



An exhibit of Fine Silver and Vintage Jewelry to open at the BAA Gallery

Trying to name an art exhibit is a bit like trying to name a whole new business. It's a labor of love, and one hopes the right title will illustrate every facet of what is being offered. But how in the world could you pick a name if every piece was completely different than the one before – not just different colors, but unique designs and singular, handmade materials?

After much discussion and some nail biting, we arrive at “Polished and Eclectic: Fine Silver and Vintage Jewelry” by Nancy Kates and Susan Palmer, the upcoming artisan exhibition at the Beaufort Art Association. The exhibit will run from February 20 through March 31, with an opening reception on February 24 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Beaufort Art Association Gallery, 913 Bay Street.

The tale of how Nancy's work in silver ended up side by side with Susan's antique beading, in a glass case, in the town of Beaufort is a testament to how small the world really is. It was

definitely not an outcome either woman foresaw when their paths crossed three decades ago, thousands of miles from here on the other side of an international border.

Nancy Kates feels like she's had "an art project going [throughout her] whole life." There was quilting, then ten years of photography, and then she began making jewelry while she was in California. It was in Mexico, though, where she had a real breakthrough. Nancy found herself visiting cultural museums and taking classes from local artisans. Then, there was the final push that began Nancy's journey to become a silversmith. In a small shop, she discovered what she thought were breathtaking pieces. They reminded her of her own work, but they incorporated silver – not just links bought from another dealer, but silver forged right around the beads. Nancy bought a few pieces, but more than that, she wanted to do it herself. She spent years in workshop settings, learning soldering and forging, as well as how to design and duplicate designs. Her works now are a testament to what she envisioned after seeing the beautiful jewelry in that small shop. They are combinations of metal, beads, soldered clasps, and delicate silver chainmail, all sterling silver and handmade by Nancy. Highlights of her exhibit include silver chain mail bracelets and necklaces, and pieces that she has termed her signature necklaces. Only about 20 of these are available since the large, carved bone centerpieces are becoming difficult to Nancy to obtain. Each one has a different theme, featuring dragons, fish, cats, or monkeys, incorporating silver links with carved bone beads, cinnabar, jade and other carved animals.



Susan Palmer came to Beaufort straight from Mexico. While Nancy spent her time honing her metalworking abilities, Susan spent decades talking to people about beads. She dug through craft sellers' bins all over South America before moving to Mexico. As the daughter of an antiques dealer, the hunt was in her blood. Her transformation into "the Bead Lady," as she's known locally, was organic. As she explains it, she just started stringing antique buttons together and wearing them. People started to ask her about her jewelry, and before she knew it, she was giving the necklaces away. Then she started selling them. It's clear, though, that jewelry is still about the story to her. "I can't just do something plain or without any meaning [about] where it's from or where I found it," she explains. It was the stories that inspired her from the beginning. In Mexico, vendors would save beads for her once they got to know her. An indigenous man, a victim of polio, would ride the bus to her house and bring her beads he had made himself. She's the first to use the word "eclectic" to explain her style, not just as vintage or antique or any one thing. "I'm always coming up with something different." While she misses the countries of South and Central America, she's finding new stories in the Lowcountry, from river glass that she received from a friend and fell in love with to teaching young military wives the intricacies of how to bead a necklace. At the moment, her works feature chokers decorated with antique pins, colorful necklaces, and bracelets with antique accents for the coming short-sleeve weather. But Susan is the first to admit that there could be a whole new collection in 24 hours.

Despite the fact that Nancy and Susan both lived in Mexico City for several years, both making jewelry, they never met. As Nancy explains it, "She was collecting treasures for jewelry ... while I was studying Mexican handicrafts and discovering how to forge." It was Beaufort that finally brought these artisans together for this exhibition after leading lives that, like their jewelry, are most definitely polished and eclectic.

"Polished and Eclectic," a collection of sterling silver and vintage beadwork by Nancy Kates and Susan Palmer, will be featured at the Beaufort Art Association Gallery at 913 Bay Street from February 20 to March 31, with an opening reception for the public on February 24 from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Polished and Eclectic

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