

Donna D'Aquino

A Fine Line

BY ANDREA DINOTO

"I NEVER KNOW where I am and what time it is," says Donna D'Aquino. She's only partly joking about her life on the road, a life she's chosen as a

hard-working, and literally hard-driving, production jeweler. D'Aquino travels around the country eleven months a year to craft shows, fairs, and gallery invitationals, her trusty Honda Element packed to the nines with the four distinctive jewelry lines she has developed for varying markets. Last summer she traveled to craft fairs in Connecticut, Michigan, Colorado, San Francisco and Wyoming, and still managed to tuck in a week of recreational travel with her dad, driving through Grand Teton National Park and down the spectacular Pacific Coast highway from Oregon to the California redwoods.

D'Aquino is a bit of an anomaly on the craft fair circuit, in that she has a solid academic background, which includes an MFA in jewelry/metalsmithing from Kent State University. Originally she studied graphic design, intending to be an illustrator. As an undergraduate, she took jewelry courses and began experimenting with developing a low-end production line. Her first attempt was a pair of earrings and a bracelet; when she proudly showed her professor, he asked her how long it had taken to make them. "I said, '60 hours,'

and he laughed," says D'Aquino.

Coming out of school, D'Aquino explains, "I didn't feel I had the tools to make a living being an artist." After working at a number of jobs over ten years, both in and out of the jewelry business, she decided in 1996 to go to graduate school at Kent State, intending eventually to teach. "My focus in grad school was on making one-of-a-kind jewelry and finding out who I was," she says. It was here that D'Aquino began to develop her signature steel-wire work, inspired by a workshop conducted by Robert Ebendorf. "He handed me wire and told me to draw," she says, and describes her sculptural cagelike bracelets and wire brooches as "three-dimensional drawings for the body and wall." On her own time, she continued to work on a low-end silver line that could be produced cost-effectively. After completing grad school, she immediately scheduled craft shows and began selling the high- and low-end lines at separate venues. At the same time, she was teaching at two universities.

D'Aquino soon realized "there was more money in jewelry than a teaching salary" and put all her energy into the work and promoting it. Eventually she understood that she could bring both lines together to appeal to a varied clientele. Her silver production line, of which she sells between 1,000 and 1,500 pieces a year, has a price range of \$50 to \$300. It is hand-fabricated and cast using sterling silver, pearls, hematite, and epoxy resins, and includes earrings, necklaces in different lengths, and bracelets. Her one-of-a-kind steel wire "Work in Line" pieces are sold both at fairs and through galleries such as Ornamentum, Facèré, and Velvet Da Vinci. D'Aquino sometimes adds vivid color to the wire pieces using a "plasti-dip" technique, notably for circle scatter pins that were featured in the 2003 SNAG conference Exhibition in Motion, strewn stunningly over a black dress. In another variation, she combines forged steel and 18 karat gold. Depending on size, "Work in Line" pieces range in price from \$50 to \$250, with unique brooches at \$450 to \$1,100 and unique bracelets at \$750 to \$2,000. D'Aquino estimates she sells about ten high-end pieces a year.

The process by which D'Aquino arranges her annual itineraries is fairly complex, and the actual traveling, setting up, and selling arduous. Any show must be applied for annually and accepted six months in

View of Donna D'Aquino's craft fair booth, 2009





DONNA D'AQUINO
Rings
sterling silver, 18k gold
approx. 1 x 1 x 1"



The artist in her Beacon,
New York studio.

advance. An application involves sending three to five images of one's work plus a display image of the booth. For a 10-by-10-foot space, the booth fees range from \$200 to \$2,500 (the upscale venues, e.g. the ACC Baltimore show, can run to \$2,000; one Chicago show is \$2,500), payable in advance. Outdoor shows present specific challenges. At last year's Ann Arbor, Michigan, show, D'Aquino endured two days of tornado sirens and rainstorms, during which some people "lost everything." By now a seasoned professional, D'Aquino is careful to pack a sturdy tent, stakes, and weights. She usually sets up the day before opening, which entails five hours of work. Fairs generally run two to four days, and regardless of whether security is present, each evening she and her fellow exhibitors pack up "what you don't want stolen." The often eleven-hour selling day is spent engaging with customers, lookers, and buyers, some of whom "don't have a problem insulting you," she says. "It's not an easy way to make a living." And yet D'Aquino relishes being on the road. She especially values time spent with the "amazing craft show community of very bright, well traveled survivors" with whom she has a strong camaraderie. "We all understand

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how hard the other works," she says.

D'Aquino reports having a "very strong customer base in the Midwest, where people have an incredible eye and understanding of the work." But, she adds, "Sadly, most people can't tell the difference between handmade and manufactured work, and new generations are not being educated as to what handmade American craft is." D'Aquino has won numerous awards and honors. Her work has been published in several books and most recently in *Vogue Italia*, which showcased one of her oversized wire bracelets on a provocatively un-attired model. Still, she maintains, "I don't follow magazine trends. The fashion world is not something I've ever targeted."

Despite her all-consuming traveling lifestyle, D'Aquino took time off over the past several years to care for her mother, who died of pancreatic cancer in March 2010. To help raise awareness of the general lack of research in this area, D'Aquino designed stainless steel key chains, whose sales through her web site are donated to pancreatic cancer research. D'Aquino's dreams for the future include someday devoting herself to sculpture and public art. But for the moment, whenever she's "out in public, not doing a show" and sees someone wearing her work she's thrilled. As D'Aquino says, reflecting on her efforts, "It really worked out." 📧

Andrea DiNoto is a New York-based writer on arts and design.



DONNA D'AQUINO
Wire Bracelet
steel

Furthermore:
www.donnadaquino.com