



# Samuel Shaw

## COLLABORATING WITH NATURE

Carl Little

**L**iving on the coast of Maine, one is constantly reminded of the geology of the place. This is “the country of the pointed firs,” as Sarah Orne Jewett described in her famous novel, but Maine is also the ironbound coast, the granite littoral.

The geological grandeur of this continental edge is perhaps nowhere more spectacular than on Mount Desert Island. With its impressive array of hump-backed hills topped by Cadillac Mountain, this largest of Maine islands has attracted artists ranging from Frederick Church in the mid-1800s to Richard Estes in more recent times. It has also served as the home base for jeweler Samuel Shaw.

As a child, Shaw spent the summers in Southwest Harbor, a village on the so-called “quiet side” of the island. Upon graduating from college in 1976, he decided there was no other place he would rather live. Today, he commutes between his waterfront home on Clark Point Road in Southwest Harbor to his shop on Main Street in Northeast Harbor, a bastion of the well-to-do during the summertime. To get to work he has to drive around the head of Somes Sound, the only fiord on the East Coast and one of the most picturesque settings in all of New England.

It took a degree in geology, another one in metal-smithing and a keen eye for stones to seal Shaw’s ties to this site of early pleasures. Blending all these interests, he turned to a natural resource close at hand and endless in supply: the beach stones that are scattered upon the rocky shingles of Maine’s islands. What he has done with these common objects over the years has led to numerous exhibitions, recognition by his peers and a reputation for inventive and witty jewelry.

Shaw’s interest in geology was inspired by a trip out west before he started college. He found himself “absolutely stunned” by the landscape and experienced a visceral curiosity about the geological formations he circumnavigated. He declared his major in the fall term of his freshman year at Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York. “I must have been the only one in the entire student body to know exactly what he wanted to do,” he says with a chuckle.

Geology became a passion. Shaw especially loved the field trips—“the expression was that you learned geology through the soles of your boots,” he recalls—and he enjoyed mucking around in the dirt, finding fossils. Having taken some jewelry classes in high school, he added a metals major to his degree at Hartwick. Eventually, the latter interest took over and he went on to pursue a master of fine arts at the Rhode Island School of Design, receiving his degree in 1984.

During his studies in Providence, Shaw drew and took courses in industrial design. Two professors, Louis Mueller and Robin Quigley, had a special influence on him: “I took their aesthetics,” he admits, “assimilating and altering them to make something more my own.” Shaw’s work of that period reflected his mentors’ linear style, their use of circles, squares and triangles. It is pretty common, says Shaw, for graduate students to emulate the work of their professors.

Today, Shaw’s jewelry is totally his own. Combining beach stones with diamonds, gold, pearls and other traditional gemstones, his designs have gained him a following that reaches across the country and beyond. One reviewer of Shaw’s work invokes “whole earth” and “Zen” to characterize his aesthetic. “I feel like I have more associations with hippies,” Shaw muses, “than I do with Zen masters.” Yet he accepts that his approach to materials—a spare, minimalist treatment wherein he is more inclined to subtract than to add elements—puts him in the latter camp. Another reviewer has



RING of twenty-two karat gold and sterling, beach stone and cubic zirconia.

likened Shaw to an alchemist, but he shrugs off this description. “Alchemy implies chicanery and tomfoolery; my work is incredibly direct, honest and pure.” He thinks that the metaphor of making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear might be more appropriate when considering how the beach stone has been elevated by him to the level of art jewelry.

A spokesman for stones, as it were, Shaw praises them with the same fervor that another, more traditional jeweler might bring to diamonds or rubies. He stands in awe of a violent, chaotic and torturous environment producing something so perfectly geometric. He admires their durability: “You think about the environment they came from, tumbling around on a beach, and there is very little that people can do to harm them.” He admires their shapes, their perfect symmetry. And he has no illusions about his role in their appropriation: “I am a little bit like a crow: I pick up beautiful little shiny objects that appeal to me and I make it possible for people to wear them.”

Perhaps most important of all, Shaw recognizes the stones’ built-in resonance, their appeal to anyone who has ever leaned down to pick a rock from the beach. “There is a lot of familiarity on the part of the clients who purchase my jewelry,” he explains, and goes on to describe a “universal response,” of something which gives joy: the memory of a stone once retrieved from the sand.

Much of the appeal of Shaw’s creations derives from the contrasts he establishes between materials. For example, a favored earring combines a piece of black basalt, a diamond and a twenty-two karat gold disk. What is initially disconcerting—the blending of precious with non-precious elements—quickly elicits admiration, as much for the beauty of the arrangement as for the somewhat audacious blending of seemingly incompatible elements.

The basalt and granite in his work comes from the nearby Cranberry Isles and from Campobello Island,



PIN/PENDANT of sterling, beach stone and amethyst. 3X3 inches.

the famous resort just over the border in Canada where Franklin Roosevelt took the waters, but Shaw says he is not above picking up pebbles in the driveway. Most of the stones are wave-polished, unaltered, and they are left that way. The most invasive elements are the drilling to accept stones or settings, or slicing to reduce weight or to create a symmetry in the case of earrings. "In terms of the surface," says Shaw, "we don't do anything other than rub them against the side of our nose."

When asked if he has truly reinvented the wheel, Shaw is quick to note that beach stones are not new to jewelry, nor is his combination of so-called low and high class materials, although he certainly has taken the idea to new places. The use of alternative and found materials such as plastics, laminates and aluminum has also been around for some time.

Along with the beach stones, Shaw uses minerals that are not considered precious. His repertoire includes pyrite, or fool's gold, fossils and ammonites from Morocco. He also utilizes rarer elements, such as crossed pearls from Japan, which are no longer available due to the pollution of Lake Biwa where they are farmed and harvested. Azurite nodules from Arizona have also become somewhat of a scarce commodity, due to the closing of a mine in Bisbee.

Three full-time assistants, Lisa Hall, Zoe Chicco and Sue Fleming, who are fine jewelers in their own right, make the jewelry, allowing Shaw the time to work on new concepts. All the design work is finished before the assistants execute the objects—"The spirit of the jewelry lies in the arrangement," Shaw explains, "and the execution is a very small part of it, but nevertheless critical."

Community-minded, Shaw serves on the local school board and is treasurer of the Southwest Harbor Library. He and his wife, Jane Tawney, have two daughters, Hannah and Lucy. He displays the same kind of orientation towards his profession: he currently serves on the board of directors of the Society of North American Goldsmiths and is past president of the Maine Crafts Association. In his view, these organizations help make the community of jewelers and artisans stronger: "It's very important to keep ideas percolating

through our group," he says, "by workshops, newsletters and other means."

A new line of jewelry is inspired by the sailing vessels that frequent the harbors of Mount Desert Island. "I live on the ocean," he states, "I do love boats; it's definitely a part of my daily visual vocabulary." Whereas his usual procedure is to work directly in the materials, for these boat pieces Shaw makes preliminary drawings. To date, thirty or so of these pieces have been made in a variety of configurations, using beach stones to represent the keel and gold elements to suggest sails.

Shaw has also tackled the boat idea on a sculptural scale. Measuring about three feet long, some of these sculptures actually float, while others, he remarks with a smile, "do not have to obey the laws of physics."

As a result of several successful exhibitions, Shaw was one of ten artists chosen to create an outdoor installation for the city of Portland, Maine, as part of its second annual Deering Oaks Festival this summer. He has been given a pond, which he plans to fill with floating sculptures, which will relate to model boats from the Victorian Age.

Another recent collection returns Shaw to the stone-gemstone dichotomy. He has been combining black basalt rocks with large-size cubic zirconia. He remarks upon the "nice effect" that happens between the black stones, which are satiny, subtle and refined, and the glitzy, refractive, high-polished, faceted fake diamonds. He has fabricated rings, brooches and some pendants out of these, and the response has been very favorable.

At times, Shaw displays a wicked sense of humor. For instance, he combines a three hundred carat smoky topaz and a large granite stone, the two objects set in a pendant that rotates. The piece, "Looking Into Your Ice Hole," is the kind of adornment, Shaw states with amusement, that Sonny Bono might have chosen in the 1960s.

While much of the jewelry has an abstract, geometric purity, at times a representational quality emerges. One pendant has a distinctly anthropomorphic shape, like a little stone man, a fetish or fertility god. Elsewhere,



RING of twenty-two karat gold, beach stones and diamond; earrings of twenty-two karat gold, basalt and diamonds.

a “horizon brooch” consists of several lucky stones—those with a quartz intrusion in them—that have been lined up so as to make a continuous line, which replicates the shape, say, of the hills of Mount Desert Island.

Shaw likens the design of such a piece to solving a puzzle. “When we make these things,” he explains, “typically we have hundreds of stones, and we just choose the ones that make the form that appeals to us.” Clients sometimes take part in the process, choosing a particular stone or set of stones for a ring or bracelet or brooch.

Even as he acknowledges that the pieces approach the representational, Shaw emphasizes that he is mostly interested in shapes, textures, colors and arrangements. And his goal and purpose are straightforward: “I make jewelry for personal adornment and I am unambiguous about that. I make jewelry because of the ten thousand-year history of humans wanting to adorn themselves.”

In the end, Shaw views himself as an advocate for the beach stone. “I want to make them worthy of people’s consideration,” he says, “by setting them in high karat gold or sterling silver.”

In a manner of speaking, Shaw is collaborating with Mother Nature, presenting her work as much as his own. Along this line, he is a great fan of the environmental sculptor Andy Goldsworthy, who creates similar magic out of found elements.

Considering Shaw’s beach stone creations, a poem by Maine writer Abbie Huston Evans comes to mind. In “Pebbles from Sister Island,” she describes “the steep beach...strange with jasper and outlandish stone, /Dim-colored, brown-flecked, olive, chiefly black, /Most like



MISMATCHED EARRINGS of twenty-two karat gold, cultured cross pearl, beach stone.

old pagan basalt from the depths/Bared when the moon tore free.”

Like Shaw, the poet pays homage to the pebbles’ great age—“When Rome fell, and Atlantis, they were here.” In the final stanza, Evans evokes the sensual nature of the stones:

Let me hold them in my hand a moment, sense  
Duration, through delight of touch approve  
The buffing of the lapidary sea,  
Darkly partake of the being of first rock.

Through his jewelry, Shaw allows us to share in that “delight of touch.” His aesthetic truly partakes “of the being of first rock.”

*Carl Little is the author most recently of “Paintings of New England” (Down East Books). He is a regular contributor to “Art in America” Magazine, where he was formerly associate editor.*



BROOCH of twenty-two karat gold, four beach stones; brooch of amethyst and beach stone.