

rock star //

Melissa Joy Manning brings nature-inspired **jewelry**, non-Western tradition, and a cabinet of **curiosities** to Berkeley.



by **SERENA RENNER** /
photography by **JOE BUDD**

➤ People like Melissa Joy Manning make you believe in the saying, “Everything happens for a reason.”

Before the Alameda native made it big as a jewelry designer in New York, she was a struggling artisan in Oakland, selling her work at street fairs, Tupperware parties, and at one boutique in San Francisco: Lava 9 on Hayes Street.

She had to work part-time as a retail consultant to support her fledgling jewelry business, and she often questioned whether it was something she wanted to dive into wholeheartedly. But during one particular bout with uncertainty, something happened that changed everything. She was watching an episode of *Just Shoot Me* for the first time,


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when a guest model pranced across the screen wearing a three-dimensional heart cage necklace—none other than the one Manning was selling at Lava 9.

“To me, it was a total sign,” says the admittedly spiritual Manning. “The universe was telling me to forget my worries and have faith that this is what I’m supposed to do.”

Her instincts weren’t lying. Manning’s unique, organic designs now can be found in more than 250 high-end boutiques worldwide and department stores such as Barneys New York. She’s been featured in publications from the *New York Times* to *Cosmopolitan*, and has a loyal following of eco-conscious celebrities such as Kate Hudson, Cameron Diaz, and Angelina Jolie.

While Manning now runs a successful showroom in New York, her roots have always been based in the East Bay. She spent much of her early years in Berkeley, mining the antiques shops of San Pablo Avenue and the craft stalls on Telegraph. Since the business launched in 1997, all the jewelry has been hand-made in West Oakland. That was until

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the lease on her metal shop expired at the end of last year, and she came to another sign in the road—this one pointing her back to Berkeley.

The studio's move offered her a chance to fulfill a long-held dream: to open a true atelier that combines production with a retail storefront. And, like many things in Manning's life, the timing was just right. Not only did she find a perfect space on Fifth Street, the space shares a parking lot with the East Bay Vivarium—where Manning spent countless hours as a teenager, eyes glued to the neon-colored snakes and mottled turtle shells; she bought her first snake there when she was in high



To me, these stones are more unusual and beautiful than a perfect diamond."

school. "It's perfect," says Manning. "It's a place I've always wanted to be."

The shop, which opened December 17, is no ordinary jewelry store. Manning's one-of-a-kind pieces are displayed in vintage wood cases alongside bird taxidermy, giant insect specimens, bones, and fossils that she's collected over the years. Mannequins with papier-mâché ostrich and gazelle heads wear chain-link necklaces and store exclusives, such as a piece of rare pyritized ammonite—a nautiluslike marine invertebrate fossil that's been naturally coated in fool's gold. Rings are stacked around test tubes and apothecary bottles, while a small glass dome highlights a pair of black agate earrings that shimmer from across the room. The result is a kind of natural history museum, with an artsy, fashionable twist.

But even amid all these curiosities, it's the jewelry that continues to catch the eye. Manning is well known for her



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fashion-forward take on unique natural materials, from quartzes and tourmalines to glittering geodes and sliced agates that display layers of color.

"I love the simplicity of taking a beautiful stone that's organic and putting it into some kind of setting that allows its natural beauty to shine through, without too much embellishment," she says. "To me, these stones are more unusual and beautiful than a perfect diamond. I like to challenge people's perceptions of precious with the materials I use."

Ever since the days of catching tadpoles in East Bay waters and visiting her grandparents' farm in the Sierra foothills (her grandmother was also a rock collector), Manning has held a fascination with nature. She vividly remembers the farmhouse, built by her grandfather from native stones that once surrounded the property. "That aesthetic has definitely influenced my work," she says. "I really like raw stones."

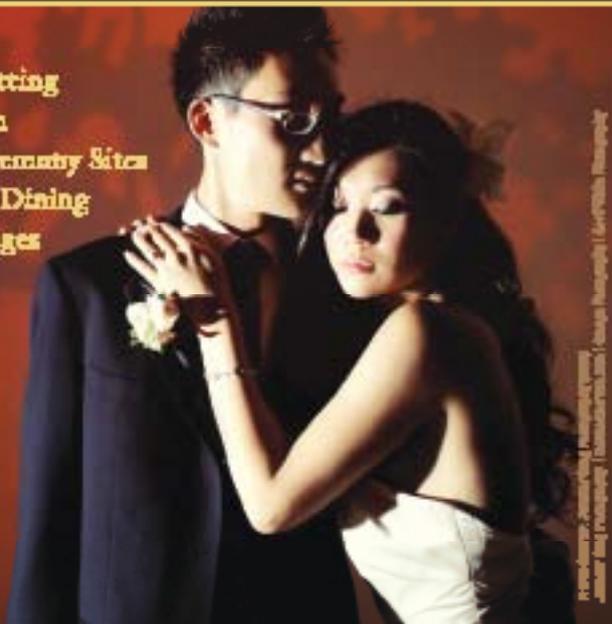
She's built a green business from the ground up that uses 100-percent recycled gold and silver as well as conflict-free diamonds while offering full benefits to her metalsmiths.

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Walking through the Berkeley store, one will also notice a nod to other cultures. Manning studied traditional silversmithing at the Instituto de Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and European design principles at the University of Barcelona. But her deepest influences stem from non-Western cultures, and her designs often reflect the ancient belief in talismans—objects such as the claws or teeth of an animal that are believed to hold spiritual powers that can be transferred to the wearer and preserved forever.

“It’s an interesting philosophy of adornment,” Manning says. “I hope someone can see that philosophy in what we do and feel the spirituality and energy of the pieces. We’re all individual and unique, so I enjoy making jewelry that speaks to people and becomes who they are. My pieces are not just accessories.”

Though Manning is worlds away from that artisan on Telegraph Avenue, her business is still very much a grassroots effort. The store was built by friends and family, and showcases the work of a couple other designers who have been instrumental in her artistic development.

“I’d never be where I am today if I didn’t start here,” Manning says. “It’s inspiring to open the store in my hometown, with the people who’ve made my success possible.”

The store is a well-received addition to the Fifth Street shopping and artisan corridor, and it’s a destination for anyone with an interest in the natural world. Who knows, maybe it will attract that teenager headed to the Vivarium to buy her first pet snake. ■

