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Robert Diamante – Recording History

By Marlene Richey

I have known Robert Diamante for close to two decades now and am still awed by his remarkable career, incredible talent, and the depth of his influence in the jewelry designer world. He is recording jewelry and the history of the designer movement (whether intentionally or unintentionally) in his own individual style, vision and perspective. Having worked with such influential designers as John Hardy and Todd Reed—not to mention hundreds of other prominent designers—Robert continues creating his own indelible visual mark on our industry.

Marlene Richey: When did you start your business?

Robert Diamante: I began photographing jewelry in 1992 when I was in college; I registered Diamante Photography as a business in 1996, then incorporated shortly after that.

MR: Why/how did you choose to focus on photographing jewelry?

RD: I was a photography major at Maine College of Art in Portland, Maine, where I developed a passion for studio lighting. Tim McCreight, who was head of MeCA Metals at that time, came to the photography department to have a piece of jewelry photographed for a magazine. I volunteered. He

approved of the photo, he came back for additional photo needs, and he told friends...that's really when it began. I credit Tim for jump-starting my career while I was still a student.

MR: What was the draw?

RD: I enjoyed the challenge of lighting, and I was developing strong technical skills with photography. Additionally, I have the ability to hyper-focus on something for long periods of time. So all those pieces fit together. Plus my name—"Diamante"; I mean, how could I not go into something jewelry-related? People think I changed my name, but it's the one I was born with.

MR: When did you start using the name "Berlian"?

RD: I officially changed my business name to Berlian Arts in 2016.

MR: Why?

RD: Berlian was my nickname when I worked for John Hardy in Bali 2007-08. It means 'diamond' in Indonesian—my family name. I wanted to be open to outside opportunities for career development. It's not easy to step away from a business even for a short time when your name is on the marquee. I brought on Nick Thompson as a business partner and trained staff, which allowed the core services to continue with or without me. Having recently returned to Maine from a two-year stint in Colorado with Todd Reed, I am thrilled to say that the business strategy worked. But it is unlikely I will leave again; my clients are very loyal to me and I don't take that lightly.

MR: You are now offering services creating websites as well as marketing. Are you enjoying that work as much as photography?

RD: Very much! Photography is still the core of the business and, in most cases, we deliver on just that. Now, Berlian Arts has a handful of clients for whom we do web, e-commerce, strategic marketing plans, and CAD design for product development. All of these things tie in together ultimately, so it makes it easy for our clients to maintain consistency. Nick is a ninja on the computer. But for me personally, photography will always be my first love.

MR: How have you learned about running a business?

RD: Early on, the artisan jewelers I worked with offered industry-specific advice that made my business relevant for the market at that time. As operational and growth issues arose, I received pragmatic advice from industry professionals outside of jewelry. As for marketing, I have developed a network of professionals within the designer and luxury industries. There is something to learn from everybody, if you listen. It is also worth mentioning a book by Michael Gerber called The E-Myth. Years ago that had a tremendous influence on me. If you read it, you will understand better why I created Berlian Arts.

MR: What or who do you think has been the strongest influence or inspiration on your work?

RD: The jewelry itself is my inspiration, and the artisans who make it are undoubtedly the influencers. I cannot express enough how much I love to work with someone who is passionate about their work. I have been very lucky to see the coolest works come through my studio.

MR: In such a competitive area of the industry, what do you credit your longevity to?

RD: First, quality; nothing is more relevant than quality. Then, innovation; bringing freshness to the core services that launched my business. And finally, collaboration; when my clients speak, I hear them. I have had clients for 20-plus years because of these reasons.

MR: What changes have you experienced since you began in both jewelry and photography? Design-wise, technologically, socially, politically?

RD: Photography has become completely democratized. The advances in technology have allowed for a great deal of DIY. The number of jewelry photographers has grown exponentially. In jewelry making, you see CAD replacing fine rendering, 3D printing replacing wax carving. But while I am a total fan of technology, talent and skill will always be required in order for something to stand out.

MR: What has not changed?

RD: The demand for superior design, superior craftsmanship, and the divine imperfection of the hand. The hand is the maker's mark on fine craft, and the finest handmade artisanal works are true luxury. The concept of "artisanal" has been hijacked by common brands from coffee to pizza to beer. It's marketing: "artisanal" equals superior quality. The trend will pass, as all things do in advertising, but never from fine craft.

MR: What was the biggest challenge you faced in your business?

RD: The challenge of all small businesses: doing what I do best while doing everything else that is required for running a business. You have to learn to lead, delegate, and trust others to do certain things so you can focus on your passion.

MR: What is a great piece of advice you received during your career?

RD: When I graduated from college, a very successful family relation told me to get a business card: “Robert Diamante, Jewelry Photographer” along with my phone number. Then pass it out and post it everywhere.

MR: What is the worst advice you received?

RD: Photograph weddings.

MR: Do you have any advice for those starting out in the jewelry/photography world?

RD: First: love what you do. Second: have a goal and attach a timeline to achieve it. Small goals add up to larger goals. Achieving goals then becomes a habit, a matter of course. Be ready to adjust as you go along. Third: hire a bookkeeper.

MR: What is your definition of “success”?

RD: Success is a bar we set for ourselves. On a fundamental level, as a business person, it’s when a client comes back. As an artist, it’s when I look at something I’ve created and I am moved. In the larger scheme of things, I would like to be known for having contributed something relevant to our industry, whatever that may end up being.

MR: Why do you think you have been successful?

RD: I am honored for the compliment. I am still working on becoming successful. But here goes: I prefer passion over fancy, longevity over expediency. I develop relationships and value trust.

Maintaining integrity and a commitment to personal growth are essential. Add talent, intuition, challenge, adversity, opportunity and persistence. Bake for 25 years.

MR: What do you want your legacy to be?

RD: Legacy. Wow! I am definitely still creating it; there is certainly more to come. Anyone who has been in our industry on any level of craft or service for more than 10 years understands the massive revolution that is occurring. All levels of retail, production, services—you name it—are being disrupted. We who are succeeding in this—and who are incorporating the opportunities into our businesses—are a part of history. I am happy to think that I am contributing to the documentation of this time period and helping my clients find their place within it.

Beyond the digital revolution is more than 50 years of rich American contemporary craft—generations. We really have been a part of something quite big haven't we? And here we are, still going.

Marlene Richey started a jewelry design firm with no prior business experience. During the 35 years since, Marlene has run a wholesale business and a retail gallery, participated in hundreds of craft and trade shows, and traveled across America selling the pair's jewelry. She has served on the boards of SNAG, CJDG, Maine Craft Association, Metalwerx and WJA. Marlene consults with artists, teaches workshops and was professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology and Maine College of Art. She is also a contributor to various jewelry and craft publications and wrote an award-winning book on running a jewelry business, *Profiting by Design*. Have a business question for Marlene? Leave it in the comments section below and she'll get back to you.