



MAKING *Statements*

A lifelong student and admired teacher, artist, and jewelry designer, Gillion Carrara, transmutes natural materials into one-of-a-kind pieces



Instantly recognizable by her close-cropped silver hair, vintage round eyeglasses, and stylish black apparel by designers like Yohji Yamamoto, Gillion Carrara cuts an undeniably sharp profile. The curated look speaks to both her minimalist aesthetic and a desire to be taken seriously. Not to mention the way it showcases her jewelry, which she makes in her Chicago studio using a mix of metal and natural materials such as horn, shell, ebony, and hardwood sourced from across the globe.

“I want people to wear them, love them, and tell stories about them,” she says. “Look at what Gillion did to this

palm seed.’ Or, ‘Gillion found Chinese game spheres that she cut apart and used in a bracelet.’ There’s always a story.”

An adjunct professor in art history, theory, and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Carrara is also a lifelong student. She attended Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia before moving to Italy, where she lived for six years, taking classes at l’Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence and working in a textile design studio in Milan. After returning to Chicago and marrying her (now late) husband, Alfonso, in the 1980s, they continued to summer in a village outside of Siena.

ELLIS HILL

ELLIS-HILL.COM
DALLAS | TEXAS
@ELLIS_HILL_



Over the years, she has sought out a series of mentors, studying metalsmithing with famed jeweler Ted Drendel, for example, and learning about glass from frequent collaborator Lance Friedman. Some of her other teachers have been a bit more unconventional: A woodsman and smoking pipe maker in Italy taught her to turn briar wood on a lathe and to clean horn by burying it near tomato plants, where ants take care of the rest, making it possible to work with. "I am a hunter/gatherer of materials but also of information and facts," she says.

Indeed, she describes her townhouse in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood as a "curiosity cabinet." Her third-floor apartment contains thousands of books, original artworks, and many treasured objects she has picked up over the years, such as a completely flat, totally preserved frog she found while hiking the Via Francigena in Italy.

Other found objects, including rocks and beads, an abandoned beehive, animal skulls and various shelf fungi, are displayed on a long window ledge in her immaculate first-floor studio.

Accompanied by the sound of classical music, Carrara moves around the room, soldering metal for a spell before moving to her polishing bench, a table saw, or a sander. The lathe is her favorite tool, and one can often find her moving rhythmically as she forms a piece of cut wood into *objets d'art*. "I learned from a master that you dance with your lathe," she says, noting that she's always surprised by what takes shape.

Often made of unexpected materials like horsehair, deer hoof, and bone, her body of work includes chunky bracelets, geometric rings, and teeth lapels with distressed silver edging. She also makes blush brushes, letter openers, men's accessories, tumblers, cordial glasses, and other functional pieces. Many of them are pierced with a silver wire. "This is my signature," she says. "Signing them would detract from how pristine they are." Of late, she's become fascinated by the idea of making knives.

The work requires focus, so much that she will often lose track of time, looking up to realize that night has fallen. Other times, she'll notice that her work is getting sloppy, which means she's tired and ready to call it a day. But she never leaves before organizing all her tools and cleaning the space, "so I can walk in the next morning, and it's fresh and ready for me to go," she says. "The studio is my love." ■

Gillion Carrara's work can be found at select boutiques. In 2018, the Chicago-based Carrara and fashion designers Andrea Reynders and Anna Brown founded a design collective called "we are MATERIAL" that meets with small artisan groups to discuss their work. After the discussion, guests are invited to look over the fashion apparel and jewelry, while being offered an opportunity to place orders. "If somebody wants to buy it, I'm very pleased, although making the object is principal," Carrara says. Opening page, right: Carrara's handblown glass spheres set on a silver chain. Opposite page, right and below left: Carrara has expanded her creations with handblown cordial glasses and tumblers; bottom right: two of her signature monochromatic rings.

