



Kenji von Achen

BY JULIA RAI - UK

Jewellery artist, metal clay instructor and business owner Kenji von Achen lives in what many of us would regard as the most romantic city in the world, Paris. We've been Facebook friends for a long while and I love keeping up with what he's up to, but interviewing him for this profile was a revelation. He's had several careers, has an interesting family history and a positive and uplifting attitude to life – and yes, there's a little bit of romance, so read on and find out more about this charming man.

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The youngest of three children, Kenji has two older sisters, one of whom passed away in 2000. His father is German, born in rural Illinois, and his mother is Japanese American, giving him his interesting name. "My pieces are signed just using KENJI," he explained. "It's not a 'Sting' or 'Cher' type of thing, it's only because nobody ever spells my last name correctly anyway and also because I'm definitely assured that they'll massacre the pronunciation," he laughed.

His parents met just after his father left the military during the Korean War. His mother and her family spent three years during the Second World War in captivity. Kenji explained, "They were forced to live in different 'internment camps' that were built for Americans of Japanese ancestry. In fact, they were horse stables that were converted into barracks. I don't know a whole lot about that period of her life as a lot of Japanese Americans don't really like talking about that period. Over the years I've learned a little more about life in the camps but most of that information has only come from reading books and doing research."

Kenji's family history is clearly important to him. "I didn't know my maternal grandfather but I remember well my grandmother," he explained. "I used to be fascinated watching her work on her Ikebana flower arrangements. She was so concentrated and serene looking while she worked on them. She would make these incredible arrangements using only three flowers and they had to be in exactly the right position or the piece didn't work for her. Since she only spoke Japanese, when I think back on it maybe that fascination was a part of our way of communicating. Whatever it was I got her message, Zen. I think that was the first time I was exposed and attracted to artistic talent. My maternal grandfather also had artistic talents as he did some wood sculpting. At my parent's house there's a beautiful hand carved lamp base made from a hardwood tree stump. It's no longer a lamp but just a beautiful sculpture vase."

He goes on, "I didn't know my paternal

grandfather either but I have fond memories of going over to my paternal grandmother's house, especially because we would get to slide down her stairs on our butts. We thought that was so cool."

Kenji was brought up in Anaheim, Southern California. "It was a great place to grow up because at that time back in the '60s our neighbourhood was nothing but young families bringing up lots of kids. We lived not far from the beach so summer vacations were spent either at the beach or camping in our motor home in the nearby forests. My parents still live in the same house that they purchased in the '50s and my oldest sister still lives in that area with her partner."

I asked Kenji what his earliest memories of his own creativity were. "The first time I realized that I was capable of doing something artistic was when I discovered a Japanese art form called Bunka punch embroidery," he explained. "Back in the late '60s my oldest sister was doing these beautiful and intricate 'doodles'. I was a little envious because of the attention and praise she was getting from her doodles. I secretly tried to imitate her drawings but they were a long way from the real McCoy! I was pretty discouraged by my attempt at being artistic until one day at a friend's house I saw my first Bunka creation. There was a specialized store near our house so I bought a kit and gave it one last try. I just followed the instructions and I realized my first Bunka. I thought it was pretty good and I was so jazzed by the results. That's when I learned that it was better to find my own ways of expressing my artistic side instead of copying someone else's work. That's still my rule of thumb."

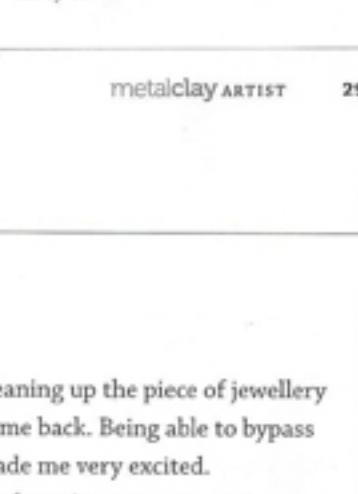
His creative life continued from these early experiences. "I moved to West Hollywood, California in 1980 and started working as a fashion consultant for a men's ready-to-wear company," he went on. "I was good at what I did and worked for several well-known Hollywood personalities as clients. I later started working as a buyer while continuing to consult. In 1981



My Secret Garden Collection



Autumn Leaves



Honey Cow

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I took on another full-time job (and continued consulting) working as an interior designer for a Beverly Hills showroom. After a couple of years working there I also started designing some of the furniture and home accessories that we used for our interior decorating. I worked those two full-time jobs for nine years. That's the real American way!"

I asked Kenji when he first discovered metal clay. "I'd been doing enamelling, bespoke jewellery and traditional silversmithing for almost a decade when I first learned of metal clay in 2005 while surfing on the net," he said. "I was thinking that if I understood the concept correctly, the idea of working with this new material would be fascinating."

He went on, "as I'd been doing enamelling work with my jewellery, I thought I could maybe marry the two materials together. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I started searching on the net to find out as much as I could. When I found out that Angela Crispin would be coming to Paris to teach a metal clay class I jumped on the occasion. At the end of the class I went home with my first silver pendant; I knew that I was hooked and I've never been the same since! I immediately started searching again for as much information as I could find out about this new material."

"Metal clay wasn't available here in France at the time, so I ordered my first packets of clay from Rio," he explained. "I can still remember the excitement and anticipation of getting my clay in the mail. When I opened my first package I immediately wanted to push the limits and see how far I could go with it. I'm that type of person; I don't like taking baby steps. I immediately want to start running. I'm also a very tactile person and I just loved the feel of the wet and dry clay. I never liked the feel of the wax I was using with my traditional jewellery making. I still don't. One of my 'fauxs' is that I'm not good at waiting. I want things 'now' and metal clay allowed me to have this. No more spending hours on end sculpting my piece of jewellery in wax, then sending it out and waiting for it to be

cast, and then cleaning up the piece of jewellery when it finally came back. Being able to bypass all these steps made me very excited."

And then the obsession went on, again another familiar feeling for metal clay artists! "I think anyone that's worked with metal clay knows that feeling of suddenly seeing textures everywhere. On my walks in Paris I started looking everywhere I could for inspiration. It wasn't something that I was pushing myself to do, it was spontaneous. Everything I looked at would get my mind churning and I'd start thinking about how I could incorporate it into a piece of jewellery. Walls, trees, leaves, doors and everything else I saw suddenly became textures. They were everywhere!"

I asked Kenji about his influences. "I'd have to say that my main influences are nature and my Japanese origins, a sort of 'Zen influence' or a 'Japanese thing'. Nature plays a big part in my creations as well as clean lines and just keeping things simple and uncluttered. I also work a lot with cultured pearls. Many of my pieces incorporate either Akoya or Tahitian cultured pearls. I think they add softness to a piece of jewellery and I think it mixes well with what I do."

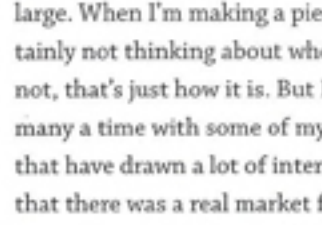
He went on, "I remember when I was a child we would go to the festivals at the Buddhist temples and you could buy a live oyster and they would open it up in front of you. If you were lucky you could end up with a cultured pearl! Again, these type of Japanese influences tie in with the feeling I had while watching my grandmother making her beautiful Ikebana floral arrangements."

"These influences in my works aren't something that are forced or intentional but rather just the way that my ideas come to me. Often I sit down to work on a piece that is far from what I call my 'Zen' style and then somewhere in the middle of creating the piece the project takes a turn and I end up back to those influences. But that doesn't mean that everything I do is 'Zen', having clean lines and being simple."

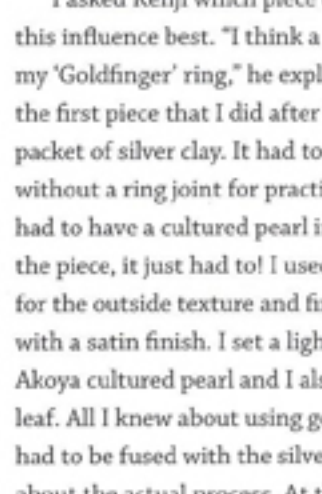
"I love architecture and I've always been a fan of Frank Lloyd Wright. While I was doing interi-

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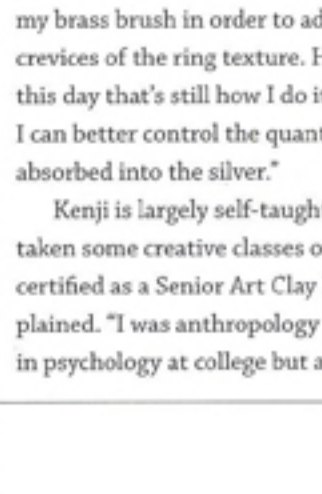
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Metamorphosis



Tryptic Collection



Tryptic Collection

or decorating in Beverly Hills I got to visit inside and out of the Freeman House in the Hollywood Hills. It's a perfect example of those clean lines and blending in with the surrounding nature. And there are also a lot of magnificent examples of architecture here in Paris. For me, when I'm inspired by architecture that usually means big. I love BIG jewellery!" he laughed.

"I make whatever feels right to me at the moment and often many of my pieces can be very large. When I'm making a piece like that I'm certainly not thinking about whether it's saleable or not, that's just how it is. But I've been surprised many a time with some of my really large rings that have drawn a lot of interest. I didn't realize that there was a real market for big rings. I don't know about elsewhere but right now what's in style here in Paris is BIG. I see some pretty huge rings in the Metro!"

I asked Kenji which piece of his work reflects this influence best. "I think a good example is my 'Goldfinger' ring," he explained. "This was the first piece that I did after buying my first packet of silver clay. It had to be simple and without a ring joint for practical reasons and it had to have a cultured pearl incorporated into the piece, it just had to! I used wood sandpaper for the outside texture and finished the inside with a satin finish. I set a light cream coloured Akoya cultured pearl and I also added some gold leaf. All I knew about using gold leaf was that it had to be fused with the silver but I wasn't sure about the actual process. At the time I had never heard about Keum-Boo. So, I just took a blow torch to it and when it looked like the leaf was starting to fuse I started tapping the ring with my brass brush in order to adhere it well into the crevices of the ring texture. Hey, it worked! To this day that's still how I do it, with a blow torch. I can better control the quantity of gold that is absorbed into the silver."

Kenji is largely self-taught although he has taken some creative classes over the years. "I'm certified as a Senior Art Clay Instructor," he explained. "I was anthropology major with a minor in psychology at college but anything artistic I

learned was just a hands-on type of experience. An example of that is when back in the '80s I started working as an interior decorator and furniture designer. I didn't have any experience in either of these fields but when the opportunity was unexpectedly put in front of me I did as I've always done: I did research and I read anything and everything that I could get my hands on about interior design. I completely immersed myself in both fields and I worked as an interior designer for nine years until coming to Paris."

I asked Kenji to talk a bit more about the classes he teaches. "I teach classes regularly in my home workshop," he explained. "I teach different levels of one-on-one classes in silver clay, bronze clay, copper clay, steel clay and a beginners bespoke jewellery techniques class. I also teach a byzantine chainmaille class and a crocheted bracelet class similar to Viking knit. When I started teaching a few years ago I was teaching four weeks out of the month but now I'm only teaching two weeks out of the month and the other two weeks are for ME!" he laughed. "My favourite class to teach is definitely the beginners metal clay class. Creating with metal clay is a real passion for me and I know it sounds a bit trite but I love trying to transmit some of that passion that I feel when I create with it. I love walking my students step by step through the techniques of working with metal clay, but when the student finally starts brushing their first fired piece of jewellery and the piece begins to shine, well, the smile on their faces tells you everything. It makes me feel like 'mission accomplished'."

Kenji's studio/workshop is in his home. "It used to be our large dining area," he explained. "It is set off from the salon by large glass French doors. In one corner I have my workbench for traditional jewellery making, in another corner my kiln for firing metal clay, enamelling and glass fusing. There's a large teak table in the middle of the room where I do my own metal clay work and teach my classes. There's also a buffet where my photography tent and lamps are set up. Everything is filled to the brim so things

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have to be tidy and all well arranged. That's just how I am anyway. But once I get working on a project there's no other words for it but organised chaos. That's the only way I can work because I always have several projects going on at the same time. Fortunately for me I can find in a second anything that I'm looking for. When I'm working on a project I can spend hours and hours working away and not even think about stopping to eat. I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night, around three or four in the morning, and I'll close the doors to the atelier and start my day."

I asked Kenji about his mind process. "When an idea comes to mind my first reaction is to just make a very general sketch that'll make me remember it later. Other times that's not necessary because I can feel that an idea will haunt me until I get it done. Lately I've been using an app on my Samsung Galaxy Note™ that is excellent for doing sketches. I gradually keep refining the sketches and, if necessary, separating and sketching different components. Sometimes after I do that initial general sketch the idea can mill around in my head for months deciding where exactly I want to go with it. Often it will go in a completely different direction from the original idea before I start to refine the sketch. At that point, in my mind I walk myself through the entire creative process, from A to Z. I try to anticipate any obstacles that I might come upon and imagine how to solve them. If I'm going to be using templates for my work I trace them out on a used cereal box [I'm very 'green']. It's the perfect weight and can easily be cut out with a craft knife or scissors. And if they're templates that I think might be used often I coat them with several layers of clear nail varnish and they hold up forever."

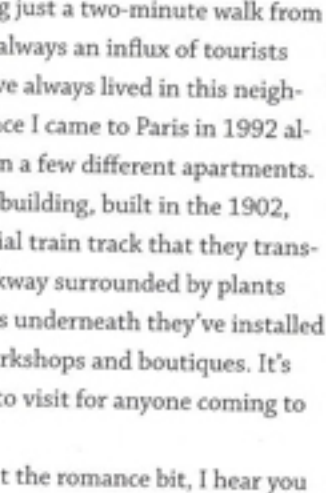
He went on, "For me, the very last step is imagining in my head the person wearing the piece of jewellery that's going to be made."

Because Kenji used traditional silversmithing techniques to make jewellery before he discovered metal clay, it's not surprising that he uses these in combination with his metal clay

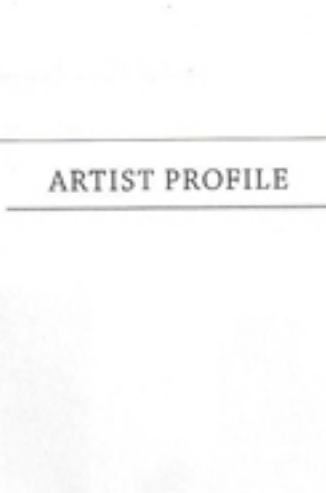
creations. "What I love about metal clay is its ability to be combined with traditional silversmithing. Using cold connections are one of the things I like to do when I work with metal clay. I love using rivets, not only for their functional purposes but also as a visual design feature. A few well-placed rivets and you not only have a piece that stays together but also a visual effect that can give your work a completely different feel than if it didn't have them. I also like using nuts and bolts. In my 'Industrial Chic Collection' I used a lot of them. I hadn't originally planned to use them in the collection, and then one day it hit me that it would be so perfect if I could use them. I added toppers to the bolts on a few of the pieces but the majority were made with the nuts and bolts exposed. It all fitted in perfectly with the industrial theme. I make most of my own findings, such as my jump rings, ear wires, clasps and stone settings and then use them with my metal clay projects but I'm finding that more and more I'm enjoying making my own toggle clasps and settings with metal clay. I find that there are so many more design possibilities with metal clay."

I love Paris so I asked Kenji to tell me a bit more about exactly where he lives. "We live near the Gare de Lyon (Railway Station). It's a quiet part of Paris with plenty of traditional bistros and small shops. At the same time with the train station being just a two-minute walk from our home there's always an influx of tourists right around it. I've always lived in this neighbourhood ever since I came to Paris in 1992 although I've lived in a few different apartments. Right outside our building, built in the 1902, there is an old aerial train track that they transformed into a walkway surrounded by plants and in the viaducts underneath they've installed galleries, artist workshops and boutiques. It's really a cool place to visit for anyone coming to Paris."

And what about the romance bit, I hear you ask? "I live with my partner of 22 years," Kenji explained. "I met him while I was on one of my visits to Paris. We talked on the phone every day



Industrial Chic



Kont Chouette



Tryptic Collection

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after I returned home to West Hollywood. Five months later I had sold everything I owned except my 4x4 (just in case...) and moved to Paris. I moved into an apartment and studied French for a year. I mean, I HAD to learn some French if we were going to be able to communicate, I was 33 at the time and he's 11 years younger than me. He's an actor/dancer/daytime job and does film, theatre and voice over work. It's been a wonderful 22 years and we're now discussing getting married both here in France and in California. Marriage is definitely not something that we need in our lives, we've been fine how it is for the past 22 years, but there are other reasons to our consideration. Time will tell..." What a sweet story.

Two years ago, Kenji had an experience which could have ended his creative career for good. "I woke up from a nap one day and I was paralyzed on my left side and couldn't talk right," he told me. "I had had a mild stroke. While in the hospital I can remember thinking about nothing else but the idea that I might never be able to work again with metal clay or to teach classes. It was scary because metal clay had become such a big part of my life and now I was going to lose that. I was fortunate because after several months of re-education and speech therapy I had almost completely recovered, except for a part of my memory."

"It took me a few more months before I sat down in front of a lump of metal clay to try to make something. And what I had been afraid of happened. I was sitting there in front of the clay and I had no idea what I was supposed to do first. Just the simple idea of taking out a piece of plastic wrap to cover the clay didn't even enter my mind. All the tools that were set out on the work bench seemed foreign to me. I didn't get anywhere that first day and I realized that I had my work cut out for me. It was the same thing in my inspiration department. It was pretty empty with a capital E. I'm one of the lucky ones though because with a lot of re-education, a lot of patience and a lot of encouragement from my partner and my stubbornness to not give up,

things have pretty much come full circle. The thought about age is that I don't know what part of my current memory loss is because of the stroke and which part is just that, age!" he laughed.

With a scare like that, getting the work-life balance right is quite important so I asked Kenji how he relaxes. "I often take on more projects than I have time for and I had been getting real stressed out. I recently decided to start meditating again and I'm doing hypnosis. When I lived in the States I used to meditate all the time but for some reason when I moved here to France I stopped. Now I make time for at least 30 minutes a day to meditate and calm myself down. I'm finding that since I started doing it my days are more organized and there can sometimes be a lot less stress in my life."

I asked Kenji where he sees himself going with his metal clay work. "As far as I can go! No seriously, at the moment I see myself expanding on my work with all the different bronze clays, copper clays and steel. For right now I just want to continue with my testing of all these clays and then see what more I can do with them. Those clays are like night and day compared to silver clay and they fit in really well with my current inspiration."

Kenji's work has been included in several books and publications and he sells his work in various places. "I do sell some of my work, but not aggressively," he explained. "I have a website that is a window for my bespoke jewellery and all my classes. My idea is to group all my metal clay classes and metal clay jewellery together on one website and my bespoke jewellery and the corresponding classes on another. I can't make a certain style of jewellery just so that it will correspond and sell on a website. That's just not me. For the time being I only sell my metal clay jewellery at shows and salons in and around Paris."

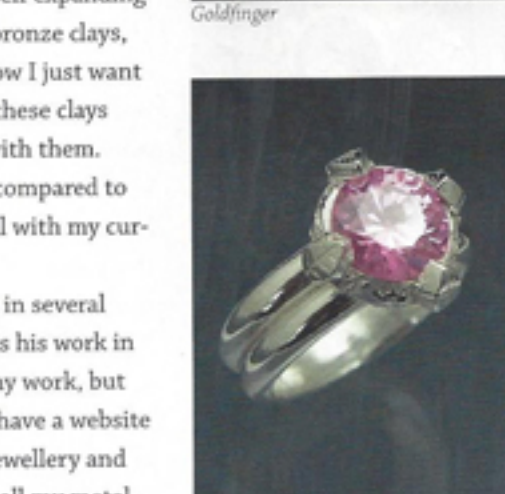
Kenji has some good advice for anyone wanting to sell their work. "I know from past experience that the first rule of thumb is exposure, exposure and more exposure!" he said. "Start with a website as that's going to be your electronic calling card. All you need is your jewellery

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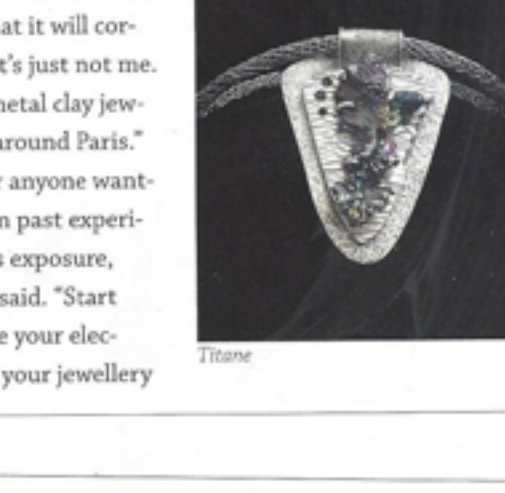
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and good photos in order to bring out the best in your jewellery. I know it's not easy but try to teach yourself to take your own high quality photos as it's the most practical and economical way to go. Have high quality prints made up so you can put together a book resuming your work. Along with a well written showcase and calling cards these will be the essentials when you hit the pavement in order to get your work into those shops. Choose the shops carefully, making sure that your designs deserve to be in a particular shop. The goal is not to get your designs into a shop at any cost. Choose wisely. It's the same things for shows; make sure that your designs fit in with the type of show that you're considering. Don't try to suddenly create a collection that isn't you just to do the show. Chances are that if you do that they'll see it and you've done a lot of work for nothing. Stay true to yourself and exposure, exposure and more exposure!"

I asked Kenji what he's currently working



Goldfinger



Pink Lady



Titane

on. "The collection I'm putting together is called 'Mon Jardin Secret' (My Secret Garden). For the majority of my pieces I'm using natural materials such as river stones, slate, concrete, sand, seed pods, glass, enamels and even one piece with a real bumblebee encased in resin. Most of the pieces are being created using different colour bronzes as their warm colours mix well with the theme of the collection and the materials that I'm using. With certain pieces though I'm also working with darkened steel and brushed silver which will give a little more of an industrial feel to certain pieces. The hours and hours that I spent alone in my parent's garden last summer really dictated this next collection."

It has been a pleasure to find out more about Kenji, his life, family background and influences and I really look forward to seeing what his new collection looks like and how it evolves.

See more of Kenji's work by visiting these websites:

Website: **Kenem Bijoux**
<http://www.kenembijoux.com>

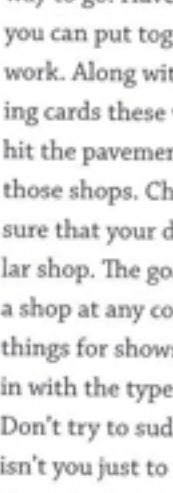
Blogs: **Pâte d'Argent - L'Art du Métal**
<http://www.pate-argent.com>



Flower Power Kenji



The Beast



JULIA RAI is a teacher and artist working in a variety of media. She finds inspiration in science fiction and fantasy and loves a good story where diabolical can be suspended in favour of wonder. Her practical and ultra-organised side is always vying for attention alongside her creative and messy side. Each is trying hard to learn from the other and live in harmony.

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