Contemporary art jewelry is so hot, it’s on fire. On any given day, galleries and major museums in the US and abroad exalt art jewelry via exhibitions and acquisitions. Each calendar year is punctuated by several high profile contemporary jewelry art and design events—from the venerable SCHMUCK in Munich, Germany, going strong after over 50 years, with an exclusive focus on jewelry design; to the younger JOYA Barcelona Art Jewellery Fair in Spain and the SIERAAD International Art Jewellery Fair in the Netherlands; to the Museum of Arts and Design’s LOOT: MAD about Art Jewellery exhibition and sale in New York City; to the annual Smithsonian Craft Show in Washington, DC, the Philadelphia Museum of Art Contemporary Craft Show, the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG) yearly conference, and the Sculptural Objects Functional Art and Design (SOFA) fair in Chicago. These are just some of the many opportunities around the world to feast your senses on innovative, thrilling, and extraordinary contemporary art jewelry.

Artists today place virtually no restrictions on their work. All materials are put to use; no topic is off-limits; the definition of wearability is tested and stretched. Fashioning a small but compelling niche in contemporary art jewelry, artists are deftly and sensitively using fiber and textile elements. They seize the sculptural and textural qualities of fiber and of textile techniques and manipulate them in exquisite ways, creating on the scale of necklaces, earrings, brooches, bracelets, and rings.

Meet five international contemporary artists of different generations engaging in definitive mark-making on the art jewelry field today.

Mina Kang, South Korea
Mina Kang creates brooches and necklaces that are structurally complex and explosively colorful. Made of ramie fabric, traditionally used in Korea for woven summer
clothing, each of Kang’s jewelry works is composed of multitudes of cylindrical and cubical shapes meticulously hand-stitched together. Barnacle- and fractal-like in appearance, these objects have multiple planes, angles, and perspectives. A 2013 Metalwork & Jewelry MFA graduate of Kookmin University in South Korea, Kang says that each new necklace and brooch begins with a hand-drawn blueprint—not surprising, given her work’s architectural leanings. She creates with precision and boldness, yet the textile materiality of each piece imbues the jewelry with unmistakable lightness, softness, and a certain buoyancy. Akin to Cubist artists whose echoes are visible in her jewelry, Kang finds meaning, comfort, and fulfillment in abstracting emotions and feelings she experiences into geometric forms. Ascribing color to sentiments, she dissects and rearranges them in cloth, and then reassembles and stitches them into new combinations and sequences.

Kang has participated in multiple group exhibitions and received awards and recognition in Asia and Europe, and had her first solo exhibition in South Korea in 2015. Her work appears in the famed art jewelry collection of Karl Bollmann. Kang is an artist whose early collections intrigue and impress.

Anke Hennig, Germany
“The origin of life is a growing cell. The origin of my jewelry is a fine thread [...],” says Anke Hennig of her delicate, feather-weight collection of earrings, necklaces, and brooches made of cotton, nylon, polyester, and rayon thread. Taking cues from a braiding technique developed in Germany in the 19th century, Hennig has adapted, modified, and harnessed the technique to form the core around which her entire body of work is conceived.

Whereas the centuries old passament braided trims often exhibited florid scroll motifs, Hennig puts a streamlined spin on her work, paring things down to variations on one main shape—that of a spiral. Unlike the stiff neck ruffs of 17th century Spain that she references, her jewelry pieces have flexibility and weightlessness. They appear to levitate above the wrist, below the ear, and around the neck. There is an exuberance and a playfulness to them, but their design is resolved and not guilty of either levity or frivolity.

Hennig’s jewelry has a likeness to living, breathing organisms, and to a quality of specimens grown in a lab or cultivated in a futuristic nursery. She plays with shapes that have the accordion pleats of gilled fungi, and with forms that are reminiscent of cellular structures, of capillaries. She cites the DNA double helix as a principle in her designs, and the themes of growth and repetition permeate her work.

She completed undergraduate studies in textile design and graduate studies in jewelry (University of Art and Design Burg Giebichstein, Halle, Germany). Hennig has exhibited widely in Germany and made appearances in exhibitions and events in other European countries, the UK, and the US. She has also been part of LOOT at MAD in New York City. Most recently, her art jewelry was seen at the 2015 SIERAAD Art Fair in Amsterdam.
Myung Urso, United States

Recognized as one of America’s best art jewelers, Myung Urso has a record of professional accomplishment that extends beyond the jewelry realm. She has awards from the Smithsonian Craft Show and the American Craft Council Show, and is represented by such acclaimed galleries as Snyderman-Works (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Velvet Da Vinci (San Francisco, California), and Pistachios (Chicago, Illinois). With graduate degrees in Fiber Arts (1986, Hongik University, South Korea) and Museum/Gallery Management (1995, City University, London, UK), Urso worked for years as an editor, curator, and gallery owner. She was deeply committed in each of these roles to promoting contemporary fine craft, but she longed for a personal creative outlet. She found it in art jewelry ten years ago.

Fiber, textiles, and stitching have been either protagonists or among the main cast of characters in all of her art jewelry. This is evident in her earliest pieces that feature calligraphy on cotton or silk, her later use of linen, hanji paper, and loofah, as well as in the most recent collections that pair wood, paper, and thread. Urso speaks with awe of the textural and sculptural richness of fiber as material. She singles out sewing and stitching for their intrinsic duality of being almost primitive in execution but extremely sophisticated in application and function.

Urso’s collections of necklaces, bracelets, and brooches have a very finely tuned sense of composition and balance. She uses the golden ratio and the tension and interdependence of shapes, colors, and scale with virtuoso deftness. Pairing seemingly incongruous materials and disparate elements, she creates hybrids of such visual attractiveness that their existence seems inevitable. Urso doesn’t hesitate to treat textile, thread, and fiber as canvas, as conduit, or as message. Lately, her interests have pivoted toward using found objects in her jewelry, while stitching and fiber have remained a constant presence.

MYUNG URSO
Neckpiece—Floating
Cotton, silk, thread, sterling silver, sewing, soldering. 7.5” x 1.25” x 3”, 2012.
Photo: Tim J. Fuss.
RIGHT: MYUNG URSO
Neckpiece—Winter Breath
Cotton, gesso, thread, sterling silver, soldering.
6" x 24" x 2.75", 2013.
Photo: Matt Wittmeyer.

INSET: MYUNG URSO
Brooch—Horizon
Canvas, acrylic paint, sterling silver, painting, soldering.
3.75" x 3.2" x 0.6", 2010.
Photo: Tim J. Fuss.
ABOVE: Inni Pärnänen Necklaces Leather, silver, 3.5” x .78” x 23.6”, 2016.

BELOW LEFT: Inni Pärnänen Necklace—A Token of Summer Birch bark, plywood, silver, silk ribbon, 7” x 1.2”, 2014. Private collection, US.

BELOW RIGHT: Inni Pärnänen Bracelets Plywood, 4.7” x 2.7”, 2015. Private collections, US.

All rights reserved by Inni Pärnänen ©
Inni Pärnänen, Finland

Formally trained as a traditional goldsmith in the 1990s, Inni Pärnänen still employs metals liberally in several bodies of work. The way she manipulates steel and silver, however, has distinct echoes of the textile world. There are folds and creases in her recycled metal necklaces, and pleats in her steel mesh brooches. A recent collection focuses on plywood elements stitched with thread. Pärnänen has also worked with paper and parchment to create jewelry pieces that have an eerie, weighted translucency to them. Some bring to mind an entomologist’s laboratory or an herbarium; others, like the Extra Organs series (made exclusively of parchment, silk thread, and mother of pearl) have a hint of a pathologist’s quarters.

Pärnänen approaches her work less like a designer who has conquered her materials and more as an artist who is probed and challenged by them. Though she has developed a recognizable style and prefers to work with natural materials above all, she is not loyal to any one technique, material, or concept. Does Pärnänen see herself as an innovator, a visual artist, a sculptor, a designer? She acknowledges that her work is propelled by innovation, grounded in design and contemporary craft, but, she says: “I often leave the definition to my audience.”

Her education as a goldsmith at Lahti Design Institute, Finland (1995) was followed by a master’s degree in design from the University of Art and Design, Helsinki (1998). Pärnänen has exhibited widely in Europe and has appeared in the US, including at LOOT at MAD in NYC and recently at Bijoux! 2016 at Norton Museum of Art in Florida.
ABOVE: BEPPE KESSLER Pleat Brooch Textile, graphite, acrylic color, 2.75" x 2.75," 1998.

BELOW: BEPPE KESSLER Overvloed Gold, steel, acrylic color, balsa wood, cotton, hand stitching, 2.9" x 3.5" x 1.4", 2011.
Beppe Kessler, The Netherlands
Since her 1979 graduation in Textiles from Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, Beppe Kessler has produced a staggering oeuvre as a jeweler who paints, and a painter who makes art jewelry. She has had countless solo and group exhibitions over the past three and a half decades, and her work is in the collections of several museums, including the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and TextielMuseum in Tilburg. Kessler’s signature style—of geometric forms, color-stacking, inclusions, and a superlative command of her materials—has remained recognizable, though her approaches and techniques have evolved a number of times. In the 1980s, her collections included beading and weaving techniques. In 1997, she received the Herbert Hofmann Prize for a collection of brooches in which she used textiles as settings for stones. More recently, she has worked with wood, acrylic paint, and paper (brooches made from newspaper cuttings of weather reports collected by her late father).

Kessler says that even when her jewelry does not use fiber per se, fiber is implicitly present as the impetus for handling other materials. She explains that when stone or wood is pierced, as though with a threaded needle, it gains a new tactility. When stone and wood are carved, their soft curves resemble those of fabric. For Kessler, the humble stitch is worthy of veneration—it is both elemental and charged with infinite possibilities. She is an iconoclast of sorts in the field of jewelry; she does not use soldering in her work, relying on other less conventional methods of building and joining the components of her jewelry.

Like many in the art jewelry world, Kessler sees bodily adornment as just one of several functions that her necklaces and brooches perform. She is confident that they are objects that can and should stand on their own, as sculpture, as art.

Anke Hennig www.ankehennig.de
Mina Kang www.minakang.pe.kr
Beppe Kessler www.beppekessler.nl
Inni Pärnänen www.inni.fi
Myung Urso www.myungurso.com
America Craft Council www.craftcouncil.org
LOOT: MAD about Jewelry www.madmuseum.org/loot
JOYA Barcelona Art Jewelry Fair www.joyabarccelona.com
Philadelphia Museum of Art Contemporary Craft Show www.pmacraftshow.org
SIERAAD International Art Jewellery Fair www.sieraadartfair.com
SNAG www.snagmetalsmith.org
SOFA Chicago www.sofaexpo.com

—Elena Rosenberg is an artist, award-winning designer, curator, arts advocate, and collector of contemporary fine craft based in Scarsdale, NY. She currently serves on the Board of Directors at Surface Design Association. www.elenarosenberg.com