

JANINE

VOICE OF THE NORTH >

GIBBONS

Curated by Sandra Evertson



**Janine Gibbons** identifies as an artist of the Inside Passage of the Northwest Coast of North America. Her jewelry designs and artwork are a natural extension of what she sees and experiences in her environment, as well as her abiding love and respect for the beauty and complexities of nature.

As a resident of Petersburg, Alaska, a small fishing village nestled between glaciers and mountains on the northern tip of Mitkof Island, Gibbons is able to draw inspiration from the simplest of activities. Perhaps a walk along the beach fringed with sand and shimmering dark blue mussels. The sound of seaweed popping between her feet. Or the graceful movement of eagles soaring above her head as raucous ravens and curious seals flit to and fro in the strata below.

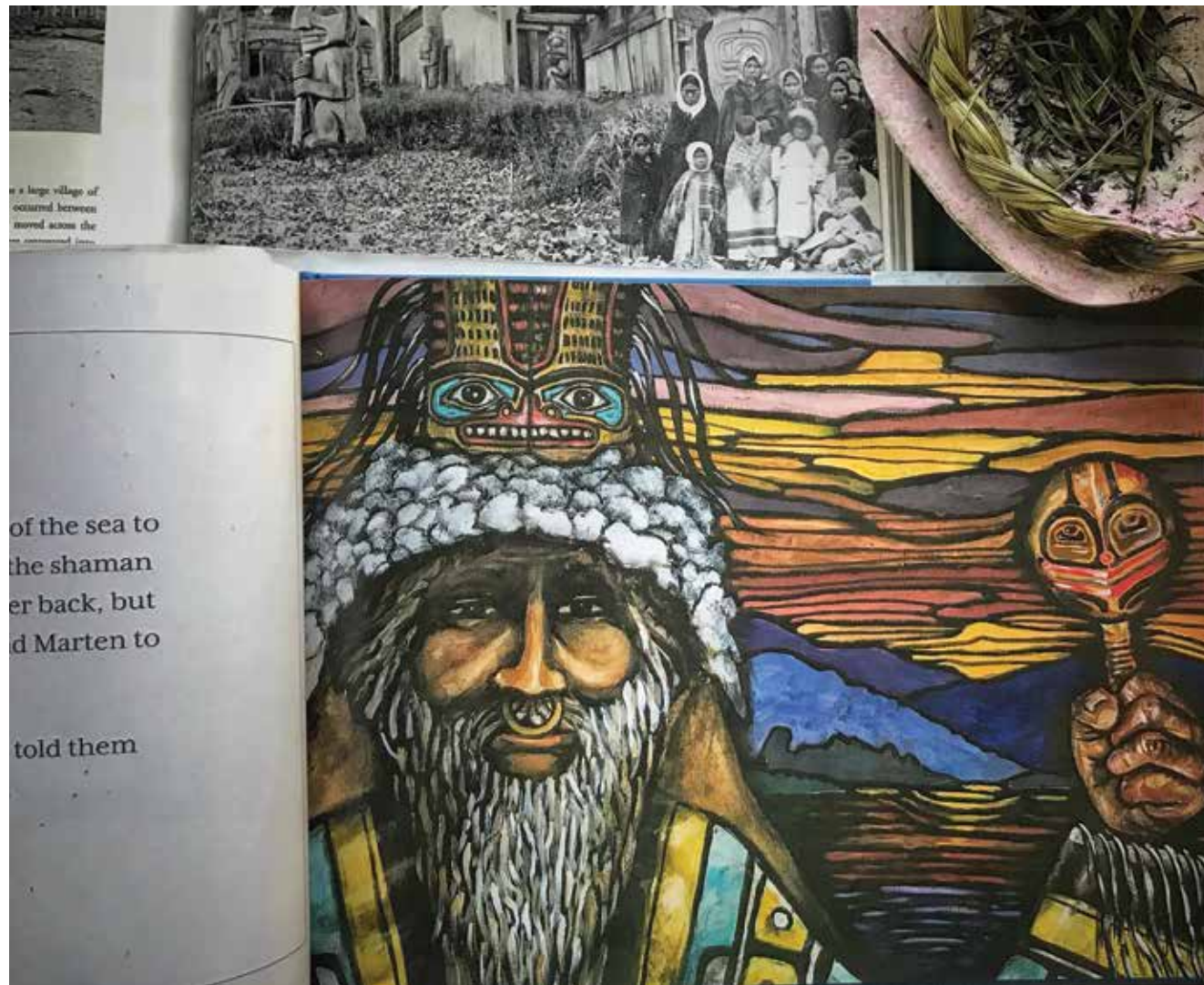
Like her ancestors, the Haida people, she feels fortunate to "live where her feet are." Influenced by a formal education that ranged from philosophy to biology, the entirety of her life has been spent creating art. She has illustrated two children's books, "The Woman Carried Away by Killer Whales," and "The Woman Who Married the Bear," both of which help promote and preserve the oral traditions and stories of the indigenous tribes of Southeastern Alaska, including the Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian.

Janine attempts to merge all of her experiences into her works in order to assist others in telling their own stories through art. "Like the burning of dried cedar branches," she says, "I try to ignite sparks of happiness and connection through my creations."



**EVER SINCE I FIRST LAID MY EYES ON A PENTAX K100 MANUAL-LOADING CAMERA IN HIGH SCHOOL, I HAVE DEVOTED MYSELF TO BEING A PHOTOGRAPHER, ARTIST AND ARDENT PRESERVER OF HISTORY.** It was love at first sight. I'd signed up to take a yearbook class and quickly found myself interested—and later obsessed—with documenting history.

The past, present and future continues to inspire my work as a professional jewelry designer, a career path I have been dutifully pursuing for over 15 years. That being said, the actual name of my business has changed over the years.



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Initially, my business began as J. Jewelry Designs due to the help I received from my mother, Jackie, my brother Jeremy and sister, Jessica. Later, as I became more independent, I changed its name to Janine Gibbons Designs to encompass all of my work.

Today, my entire business is built around creating meaningful art, whether it's the physical pieces I create in the form of jewelry, illustrations, paintings and photographs, or the duties I've chosen to embrace as a teacher, mom, healer and activist. My ultimate aim is to document the island communities of Southeast Alaska using all these tools of my trade.

I arrived at this path via a circuitous route. After graduating high school, I was crowned Miss Alaska National Teenager in 1995 and then spent a year abroad as a Rotary exchange student in Mainz, Germany.

When I returned home, the pageant provided me a college scholarship to study at the Art Institute of Seattle, where I graduated with an Associate of Applied Arts. Then on a lark, I went to work as a deckhand on small cruise

ships and yachts that sailed from Alaska down to Baja, California. I had built up enough sea time to get my 100-ton Mate license, but decided I needed to get serious about life, so I went back to school while working as a bartender.

Unfortunately, just as I was preparing to graduate with a degree in elementary education, a seizure disorder that I had been grappling with began to spiral out of control. This changed my life and my way of thinking. One semester before graduation, I took what would later amount to a 10-year break from college and started making jewelry for income.

The initial spark that ignited my interest in jewelry production was a handmade necklace my brother created for me. That very special gift inspired me to start crafting my own pieces, a passion that continues to inspire me to this very day.

For me, jewelry is a bridge that links my love for paint and photography with my passion for wearable art. I feel my mission is to help others see their own beauty as well as the beauty that surrounds them. When I see a beautiful



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**I WANT TO EMPOWER YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS TO CREATE AND DOCUMENT THEIR OWN FAMILY STORIES THROUGH ARTISTRY.**  
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rock, shell, flower, bird or combination of colors that vibrate with life, I want to capture it and distill it down into whatever medium I am working with at the moment.

Transforming my passions into a viable career was no easy task. The first step I needed to take in making my business a reality was to purchase the appropriate tools and materials I needed to start working. I did a lot of research on certain applications and traditional techniques, but in the end, I came up with my process, including my own unique enameling technique. It was by experimenting—as opposed to following prescribed directions—that I ultimately found my way.

Sometimes my experiments worked out, but other times they flat-out failed. I persevered by making a conscious effort to view these failures as “muscle building” exercises, a means of “strengthening” my art. I’ve had many mentors along the way, but I feel especially connected to my ancestors and their particular stories. I believe their enthusiasm for life has kept me going. Whenever I feel down, I remember how much they sacrificed for me to be here. And in the end, I simply want to make them proud.

Surprisingly enough, my greatest growth and creativity have been a product of dealing with the hardships of owning and running my own business. One time, while still in the early years of my business, I operated a retail



## CHOOSE SUCCESS

› **JUST SAY YES.** Whenever an opportunity to travel or learn more about your business arises, take it. Later, you can be more choosy. In the beginning, you need to connect with as many people as you can.

› **CLEAR THE AIR.** If there are groups of artists congregating—no matter who they are—go check it out. Most artists bottle themselves up inside their minds, so remind yourself that it's a good thing, every so often, to leave your house or studio.

› **REJUVINATE.** Do whatever gets your creative juices flowing. Dance with your headphones on if that's what it takes. I do it all the time!

› **DO IT ALL.** Apply for everything. When I first became an enamellist, it was because I applied for a grant. I didn't get the grant, but the application process made me consider all the tools I might purchase if I won the \$5,000 award. Once that seed was planted, there was no turning back. I saved the money and bought the equipment I needed.

› **BE FRUGAL.** Create the least amount of waste possible by keeping a tidy work environment. Create art in an environmentally conscious way.

› **WORK THE ANGLES.** Develop the quickest, most efficient and simultaneously meticulous way to complete tasks. This will save you lots of time and bring a high level of quality to everything you produce.

› **LISTEN.** Be open to suggestions, but remember that you don't need to adopt them. If what people say doesn't vibrate well with your heart, then likely it isn't the right thing for you.

› **FORWARD MARCH.** Always push forward toward innovation. Don't be afraid to combine old techniques with new equipment. The best discoveries are made when you pioneer a new path.

› **SET FINANCIAL GOALS.** You need to keep money coming in. Alternate your roster of expensive, time-consuming projects alongside the more affordable projects that can be produced more quickly.



## WISE WORDS

“Mom, you see everything in rainbows. What I mean to say is, you see all the fun that we can have.”

— Reid Johannes Ruecker, Age 10

store in Ketchikan, Alaska. A woman came in and made a comment to her friend as she looked at my work that I won't soon forget. “I could do that,” she said to her friend.

Which got me thinking. Yes, she could possibly copy my designs, but could she make 1,000 pieces on a tight deadline? Could she come up with a litany of different colors, patterns and variations? Could she package her pieces, get insurance, market them, retail them, and pay for employees to help sell them? Would she know the history of a particular piece and take the time to thoughtfully convey it, live it and breathe it?

I concluded she could not. But that temporary aside reminded me that I had, indeed, walked through the proverbial fire and come back to tell about it!

Fortunately, my seizures subsided to a manageable level over time. Days passed. Months. Years. Compile all that time, and it becomes a 15-year timeline of failures, successes, heartbreaks, babies, marriage and divorce. It all led me to where I am today. I'm proud, for example, that my work can be found at the Smithsonian American Art Museum: Renwick Gallery Store, the Seattle Art Museum and many more fine stores and galleries around the country. If anything, I've begun to more clearly see the fruits of my labors over recent months.

I recently took a break from making jewelry for the first time in 15 years to work on illustrating two culturally based children's books for Sealaska Heritage Institute in Juneau, Alaska, as part of their Baby Raven Reads program. In the meantime, one of my photographs was published in “National Fisherman” magazine. In addition, I just found out I will be illustrating another children's book for Sealaska Heritage based on a traditional oral narrative. I am also planning future projects that communicate the Haida worldview of how our people traveled from the Inside Passage up to the Aleutian Islands and also to



Hawaii and back by canoe. I've been meeting with community members and elders from many different towns and villages throughout the region. When I gather this information, I meet with lots of friends, talk with them during long walks, listen to music and pray that all the work I have done will speak for itself.

Sometimes, I even do the speaking myself. I am excited about the prospect of speaking and teaching in schools in Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Canada, (where my tribe is from), as well as throughout Southeastern Alaska, (where I was born and raised).

My life has, therefore, been a delicate balancing act. It's been said women are like octopuses—we have so many things to juggle. Our brains fire in so many directions, all at once, but through yoga, prayer, meditation, physical exertion, good food and loving, supportive people, I've found balance. Which is more proof, I'd argue, that there is no straight path to the finish line of success—only the will to keep pushing ahead.



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