



Lola Fenhirst Sybil Ring and Sybil Collar Necklace

BRILLIANT & BLACK: A JEWELRY RENAISSANCE

Words by Smitha Sadanandan

In September 2021, Sotheby's staged the first-ever selling exhibition, 'Brilliant and Black: A Jewelry Renaissance,' dedicated to black jewellery designers. Not only did it strike a cultural chord, but it also pushed creative minds into reaching new milestones. "Spanning from the 1950s to today, these artisan's creations – many of which have been newly created for the occasion – showcase a range of styles and materials, illuminating the diverse sources of inspiration," said Frank B Everett, Sotheby's Director of Jewelry.

Curated in partnership with jewellery writer and authority Melanie Grant, the exhibition showcased the works of pioneers like Art Smith and Winifred Mason Chenet, as well as custom-made creations and signature designs by Harwell Godfrey, Jacqueline Rabun, Johnny Nelson, Lorraine West, Rashid Johnson, Thelma West, Vanleles, Castro NYC, Almasika, Marei Fine Jewelry, Mateo, Matturi Fine Jewellery, Melanie Eddy, Sheryl Jones Jewels, Ten Thousand Things, Lola Fenhirst, Jarriet Oloyé, Maggi Simpkins, and Shola Branson.

"This show represents a shift in thinking from 'African-inspired' to black talent being the inspiration. I've loved working with Frank, Sotheby's, as well as the designers who have surpassed all our expectations. I think we'll look back at this moment as a game changer, amplifying the often overlooked and sometimes underappreciated talents and stories of black jewellery designers. With this exhibition, we hope to introduce these designers to a new audience of enthusiasts and collectors and to dismantle the boundaries that still exist," says Grant.

Lola Fenhirst

For designer Lola Oladunjoye of Lola Fenhirst, 'Brilliant and Black' was a game-changer. "Melanie had a vision, which Frank supported whole-heartedly, and the outcome was this beautiful, first-of-its-kind selling exhibition. The work that I do is founded in exploring identity and heritage, and 'Brilliant and Black' has proven to be an excellent forum for this type of examination of culture," she said. Her three submissions for the show are a continuation of the Sybil Series, which she first showed in 2016. Deriving its name from classical literature, the series is inspired by the ancient Greek mythological Sibyls, or female oracles, whose prophecies emerged in

layered riddles. "In a nod to my Anglo-Nigerian heritage, the bead, a traditional West African tribal motif symbolizing wealth and fertility, is represented by the rounded scalloped forms that make up the frame around which delicate gold filament is woven. This interplay of soft strength and fragile, taught lines represents the co-existence of African and European culture," explained the Paris-based designer.

Lorraine West

Brooklyn-based designer Lorraine West's standout pieces include the Ascension halo ring and the Abstract Wing cuff. "The principle of illuminating your inner being so your outer being can shine its brightest underlines the design ethos." Design elements of the silhouette of the ring draw on the French manicure nail, and in particular, the "coffin-stiletto nail." West sprinkled burnished diamonds to create a diamond halo on the metal, making it incredibly cool. The Abstract Wing Cuff in gold and silver is a spin-off of the original arm cuffs that the designer handcrafted for singer-songwriter Erykah Badu for a tour some years ago. In its new iteration, West employed a single row of bird wings for a bold yet everyday look. The mix of gold and silver pays homage to the beginnings of her metal smithing journey to presently working with gold.



Lorraine West Ascension Halo Ring



Matturi Fine Jewellery
The Nomoli Obelisk
Earrings

Matturi Fine Jewellery

Satta Matturi of Matturi Fine Jewellery showcased earrings from her signature bejewelled mask series inspired by traditional African mask and masquerades. These designs were inspired by Matturi's 'Whispers of Meroe' collection, which celebrates the ancient Kushite Egyptian kingdoms, the 25th dynasty of Pharaohs and Queens. The signature piece, 'The Nomoli Obelisk,' references the ancient Egyptian four-sided structure and features custom cut onyx and bejewelled masks.

Mateo

Matthew Harris drew inspiration from artists like Alexander Calder and Brancusi to create his minimalist fine jewellery. His signature Eve Baroque pearl earrings inspired by Brancusi's sculpture called the 'Sleeping Muse,' and a pair of pearl mobile earrings inspired by Alexander Calder, were particularly noteworthy. The Pearl Curve earring, yet another signature design, shows off pearls in a modern and cool way. "I am truly humbled that my work was adored and appreciated," says the self-trained designer, whose pieces were quickly snapped up at the exhibition.



Matturi Fine Jewellery
Nomoli Totem Arc
Earrings



Mateo Eve Baroque Pearl
Earring, 14k Yellow Gold
with Baroque Pearls

Castro NYC

American designer Castro handpicked pieces from his earlier works to showcase at the Sotheby's selling exhibition – these truly reflected his layered inspirations. For his designs, he turned to muses range from Egyptian and Benin cats to Benin shields, as well as bronze and emerald. "Back in the day, Bronze was used to make African statues and money, while red represents the tears of struggle and the red clay the earth in West Africa," says the Istanbul-based master jeweller. Vivid green Muzo emeralds encrusted on the Cat money brooch pendant and Drip earrings were supremely fascinating and replete with symbolism. He also employed an array of materials and gems for the antique bisque porcelain doll, with vibrating wings and removable mask.



Castro NYC Cat
Money Brooch

Mateo Eve Baroque Pearl
Earring, 14k Yellow Gold
with Baroque Pearls

Melanie Eddy

Much of Melanie Eddy's work is informed by "our relationship to architecture both how we inhabit architectural spaces and how they transform our environments – both in urban and rural environments." Eddy's Bermudiana earrings with free form and tapered baguette amethysts and mauve triangular sapphires were inspired by her childhood home of Bermuda and the flora; in particular, the distinctive purple Bermudiana flower. "The Bermudiana flower is inextricably linked with the story of Sarah (Sally) Basset. An enslaved woman who was burned alive at the stake in 1730 by the government of Bermuda for allegedly attempting to poison her granddaughter's enslavers. Sally declared her innocence until the very end," informs the jeweller. Eddy's Palmetto ring brings to life more childhood memories – the colour palette references Palmetto berries and the dramatic intense sunsets in Bermuda.



Melanie Eddy Bermudiana Earrings

Marei Fine Jewelry

Angie Marei of Marei Fine Jewelry showed her affinity for historical references with The Goddess Isis Pearl Ring inspired by Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess of the moon, fertility, healing, and magic. The ring's unique architectural design nestles a large, black Tahitian pearl as if showcased in a throne. Bold designs are her forte and the Il De Philae Ring in brown zircon and white diamonds was quite a powerful piece. Inspired by desert palm trees on a recent trip to Mexico, these were translated into a stunner fit for the Sotheby's exhibition. "I named the ring after the ancient Egyptian Island of Philae, where the sacred Temple of Isis was built," she added.



Maggi Simpkins In Bloom
Ring with Central Fancy Pink
Diamond



Marei Fine Jewelry
Il De Philae Ring

Maggi Simpkins

Maggi Simpkins' rose gold In Bloom Ring, valued at US\$1 million, was the talk of the town. A blooming cluster of custom cut rubies and sapphires surrounded the flawless fancy pink diamond at the heart of the ring. Other sparklers included the ethereal Sunburst ring and colourful Peacock ring. "When I was asked to submit three pieces for this selling exhibition, I wanted to create three unique, one-of-a-kind rings that told my story. These pieces tell a story of my 'coming-of-age' as a designer, and allowing myself the permission to realise my greatness," shared Simpkins.