



# CUFFS AROUND THE EDGES

## Two New Mexico jewelers amp up a traditional shape

**L**ike many people, I love a good accessory. I'm not really one to follow the crowd when it comes to clothes, but even though I tend toward the classics (black, denim, and more black), I still like one part of my outfit to make some sort of modern statement—usually an accessory. In my book, you can't beat jewelry. Compare me (please!) with that perennial style icon Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, wearing an understated monochrome ensemble paired with a killer necklace or large costume earrings.

So when I recently made my way through the jewelry section of the shop at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I was mesmerized by the work of Pat Pruitt and Aaron Brokeshoulder. I started mentally flipping through my closet to remember what I have that would work with the dozen pieces each of them has on display.

They have such different styles, but each in his own way takes themes or techniques from traditional jewelry design, both Native American and other, and modernizes them.



The oxidized sterling silver of Aaron Brokeshoulder's *Pleasant Moon* cuff represents the Pueblo, with a charoite stone for the moon above; water flows inside. Top: On Brokeshoulder's *Corn* bracelet, a coral medallion represents the earth, and a corn symbol is stamped on the outside; inside are sunbursts.

TED MARX, TJM IMAGING (2)

The gift shop's manager, Ira Wilson—guitarist and lead vocalist for Albuquerque's award-winning rock band Red Earth for more than a decade—likens Pruitt and Brokeshoulder to groundbreaking classic-rock guitarists such as Eddie Van Halen. "Those guitarists started with a Fender or a Les Paul, and see how innovative they were," says Wilson. "With Aaron and Pat, the basics are the same, but they're finding a way to express themselves that's uniquely them."

Of the two, Pruitt has the rock-star personality, and not just because of his hot-rod hobby. He started learning the silversmithing trade 20 years ago under traditional jewelers on the Laguna reservation in Paguete, New Mexico, an hour west of Albuquerque, but for the past 15 years he has made body-piercing jewelry of all shapes and sizes. He works in stainless steel, so when he began his own jewelry line (because he couldn't find a whole lot of what he calls "cool guy stuff" out there), he stayed with that material.

Pruitt is one of the few fine jewelers to work in stainless steel exclusively. And he does it well: He was presented with the national Couture Jewelry Award in 2007 in the alternative metals category. His stuff is undoubtedly cool. I love a great cuff bracelet, so I was really attracted to the large ones on display at the Cultural Center, one with a timing belt along the top, another with stingray skin. Pruitt's materials take the cuff shape to a whole new modern edge.

"I am always looking for work that pushes the envelope. I loved Pat's work immediately because his quality of



Pat Pruitt's stainless-steel tire-tread-design cuff. Below, right: Pruitt's modern sensibility has led him to create stainless cuffs with timing belt (top) and black stingray skin. Below, left: Under the charoite spider on this cuff of Brokeshoulder's is a cutout of the North Star; inside he has stamped planets and stars.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF PAT PRUITT (3); TED MARX, TJM IMAGING





Symbolic storytelling is integral to Aaron Brokeshoulder's work.

workmanship was superb, because it is based on the traditional but goes to the extreme," says Victoria Price, owner of Victoria Price Art & Design in Santa Fe and daughter of film legend and noted art collector Vincent Price. Her gallery showcases contemporary home decor, art, and jewelry and has featured Pruitt's work for five years.

"He's part of a new generation of artists whose work will not just be associated with being Native American or from the Southwest," she continues, "but will be seen as having national and even international appeal—even as their heritage makes their work more compelling to many."

Pruitt also makes thinner cuffs inlaid with copper, silver, and/or 24kt gold, and here's where you'll notice some of the Native influence in his work. He says I hit the nail on the head when I tell him I see rivers and mountains represented in the thin undulating lines. Often, though, he bucks

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conventional design in favor of what he calls "badassness." Says Pruitt, "I take a different approach to my work because with stainless steel there is no tradition."

Aaron Brokeshoulder, on the other hand, creates designs very much rooted in tradition. I'm drawn instantly to a polished sterling-silver cuff that has rectangular coral inlays along the length, a center medallion of a raised coral, and Native symbols stamped into the inner and outer surfaces of the bracelet.

The symbolic storytelling is integral to Brokeshoulder's work—and fits the jeweler, whose personality seems more like roadie, or lyricist, if his friend Pruitt is lead guitar. One bracelet tells of dancers asking a turtle for the blessing of rain. Another depicts two spiders meeting for mating. "I heard stories from my great-grandpa before he passed away, and I incorporate that stuff into my jewelry," says Brokeshoulder, who works in his garage studio in Albuquerque. He learned smithing from his father at his Santo Domingo Pueblo home. Working his way up until he began designing on his own, Brokeshoulder has now won many art-market awards—and a national following.

"Aaron's jewelry is a combination of a continuing approach to tradition that doesn't necessarily stay in the box," says IPCC shop manager Wilson. "He likes to hang on the edge." And that's exactly where the next cuff I see goes. Also in a traditional shape, this one has a dark, pebbled surface: oxidized silver. It's a relatively new technique for him, one that resembles sand-casting. Brokeshoulder retains the stamped symbols on the inside of this piece, but the outside has three raised lines—rivers—and four raised dots, which stand for the four directions (north, south, east, and west, traditional Native symbolism).

Both Brokeshoulder and Pruitt are hanging on so many edges in their work—in technique, design, and material. I can't wait to see their next breakthroughs, but for now I just like dreaming about which one would look best out of the glass cabinet and around my wrist. ✿

FROM LEFT: KATE RUSSELL; LEE MARMON

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