

CHARLES PINCKNEY

THE STORY AS THE JEWEL



WATERBUG brooch of fabricated sterling silver with granulation, seven layers of carved and stacked titanium, and tourmaline set in a custom bezel; 8.4 centimeters wide, 2005. *Collection of the artist. Photograph by Steve Meltzer.*

Ashley Callahan

From the outside, Charles Norman Pinckney's studio looks cold and formidable. It is housed in the Old Clarke County Jail, a historic late nineteenth-century stucco-covered building in Athens, Georgia, Pinckney's hometown since 1985. Setting foot inside, though, visitors find a warmly lit room brought to life by Pinckney's resonant voice, friendly laughter and generous spirit. Every inch of the studio is filled with something: sheets of copper, tiny drawers of beads, all kinds of tools, children's drawings, handmade lamps, award ribbons, and stuff, a lot of stuff—there is no quick route through the space, physically or visually. It has the curious attraction of a tinkerer's workshop. Pinckney welcomes visitors to this retreat with an open heart and a ready hug; the intimacy is disarming. Pinckney has an imposing physical presence, and one can easily imagine him working with metal on a monumental scale, but he has “just always loved small things.”

One quality about Pinckney that is immediately obvious is his natural inclination toward storytelling. Over the past several decades he has developed a personal lexicon of symbols that he employs in his jewelry to convey memories from his childhood, experiences related to him by others and his perspective on human nature. Pinckney is gifted at finding the nuggets of raw emotion at the core of each story and shaping them into works of art. The volume of feeling embodied in one of Charles Pinckney's handcrafted pieces of jewelry can be

overwhelming. Inevitably, his stories about patrons' initial reactions to works they have commissioned involves them being overcome by tears, and for years after buying even a simple pair of earrings, many customers recall the story he told them about the jewelry every time they wear it. Pinckney works with silver, titanium and copper, and occasionally precious or semiprecious stones and found objects. He firmly explains, though, that he is not concerned with carats or clarity because, “The story is the jewel. The inanimate thing, it doesn't make the heart flutter, it's what it represents that makes the heart flutter.”

Pinckney recalls being sad when his father, Pharith Arthur Pinckney, stopped telling stories. He is not sure why he stopped, “Maybe he figured we were old enough and didn't need to hear stories,” but he fondly remembers sitting on his father's foot and listening to Tar-Baby and other Uncle Remus tales, “not politically correct these days,” he chuckles. Pinckney acknowledges that he was raised in a community of makers; if someone needed something in his part of South Carolina (he was born in Sumter and raised in Williston), it was easy to find the person to make it. “It was just a part of living. Nobody was an artist. It was just a part of life.” He did not grow up with an awareness of storytelling or making as art, though, or of art as a profession. As a child he told his mother, Emma Rebecca Pinckney, “Wouldn't it be great if I could make a living making things for people?” Looking back,

EMBRACE brooch or pendant fabricated of sterling silver, titanium, pink opal, and rubies on handmade sterling chain; 4.6 centimeters diameter, 2009. *Collection of Margaret and Tony Summers. Photographs by Karen J. Hamrick, except where noted.*



he sees that wishful thought as a time when he caught a glimpse of the person he would become, and he believes that every person gets such a glimpse as a child. Pinckney frequently uses an image of a window in his work, and the pendant *Just a Glimpse*, with its suggestion of a partial wall with a small window looking out to a dark blue sky, draws on that belief.

Pinckney's outlook seemed peculiar amongst his peers and often drew comments from his family when he was young. Once, when fishing in a boat with his father, he gazed out over the water and remarked on the beauty of the sparkling sunlight in the ripples. His father replied, "Boy, you think too much," which became the title of a necklace. Another time he watched the waterbugs and noticed how their legs bent the surface of the water, a seeming impossibility and the inspiration for the *Waterbug* brooch. One particularly special place where he went to play games with his brothers and enjoy nature was "the big tree," captured in a pendant of the same name. He loved sitting in the tree and listening to leaves rustle and cars go by. Of this experience he shares, "This is where I was learning to feel, in that big tree. I knew there was a difference between hearing and really listening."

Many of Pinckney's pieces of jewelry reflect his appreciation for his parents' love and wisdom. Some express that quite directly, as in a necklace (*Family*) with a piece of curved titanium, tapered at both ends, with six silver rings around it, all under a red heart suspended from a copper arc: the titanium represents his father, the six rings are him and his siblings, and the heart is his mother's love. In another necklace, *Lessons on the Clothes Line*, he records the memories of dashing to the yard to retrieve the laundry when it rained suddenly, propping up the clothesline when it sagged and taking pride in wiping off the line before using it. *Work Ethic*, which incorporates paintbrush bristles, reminds him of the time his father made him help paint the house. He hated the work, but the deep satisfaction he felt once the job was complete helped him to develop a strong work ethic. In the pendant *Fire Bridge*, Pinckney uses a carnelian to represent the dangers that children will encounter in the world. He believes that all parents

want to provide their children with the tools to get through those fires, and in *Fire Bridge* those tools are his father's strength, represented by the titanium bar at the top, and his "mother's pearls of wisdom."

Pinckney is largely self-taught as a jeweler. After studying psychology at Clemson University and working for many years as a radio DJ and a hospital orderly, he began experimenting with scrimshaw and small woodcarvings and mosaics. In order to meet a practical desire to learn how to make a bezel setting for his scrimshaw, he enrolled in a workshop with Eleanor Caldwell. His only formal study of jewelry was in that workshop and a subsequent one taught by Chuck Evans, both in the early 1980s at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee (where he recently led a workshop himself), and another in 2005 at Anderson Ranch in Colorado with Robert Ebendorf, with whom he found a special artistic kinship.

The workshop with Caldwell was Pinckney's first introduction to working with metal, and it was a natural fit. During that experience one of his classmates happened to give him a piece of titanium. Generally when seen in jewelry, titanium is machined, resulting in a clean, modern look. Often the metal is heated with an electrical current to produce predictable, stable colors. Pinckney uses titanium in several ways: in bright bluish layered sheets, often held together with rivets with moon-shaped heads (the metal cannot be soldered); in stacked laminations with notched edges that suggest patterns like bricks or train tracks; and, in contrast to how most jewelers work with it, as a traditional forgeable metal. He likes that titanium is strong and light, and in his powerful hands this challenging material appears to yield as readily as silver or gold.

Pinckney speaks eloquently about form and line. When asked how he learned about those formal aspects of design, he points to the hand-drawn triangular blocks on his business card and says, “Those shapes, those represent actual shapes that I played with as a child. They were firewood . . . and I just thought, there’s got to be something else you can do with this. There’s just got to be something else besides burning it. Because I thought they were just the most beautiful things.” The combination of Pinckney’s intuitive sense of design with his palette of symbolic images leads to jewelry that has an inventive, collage-like quality. Many works have immediately

he finds connections with the people he meets, and his patrons discover bits of their lives told through his jewelry, whether in a pendant with a hand form, “because everyone needs a helping hand sometimes,” or a necklace reflecting the joy of picking blackberries with neighbors.

Some of the most emotionally moving of Pinckney’s works result from commissions. For example, in a pendant titled Ring, Pinckney incorporates the diamond wedding ring that belonged to the commissioner’s late mother. “This is a synthesis of the conversation, of what I think she was saying about her mom.” When Pinckney works on pieces like this,



RING pendant fabricated of sterling silver, titanium, antique ring, freshwater pearl, and rubies; 5.7 centimeters long, 2006. *Collection of Julia Sanks.* CHARLES PINCKNEY in his studio.



recognizable pictorial elements, but even the more abstract ones reveal certain themes after learning to recognize Pinckney’s visual vocabulary. He addresses the many textured surfaces he uses and the asymmetry he often employs in his jewelry thusly: “If they were nice and shiny and symmetrical, it wouldn’t feel the same . . . It would be kind of sterile. It wouldn’t be as rich of an expression,” and most importantly, “It wouldn’t be the way I would say it.”

Most of Pinckney’s sales involve personal contact. Many weekends a year he travels to art festivals where he spends his days talking with people. “I like people.” He enthusiastically tells the stories of his life that are reflected in his jewelry and he listens with genuine interest to the stories of others. Often

Inevitably, his stories about patrons’ initial reactions to works they have commissioned involves them being overcome by tears, and for years after buying even a simple pair of earrings, many customers recall the story he told them about the jewelry every time they wear it.

he explains, “You fill yourself with the feeling that person had. You think about the human, the child.” For Ring, he thought about the profound love and respect the daughter had for her mother, and decided to place

the ring near the base of the design because the mother had provided such a strong moral and spiritual foundation. From that symbol of the mother springs a series of ruby beads reflecting the daughter’s passion, and branches with leaves, representing the daughter’s vitality. The tendrils of the foliage just barely break through the top edge, indicating future growth. The dark blue background suggests a window: “She’s looking to the past at her mom, but her mom’s a part of her future because . . . she gave her legs, she gave her grounding for her

SAPELO FOUND brooch or pendant fabricated of sterling silver, titanium, bronze moon rivet, and found shell from Sapelo Island; 5.1 centimeters high, 2006. Collection of Lisa and Al Kent.

future.” The design seems to sit atop a pearl, which “was about the period of thought for her mother, her love for her mother, giving rise to all of this.”

A necklace titled Embrace resulted from a commission by a husband for his wife. Pinckney listened carefully to the story of how the once healthy, robust gentleman was depending on his wife for everything now that his body was weakened by cancer. Pinckney describes what he created:

“This piece represents the purity of what he felt, and at the same time elevates her without diminishing him. So I chose to put four arches representing her support of him. The more you push on the arch the stronger it becomes. Here again these rubies represent his passion for her and hers for him. Wherever he turns he sees her support and her passion. The center is a pink opal; she loves opals ... The window here is titanium and this is the future. He has a future. He’s embracing his new reality. She is embracing him and he has to cling to her ... This is their story.”

Though Pinckney often makes preliminary sketches, the final designs are led equally by his ability to connect to such personal stories and to “feel his way through making” the jewelry.

One of Pinckney’s favorite pieces is Sapelo Found, which incorporates a shell he picked up on the beach on Sapelo Island, just off the Georgia coast. For him this humble shell signifies the history of the island when it was inhabited by emancipated slaves who wanted a better future for their children, but had no way to imagine what that future might be. “Here is a window that [the earlier inhabitants] never saw, but they are the fuel for those generations that do see it. It’s an old story. It’s a very old story. It’s a story of parenting. It’s not a black story, it’s not a white story, it’s a human story.” This brooch (or pendant) is in a private collection, and the owner’s husband recently commissioned Pinckney to create a stand for it so that it could be displayed at all times. Wearability is not tantamount in Pinckney’s work; all of his jewelry is wearable, but he views it first as small sculpture and is perfectly happy to have it treated as such.

While Pinckney’s parents created a safe, happy environment for him, he was aware of the inequality and racism that were deeply ingrained in the social structure of the South in the 1950s and 1960s. Sometimes that experience surfaces in his work in subtle ways, such as having the clasp connect at the pendant. He explains,

“When I put my clasp up front, that’s done with a reason. You’ve got a wonderful pendant. The only thing keeping that pendant secure on your body is the clasp. And we take that very important thing, and we choose to hide it behind our neck ... This is where it kind of comes back to a Southern thing. With the society that I grew up in, we [African Americans] were hidden. The houses with the nice yards, we never got to



play in them, we never got to walk across them unless we were raking them or something like that. The people that were neighbors, that cooked for people, kept their houses, they couldn’t go in them. They were hidden, so I say, ‘put the hidden ones out front,’ where their importance is viewed directly by everybody that sees that beautiful piece.”

The sense of humanity and equality reflected in the series of Birthright brooches is even more palpable. Pinckney, with a touch of drama, asks, “What do you get for being born?” He answers, “The right to be respected, to have privacy, to have no fear.” All of the brooches have a carefully selected stone in the center and are compass-like in format, indicating that the respect is “everywhere, four points, it covers everything.”

While most of Pinckney’s jewelry is out in the world in private collections, he does have some pieces set aside, tucked away like a child’s treasures, which is, after all, what many are: glimpses of his youth, “It’s like locking little bits in time.” And while the materials might not last forever and might not be the costliest available, the stories are precious: “The piece is subservient to the story. It’s that intangible quality that is the value ... It’s what it’s about that’s important. It’s the only thing that is going to last. The only immortal thing is the story.”

SUGGESTED READING

Dienst, Jennifer. “Made of Memories,” *Southern Living* (April 2008): 32, 34-35.

Ford, Wayne. “Crafting Memories,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, April 3, 2004. (available via www.onlineathens.com.)

Hammes, Mary Jessica. “Charles Pinckney’s Work Tells Stories,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, March 25, 2007. (available via www.onlineathens.com.)

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