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MAKING A PRODUCTION OUT OF IT: Micki Lippe on the Art of Repeatables

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Making a production line is not selling out as an artist. It is not only a way to get started—profitably—in making jewelry, but has many challenges and rewards of its own. Seattle jewelry artist Micki Lippe talks about her 20 years making a production line, what goes into it, and its advantages and disadvantages.

by

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At one time or another, the thought of doing a production line crosses the minds of most artists, from painters to jewelers. Some reject the thought and continue to do only original pieces. Others embrace the benefits of production, stamping out clones at the expense of originality. Still others, like Seattle artist/jeweler Micki Lippe, see production as a means to an end: a way to get started in the business, get noticed, and get sales.

“You feel like you’re more commercial when you’re doing production work. You think, “If I were a *real* artist, I’d be doing one-of-a-kinds,” says Lippe, who spent 20 years creating production jewelry. But, she adds, “You can get real excited and creative about how to produce a piece that looks great, that you can make in one hour, and that will wholesale for a certain price.”

As a working mother in a two-income family, she didn’t have the luxury of being able to make one-of-a-kinds. Lippe, who is a past president of the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG), was a commercial illustrator who decided, shortly after finishing school, that commercial art was not where she wanted to be. Because she loves to work with her hands, she explored many avenues—fashion design, ceramics, weaving—as alternatives. Finally, she explored jewelry making. “As soon as I picked up the torch, I knew this was what I wanted to do with my life.”

Making a career change would have meant a severe financial jolt to her family, however. She had to figure out how to make her career change while maintaining her share of the family's cash flow and taking care of two children. The answer, she reluctantly decided, was to make a production line.

Many artists think that creating production work means sacrificing originality and creativity. But Lippe saw its inherent creative challenges. The first thing she learned was that she had to work backward, choosing a price point and designing to that goal, rather than making a piece and determining the price at the end.

She also had to bear in mind that production designs have to appeal to people of all sizes, shapes, and colors. To test market her ideas, she showed them to family and friends to get feedback. (This is an inexpensive marketing technique she recommends to students in the craft marketing classes she teaches.) Between designing to a specific price point and for a broad audience, Lippe found her creativity sufficiently challenged.

Due to time and price considerations, Lippe chose a simple look for her production work. The bi-metal pieces—22 kt. gold and sterling fused together—were composed of basic geometric shapes soldered to and connected by poles or bars of metal. For inexpensive color, she added small beads and stones that were half-drilled and could be glued onto the pieces, rather than using cut stones that had to be set.

It took almost five years, but Lippe reached a point where she had enough gallery representation to quit illustration and switch to jewelry full time. But there were still lifestyle considerations—her children, for instance. She would typically work between 9 p.m. and midnight, after her kids were in bed, or on Saturdays, when she would get up at 6 a.m. and put in three hours while the kids were occupied with breakfast and cartoons. She found that once she got into it, the work would flow easily. “There’s real Zen in knowing that in one hour, you’ll have X number of pieces done,” says Lippe.

But she knew from the beginning she needed help. “You really can’t afford not to have employees,” she says. When people are high on the enthusiasm of starting their own business, “they forget that they have to eat, sleep, and have fun. When they forget to have fun, they burn out. Then they’re nowhere.”

Her first employee was a neighbor who wanted to work while her own kids were in school. “I was better off paying her to brass brush pieces and do my shipping than I was doing it myself,” Lippe says. Although her first employee was unskilled, the more than 20 others who have worked for her over the years were not.

“I can’t afford to teach people to solder,” she says. “They have to have basic skills.” She found her employees through her affiliation with the University of Washington, through a local metals guild she started, and other networking channels. She once even located a worker through a contact at the American Craft Council Show in Baltimore. Under Lippe’s instruction, her employees felt they were serving a one- to two-year apprenticeship—not just in jewelry making but also in business. “They learned things from me that they don’t learn in school,” she says. “Most have gone on to have their own businesses.”

Lippe worked hard to get her line going, but she never forgot to play. If she finished her production goal before midnight, she would work on one-of-a-kind designs. “They were the candy I would give myself when I had finished whatever production work I had to do,” she says. Compared to the production work, Lippe’s unique pieces were more organic—freeform and representational, with a “found object” feel to many of the elements.

After 20 years of doing production, Lippe found she was spending more time on design, administrative, and marketing tasks and less time at the bench. She also noticed that her subconscious was pushing her toward doing one-of-a-kinds. “I would have a

special stone cut for me by someone like [Seattle lapidary] David Vance Horste to go into a piece that was in between one-of-a-kind and production—it was still in the style of the old work but half a step out because of the custom-cut stone. It was kind of the rumblings of me wanting to move on.”

Making the shift was like starting from scratch, says Lippe. “I didn’t have any work backlogged, and it took me a good six months to find my voice. I made quite a few stabs in the wrong direction.” She also had to make a mental shift. Working on production you have to, well, *produce* in order to meet deadlines—and get paid. Every minute that passes without a solid product is time and money lost. When she works one-of-a-kinds, though, Lippe may spend two hours on a piece and have nothing finished to show for it. When this first happened, she had to get around the initial panic that she wouldn’t meet a schedule. It almost made production work seem easy. “One-of-a-kind work seems like a much bigger challenge—to be constantly reinventing pieces. In production, I would add designs once a year.” Now she enjoys the leisure of just letting a piece evolve, watching what her hands produce.

That leisure came with a price, however. Although the style of the one-of-a-kind work was still recognizably Lippe’s, the change cost her all but one of her usual galleries—not only because of the difference in designs, but also because of the shift in price point. Where her production work had retailed for between \$80 and \$300, her new work ranged from \$650 to more than \$1000. Now she is represented by only De Novo gallery in Palo Alto, California, although she expects to add Facere Jewelry Arts Gallery in Seattle next year. But that will be enough, says Lippe: Supplying more than two or three galleries with one-of-a-kind work would be impossible for her.

The upside to all this is the flexibility she gains. She and her husband will be spending 10 months in Germany, sharing studio space with an artist there. When she was

doing production, the freedom to disappear for 10 months was not an option. She had to be there, taking care of the business. “Now,” she says, “I can call the shots.”

(To see Micki Lippe’s work, visit her website at www.looselyhinged.com.)