

# Jewelry princess transforms the art world

By Jocelyn Eikenburg

Who says you can't become a princess? Jewelry artist Michelle Pajak Reynolds is living proof that sometimes the whimsical yearnings of a five-year-old are the start of a lifelong passion. Her lines of dramatic and luxurious wearable art add a certain air of extravagance to her life – and the lives of those who put on her work.

It's hard not to feel like a princess wearing Reynolds' jewelry. There's "Pirouette", a delicate pastel pink choker-style necklace in scrunched tulle and organza with overflowing sterling silver, steel, glass and pearls; "Sangria", a seductive necklace made of gossamer strings of crimson glass beads with dangling petals of white chiffon; and "Passion", a pendant reminiscent of a glorious sunburst with scarlet red rayon ribbon and amber pearls. One thing is for certain about these and other pieces from her studio in Kent, Ohio: each is a one-of-a-kind vehicle for transformation.

It's transformation -- from an ordinary person to what Reynolds refers to as a "magnificent being" – that sits at the core of her art.

It all began when she was five years old, growing up in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. Like many girls her age, she longed to be a princess and delighted in the act of dress-up. But there was one difference – her fascination wasn't a childhood phase. It was the beginning of a lasting preoccupation with the transformative power of adornment. Reynolds admitted that people are truly surprised by her "because it's rare for you to hear about someone at such a young age discover a passion and stick to it." Now in 2006, she marks her 24<sup>th</sup> year of creating unique jewelry.

It was at Kent State University, where she earned her bachelor of fine arts degree, that Reynolds took this idea of dress-up and translated it into an astounding concept that is challenging how jewelry is made.

In fall 2000, Reynolds faced the daunting task of starting the body of artwork for her senior thesis. She turned to Maria Phillips, a visiting faculty member in the jewelry department, for guidance and a fresh perspective. Phillips instructed her to bring forward the objects she connected with, which turned out to be textiles, fabric and fashion images. Reynolds remembers the stunning response from her professor. "She said 'I don't know how you're going to use these textiles to make jewelry, but you're bringing something to this program that no one else here has. And you're going to teach me in the process.'"

That conversation led to working with Phillips on her first fusion of textiles, precious metals and beadwork. In the years following her graduation in 2001, this has become a distinctive hallmark of Reynolds' style.

Less obvious, but equally distinguishing, is Reynolds' creative process. "As I work, certain objects speak to me. Usually the pieces are telling me what they are and not the other way around," she explains. She does not consciously impose a name on her pieces; her role is in uncovering the personality and name of the piece itself. "I don't

know where this is going to end up, and that's the fun part about it," says Reynolds. So it's not surprising then that her most recent collection is called "Serendipity." While the ideas may come fortuitously, the art takes a lot of patience and dedication. A recent piece required 300 hours of work and hand-sewing 51,000 seed beads smaller than one millimeter in diameter.

Reynolds' work is slowly transforming her own position in the art world, and the successes are mounting. Actress Sophia Bush and actress/singer Nona Gaye have worn her jewelry. Her work has made the covers of *Grace Ormonde Wedding Style* and *LA Brides* magazines, as well as Marshall Field's Spring/Summer 2004 TV advertising campaign. And she is one of the featured artists at *Sculpture to Wear*, a gallery based in Santa Monica, California that is regularly frequented by Hollywood stylists. These small victories mean a lot to Reynolds, whose critics maintain her work isn't authentic jewelry because it doesn't involve diamonds and gold. "I feel that I've been very blessed," says Reynolds, "and each moment of recognition is more like a beautiful firework...."

Reynolds also has a significant following in Northeast Ohio. "There are a lot of women in [the region] who are looking for something out of the ordinary... They can take risks because they know who they are... It's these women who are buying and supporting my work." It's no wonder then that area boutiques – including Anne van H. in Cleveland, Bliss in Hudson and Winds of Change in Chagrin Falls – carry her pieces. She has also exhibited her work at a number of local galleries including Gallery M in Cleveland, the W.H. Eells Gallery at Blossom Music Center and Gallery 138 in Kent.

One of her avid supporters is her husband, Randy, a diesel truck mechanic whose appreciation of artwork has grown since their first meeting in March 2001. "Now, instead of getting gifts from the mall, he'll go to the gallery or ask me to create something," Reynolds says.

Just as Reynolds' work breaks with tradition, so does her philosophy towards fashion. She is skeptical of fashion trends, citing her desire to see people think for themselves when it comes to choosing what they wear. "If you find something that moves your spirit, you're going to radiate that. That is always beautiful and always sexy... If it makes you feel like a goddess, why not wear it?"