John Nels Hatleberg: Art, Artifice, and a Passion for Gems

BY ANDREA DINOTO

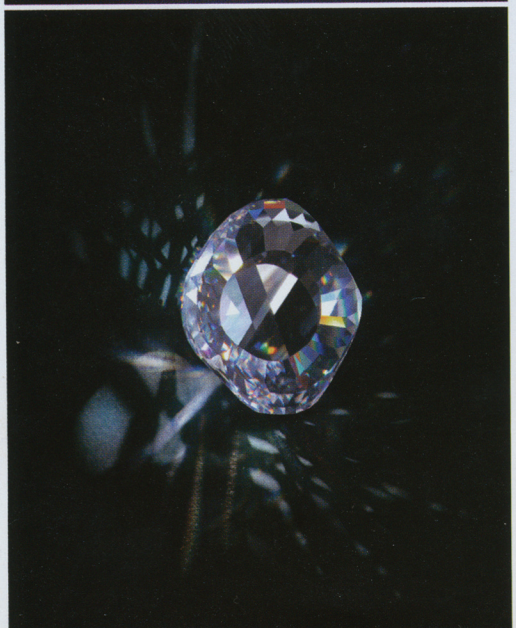
Green Lantern Ring
diamonds, pearls, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, tourmalines, spinels, red emeralds, pallasite peridot
1 ¼ x 1 x 1 ½"
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO

Moldavite and pearl Pin
moldavite, South Sea Pearl, seed pearls, 18k gold
2 ¼ x 1 ⅞ x 1"
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO

JOHN HATLEBERG'S CONSUMMATE skill as a counterfeiter is much in demand, not by underworld characters but by museums, collectors, and prominent jewelers around the globe who know him as the world's foremost creator of replica diamonds. His faux gems, which he describes as "visually indistinguishable from the originals," are copies of stones so extraordinary that they almost always have names, and often histories—famous and infamous. Using a proprietary process he developed in 1987, Hatleberg has replicated no less than the Smithsonian's deep sapphire-blue Hope diamond, the 1851 Koh-i-Noor (part of the British Crown Jewels), and the 273-carat Centenary (the largest D-flawless diamond in history). The more than 30 storied gems can be viewed on his website in all their eye-dazzling glory. The replicas (made of synthetic, and sometimes gem, material) are valued primarily as indelible records of the true stones and also for security or sometimes display purposes. In one case—the details must remain secret—a Hatleberg replica was used to ransom a kidnapped owner of the original.

Tony's Hope (Hope Diamond replica), 2010
1 x ⅞ x ½"
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO

Koh-i-Noor, diamond replica, 2006
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO



But diamonds represent just one facet, so to speak, of Hatleberg's seemingly inborn gemological passion. He grew up in the Washington, D.C., area, where his mother worked at the Smithsonian. The household was filled with art books, one of which, Ian Balfour's *Famous Diamonds*, struck a chord in young John's mind. Encouraged by his parents, who provided him with his own cutting machine at age 10, Hatleberg proved himself a precocious lapidary. He benefitted from mentors at the Smithsonian, and until college made a serious study of geology. Drawn as well to the world of art, he was the first and presumably only Cranbrook Academy of Art student to use minerals and gemstones as his basic sculptural material ("They called me Mica Man," he recalls of his time pursuing a master's degree at the school.)

Today Hatleberg, 50, derives the bulk of his income from his diamond replica commissions, but he devotes himself just as intensely to the creation of artworks using gems and minerals as basic materials. He also designs unique pieces of jewelry by commission only, and collects unusual gem, mineral, and fossil specimens, which sometimes find their way into his art. One gets a sense of how all this gem-fueled passion hangs together when visiting his apartment in a posh high-rise building across from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Hatleberg is genial, casual, and low-key, pleased to usher a guest into his formal dining room, which also functions as an exhibition space, albeit one with a jewel-box ambiance. The room's French doors are held open by two astonishing three-foot-tall amethyst geodes shaped like rearing serpents and the walls are entirely covered in muted gold leaf (applied, he says, by an artisan who does such work for mosques in Jerusalem). Artworks displayed around the room include a "painting" made by layering tourmaline flowers on a rose quartz "canvas," the whole set in a goldplated pyrite frame. A side table holds various tableaux assembled from "found" gems, that is, nuggets, baroque pearls, and crystals that mimic recognizable forms. In one such tableau, *St. Francis Preaching to the Birds,* several large and lustrous freshwater pearls have been selected for their cartoonish resemblance, variously, to a kneeling man, a duck, a bird in flight, stars, puffy cloud formations, and one bubbly Dr. Seussian creature. All are set—glued, actually; Hatleberg can be startlingly casual—to a slab of shimmering opal about the size of an iPad. The incongruous effect is that of a piece of naïve art interpreted by a slightly mad jeweler. In another tableau, *The Golden Calf* (2008), a naturally formed gold nugget in the shape of a calf is mounted on a jagged piece of iron meteorite, together with specimens of silver and copper, to form an amalgam of the biblical narratives of the Burning Bush and the Golden Calf. Hatleberg delights in the irony that although the original golden calf was made by man as a graven image (to be worshipped by the Israelites while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the ten Commandments), his was "made by God," and thus "a wonderful jibe at religion." In stark contrast is an abstract sculpture: a grouping of slender black towers constructed from stacks of naturally occurring, roughly half-inch-square cubic crystals of Spanish pyrite.

In each of these works—including one in which a real hummingbird's nest is arranged with nest-shaped mineral formations, and another comprised of tiny penis- and vagina-shaped columns of pearls set up as if for a square dance—Hatleberg shows how both biological and abstract forms were prefigured in the creation of the universe and exist today as gemological phenomena. As a gemologist, he is also interested in how ancient cultures incorporated gems and minerals into their belief systems. Inspired by a pre-Columbian Incan account that speaks of entire gardens recreated in silver and gold, Hatleberg took real corn cobs, complete with husks, and replaced the kernels with lustrous pearls to create a conceptual jewel in which gems honor the Incas' reverence for their life-sustaining crop.

While the dining room serves as a display area, a small bedroom functions as Hatleberg's unlikely studio, where high-tech activity takes place in a decidedly low-tech environment. To cross the threshold, one has to step on a slab of petrified wood about the size of a small scatter-rug. This hunk of fossilized tree is a gleaming gemstone streaked with earthy tones of gold, black, and brown, in which the original wood has been replaced, over eons of life on Earth, with a crystalline mineral substance. It is, quite literally, a stepping stone into Hatleberg's inner sanctum. Here the replica diamonds are produced, but the setting is far from pristine, as might have been expected. In fact, it's a bit of a mess. This is surprising, as each replica demands intense concentration and technical exactitude, not to mention incredible patience (months, per gem, at the faceting wheel; 14 months on the Centenary Diamond alone). Hatleberg's method requires making silicon molds of the original diamond from which every facet can be mapped. (The real gem is never on his person or in his studio.) A casting made from the mold is used to produce a replica in a measure-and-cut procedure. Hatleberg sits at an Ultra Tec faceting machine mounted incongruously on a funky, gold-leafed round table he describes as a "Baroque baldachino," a repurposed canopied structure that he discovered on the Lower East Side. "I think of it as a UFO," he says, "a transporter to another realm." Working at the Ultra Tec, he enters what in his words sounds like an altered state. "When the wheel is spinning and the motor humming it's hypnotic," he says. "My mind is free to think about my life, generally, and the people in my life. I feel that I'm cutting the people I love into the stone; I think some of that energy goes into my gems and makes them more powerful, that gems take on a patina of the lives that pass through them."

Arrayed in front of him on the baldachino are dozens of Hatleberg's favorite gemological treasures and curiosities, objects that suit his self-described "wunderkammer sensibility," ranging from gemstone eggs and baroque pearls to a tiny "Christmas tree" composed entirely of sparkling Colombian emerald crystals. Hatleberg mentions cryptically that the tree sits on "a slice of the planet Mercury," explaining when pressed that the material had been found to contain " isotopes of carbon and hydrogen that don't exist on Earth." Set unobtrusively on the studio floor is one of Hatleberg's

Chrysocolla Nest, 2005
South Sea pearl, hummingbird nest, chrysocolla.
2 ½ x 7 x 3 ¼"
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO

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The Golden Calf, 2008
gold, silver, copper,
meteoritic iron specimens
4 x 4 x 4 ½"
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO

Mineral Kingdom, 1988
mineral specimens with hematite,
graphite, mica, rutile in resin
9 ½ x 8 ½ x 4"
PHOTO: JOHN HATLEBERG

major artworks: a black box called *The Mineral Kingdom*, his homage to Joseph Cornell's *Taglioni's Jewel Casket*, a surrealist work in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Cornell's felt-lined box, filled with three rows of glass ice cubes fitted into slots, honors the nineteenth-century Italian dancer Marie Taglioni, whose carriage was stopped, as legend has it, by a Russian highwayman requesting she dance for him on the snow. In Hatleberg's version, the box itself is made of resin that has been filled with powders of different minerals. Inside, rows of identical black cubelike forms serve as pedestals, each for a different mineral specimen. Calcite, azurite, malachite, pyromorphite...the names mystify the amateur, but when spoken have the effect of an incantation, which may be exactly the result Hatleberg intends. In every sense, the box is a microcosm of Hatleberg's world, offering a sampling of the Earth's riches and beauty in all its brilliant color, form, and mystery. As if to provide a portal into this mystery, Hatleberg created the equivalent of a scrying (fortune-telling) stone, basically a slice of a meteorite polished to a mirror finish. He explains that a meteorite (a rock that falls to Earth) is a "solid ball of iron and nickel alloys" formed over hundreds of millions of years of cooling. "I thought if I made [this particular specimen] into a mirror," he says, "it would be like looking into all time."

Flower Painting, 2000
tourmaline, rose quartz, gold leafed pyrite, quartz, peridot
24 ¾ x 24 ¾"
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO

This sense of gemological awe also imbues Hatleberg's far-from-ordinary jewelry designs. For an engagement ring—"the single most powerful jewelry form," he says—he chose fulgurite, a type of mineral formed when lightning strikes sand. Writing on his web site, Hatleberg notes that this "lightning bolt" ring delighted the couple, who "liked the allusion that they would be wearing the harnessed power of lightning to represent their love." Hatleberg defines jewelry rather broadly. For a family—husband, wife, and two daughters—he designed a *Chart Gem,* in which a faceted sapphire nestles in a cluster of amethyst crystals that line a fragment of eggshell: the two gems are the parents' birthstones, while the faceting is based on the daughters' astrological charts. Originally conceived as a freestanding piece, Hatleberg eventually made it into a pendant. Asked if he's ever designed a piece of jewelry for himself, he produces his outrageously extravagant and oversized *Green Lantern* ring composed of a "kitchen sink" of jewels. The flaring flat-topped form of the massive 18-karat gold base, entirely pavéd with emeralds, rubies, diamonds, sapphires, spinels, and tourmalines, provides a stage for six huge gemstones that perch on top like spaceships on a landing pad. Hatleberg has subsequently made four similar rings for one client, an artist, who wanted a different one for each season of the year. It would be hard to upstage such a showpiece, but Hatleberg managed to do it with *She Jewel,* an event in which a seminude model was adorned with 30,000 tiny gems affixed to a diaphanous adhesive garment. Done for a photo shoot, and with assistants, this ephemeral creation now exists only as photographic evidence of Hatleberg's audacity with his chosen medium.

As a collector of unusual gem, mineral, and fossil specimens, Hatleberg searches for extraordinary examples at

the annual gem shows in Tucson, Arizona, at which dealers converge from around the world. A notable find can become a piece of jewelry, as did a keshi pearl with the anatomical shape of a human heart, complete with aorta and pulmonary vein, made into a pendant. Hatleberg describes such natural specimens as "my sculptures," just as an art collector would refer to prized acquisitions. Most precious and extremely rare among them is a blue-green opalized snail fossil from Australia, six to eight million years old. "With its Fibonacci display," says Hatleberg, "it seems to concern the miracle of life." The fossilization process, in which a living creature like the snail can be alchemized into a jewel, fascinates Hatleberg and suggests to him that gems can be equated to life itself. The evidence can be as miniscule as a rabbit's tooth fossilized to pure turquoise, or as massive as a ram's skull turned entirely to selenite, a variety of gypsum. Pure white with curving horns intact, the head was found in a salty Australian lake, where fossil hunters troll regularly for such crystallized specimens. It is now displayed prominently among Hatleberg's and his wife Rise's impressive collections of antiques.

In his treatise *On Love*, the nineteenth-century French writer Stendhal speaks metaphorically of "the birth of love" as an abstract event in which the love object is crystallized in the mind. In Hatleberg's world, where crystallization is a concrete reality, the love object occupies time and space. Witness his most arresting specimen, a voluptuous, three-dimensional chalcedony "flower" whose softly glittering quartz-filled cavity bears an uncanny resemblance to a vagina. In gemspeak, this is a botryoidal formation common to Arizona, where similar, if less explicit, specimens are referred to as desert roses. Hatleberg acquired it at a gem show in Tuscon, at one of the many hotels hosting gem, mineral, and bead dealers. "I was told to go to this particular dealer," he says, "and as I was arriving, two women walked past me that looked like young hippies." As he entered the dealer's room and took up the specimen to examine it, the dealer exclaimed, "Did you see them? Those two women have been praying to the thing for 45 minutes!" Hatleberg explained that this was exactly what he had come to buy. "I've seen hundreds of chalcedony flowers," he says, "but this one was wonderfully vaginal." No doubt the two women felt the same, even worshipful at the sight of such a astonishing natural formation in which the essence of love, sex, and generative power had been, quite literally, crystallized.

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Furthermore:
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Opal Snail
PHOTO: TONY PETTINATO

Malachite Vagina, 1992
malachite, serpentine
4 ¾ x 5 ½ x 1 ¾"
PHOTO: KEITH SCOTT MORTON