

BY NINA HEMPHILL REEDER

Like a hidden gem, D. Muscio Fine Jewelry Studio, a five-year-old custom-jewelry boutique, sits in the budding Brookhaven community, where Buckhead's prestige transitions seamlessly into colorful Chamblee. It's a far cry from your average jewelry store, in which diamonds seem best preserved in the frosty temperaments of sales associates. Instead, the studio lends the impression of a quaint art gallery with soft white walls and several mounts and fixtures, exhibiting a sample selection of "wearable artwork" from owner and head designer Dawn Muscio. In fact, the only intimidating presence might come from Muscio's newest staff member, Duncan, a 4-foot-something Great Dane, who from time to time makes appearances at the studio; but who is utterly harmless, according to Muscio.

And like her massive pup Duncan, Muscio is just as friendly, except she's just a wee bit taller at 5-foot, 1-inch. And she's the source of some of the most original fine jewelry donning the necklines and fingers of Atlantans in the know. With her esteemed Pratt Institute training in the art and an additional years of professional experience, Muscio can boast that all of her pieces—from rings, necklaces, cufflinks, pendants and more—are done in-house by hand.

While much of the studio's works are private custom commissions, Muscio does offer a small line of pieces like her signature eternal love pendants; signature child art jewelry, which casts a child's handprint or favorite painting into precious metal cufflinks; and her own studio collection of unique designs, which embody everything from adventurous ring structures to unconventional stone selections. That desire to push the envelope of fine jewelry has already won her several awards in leading international and national jewelry competitions. But what's most rewarding for Muscio isn't the accolades but the creative course of taking a piece from start to polished, gleaming finish.

"I love the whole process of evolving from idea to completion," she says. "That first idea on paper is usually just the starting point, but then it goes through a sequence of steps, which gives it layers, histories and ultimately a new existence."

It's in this custom process that the studio largely operates—customers looking for new pieces or redesigns of older jewelry, a growing trend in which custom craftsmen like Muscio benefit. While other custom jewelers

PHOTOGRAPHER: GUY LAWRENCE



Platinum cufflinks (above); Dawn Muscio (right)

Award-winning designer Dawn Muscio evolves the jewelry industry one step at a time

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have their processes, too, Muscio likes to think of hers as uniquely personal.

Each commission starts with an initial consultation, as she assesses the client's aims and educates clients on the best metals and stones for the piece. Multiple sketches are then made for client approval, which yields to a three-dimensional computer animated design (CAD) mock-up, a rarely used tool in custom jewelry design.

"CAD allows us to be more versatile and see what a concept might look like with a different metal or what would that look like with a different stone. It just gives us another step in the process for people to feel more involved, get more creative and for there to be less chance for any miscommunications or mistakes," says Jacqueline Williams, Muscio's business partner and the studio's CAD animator.

After this stage, the studio moves forward by constructing a life-size wax replica of the actual design. For newly married couple Rachel Belew and her husband Steven, these were invaluable steps for her

wedding band, especially since they were coming off of an unsatisfactory experience with another custom jewelry retailer, which mishandled Steven's wedding band.

"That was a really bad experience with a custom jeweler, and it really made us appreciate the one-on-one rapport that we are able to have with Dawn in her studio because she really cares about her clients, and it shows," says Belew, a local public relations manager. The finished wedding band was, in her words, "stunning." So much so that she even commissioned Muscio again for a redesign of her late great grandmother's diamond engagement ring and her late mother's wedding band. "It was a part of me going into that ring. I think that's what makes it was so special. We didn't just go into a store and pick out a ring that anyone else could have picked out. We had an idea in our minds of what we wanted this ring to be, and she was able to take that and make it real and tangible."

Muscio says accounts like these give what she does added purpose.

"I don't want to sound egotistical in thinking that I'm leaving some semblance of a path in someone's life. I realize it's a luxury item, but people are so emotionally attached to jewelry," she says. "These pieces are often celebrations of life and love, and we are somewhat connected."

Both Williams and Muscio even recall sharing tears with a client when they presented him with the redesign of a sentimental heirloom. That, she says, is another reason she puts so much care and detail into every piece.

"My goal is to make a piece that people are going to cherish forever and become a statement piece that their children or grandchildren are going to want," she says. "And even if my pieces are redesigned again generations later, I want that next jeweler to think that I was an artisan—I truly cared." SP

*D. Muscio Fine Jewelry Studio is located at 1441 Dresden Drive, Suite 120. For more information, call 404-846-3434 or visit [www.dmuscio.com](http://www.dmuscio.com).*