instance, the laws of nature says in order to float, you have to be heavier at the bottom and lighter at the top. That kind of stuff. The jewelry refers to those elements."

Quirky? Sure, but Shaw has been successful. "My store now has 2,000

square feet of display space, and we sell jewelry made by over 100 artists," he says. "Fifty percent of the gross sales are from my jewelry, though my work only has 20 percent of the floor space."

Modestly, Shaw credits his sales techniques as much as his talent for his current success. "The personality of the person selling the jewelry is very important. A lot of people don't realize that. At my store, we have a very jovial and relaxed attitude. I try to make people feel comfortable. We don't pressure them at all. We leave a lot of jewelry out on the counter so people can pick it up. We have a lot of open cases. The displays are incredibly minimal. We use no props whatsoever. We bend over backwards to be unpretentious. We're not stuffy at all, even though we sell expensive things." And, of course, it helps that people love the things he sells.

He has four or five jewelers helping him put together his creations. "I like that. "I love my employees, and we have great relationships, and I'm very fortunate to have wonderful people working with me. And if they do some of the production, it frees me for exploration."

Not to mention wandering on the beach, picking up stones. ♦