Gustav Reyes

CONTEMPORARY ART JEWELRY

Chicago + Mexico City



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Artist Overview

Working in wood and art jewelry, Gustav Reyes brings handwork and contemporary fabrication together to explore material memory, impermanence, and the relationship between body and object. Born in Mexico in 1968 and raised in Chicago, his practice developed from early wooden rings into brooches, neckpieces, bracelets, and sculptural forms. Across that evolution, bending, salvage, hand tools, digital fabrication, and the prior life of material remain part of the same vocabulary.

Practice

Reyes treats wood not as neutral stock but as a material that carries time. Salvaged and inherited material can retain earlier tool marks, use, age, and association; new fabrication methods enter the work when they extend what the hand and material can do. The result is a practice in which jewelry sits between body, object, drawing, and small sculpture.



Nothing Gold Can Stay, 2009. Padauk, exotic wood from Norm Sartorius, silver. 3.81 x 2.54 x 3.81 cm. Photograph: Tom Petroff.

Selected Current Work

CURRENT OBJECT RECORDS ARE MAINTAINED AT GUSTAVREYES.COM/WORKS/

The Interval Brooch

c. 2019-2020
Cherry wood; stainless-steel pin
Approx. 3.5 x 2 in. (8.9 x 5.1 cm)
Artist's collection, Mexico City

Found Edge Ring

2025
Salvaged wood from Norm Sartorius; species unknown; salvaged ABS plastic
CAD-designed / 3D-printed connector; traditional wedged woodworking joint
Approx. 1.25 x 0.75 in. (3.2 x 1.9 cm)
Selected original Sartorius tool marks retained; Mexico City

The Divide Ring

2025
Salvaged wood from Norm Sartorius; salvaged ABS plastic
CAD-designed / 3D-printed back structure; traditional wedged woodworking joint
Approx. 1.75 x 0.75 in. (4.4 x 1.9 cm); Mexico City

Open Coil Brooch

2016
Ebonized white oak; paint; stainless-steel pin
Cold-bent construction
Approx. 3 x 3 in. (7.6 x 7.6 cm); Mexico City

Held Knot Neckpiece

2019
Ebonized white oak; silver; PVC ring
Cold-bent construction
Approx. 2.74 x 2.24 in. (7.0 x 5.7 cm); Mexico City

Developing a Language

2008-2018

During this decade, the structural language that began with the wooden ring widened into a broader investigation of body, material memory, repetition, scale, and fabrication. Bending became more than a way to make wood wearable: it became a visible line that could hold tension, volume, and open space.

Coil Brooch: process becomes structure

The CNC-cut bending form held thin strips of wood in their curve while drying. That form translated a drawn geometry into a repeatable physical process, allowing the final brooch to retain the same controlled spiral after release.



Coil Brooch, 2013. Museum of Arts and Design, New York, permanent collection, accession 2013.56.



CNC-cut bending form used to shape and dry the wood for Coil Brooch.

Studio, Process, and Presentation

Commercial production and exploratory work shared the same studio. Repetition sharpened practical knowledge of species, laminations, finish, proportion, and durability, while the same bent-wood vocabulary moved outward into brooches, neckpieces, display structures, lighting, and furniture. Making and presentation became related questions: how a line holds shape, how it meets the body, and how an object is encountered.



Ring-making process at the lathe, Simply Wood Rings studio. Archive photograph.



Bent-wood display structure in the Gustav Reyes studio. The display system extended the same curved language into the environment around the jewelry.

Studio as a continuum

The Simply Wood Rings period functioned as both a business and a working laboratory. Custom commissions, production systems, and material experiments overlapped with the development of the broader Gustav Reyes practice.

Institutional Record

Selected Collections

Museum of Arts and Design, New York - Permanent Collection

Coil Brooch, 2013 - accession 2013.56

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven - Permanent Collection

Acquisition context

Reyes exhibited at LOOT: MAD About Jewelry 2013. Jewelry specialist Bryna Pomp curated LOOT, and Ursula Ilse-Neuman was MAD Curator of Jewelry. Museum records confirm Coil Brooch and accession 2013.56; Reyes recalls Pomp and Ilse-Neuman as directly involved in the acquisition at the show.

Selected Exhibitions

2015 - LOOT: MAD About Jewelry, Museum of Arts and Design, New York

2015 - Matter of Material, Facere Jewelry Art Gallery, Seattle

2014 - JOYA Barcelona Art Jewellery Fair, Barcelona

2013 - LOOT: MAD About Jewelry, Museum of Arts and Design, New York

2013 - Ingrained: Turned Vessels and Jewelry in Wood, Patina Gallery, Santa Fe

2013 - WOOD, Velvet da Vinci, San Francisco

2012 - Out on a Limb: Contemporary Wood Jewelry, Racine Art Museum

2011 - From Minimal to Bling: Contemporary Studio Jewelry, Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston



Gustav Reyes at LOOT: MAD About Jewelry, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2013. Archive photograph.



Bryna Pomp, curator of LOOT, photographed by Gustav Reyes during the exhibition.

Selected Press & Writing



IN PRODUCTION

Gustav Reyes
A Bent for Wood
BY ANDREA DINOTO

A BRACELET SPIRALS around the wrist like a bit of ribbon; a necklace tumbles in airy, interlocking hoops; a slim wedding band emits an intriguing gleam.

Gustav Reyes achieves these dramatic and subtle effects with the most stalwart of materials: wood. Reyes employs a proprietary process that melds traditional woodworking techniques with the steam bending and laminating technology associated with bentwood furniture manufacture. A cabinet maker by trade, Reyes turned exclusively to jewelry in 2005, the day his wife Juanita—who has metal allergies—asked if he could make her a ring of wood. Reyes understood that if he drilled a hole in a piece of wood it would collapse, but if the wood were thin enough and he could roll it he'd get a solid structure. In half an hour he'd made a ring that would become the prototype for his unique line of laminate and carved jewelry in woods from common to exotic to found.

Artist Gustav Reyes, 2010

Reyes uses salvaged woods from a variety of sources: craftsmen friends, industrial offcuts, even sentimental items such as recycled musical instruments or a child's old baseball bat. For his popular "Organic Coil" spiral bracelets, he uses FSC wood from controlled forestation, "so there is an ethical approach to its harvesting," he explains. Reyes exhibits regularly at ACC and other shows and through select galleries. Although he makes every piece himself (prices range from $120 for bracelets and earrings to about $3,000 for one-of-a-kind pieces), he employs three studio assistants and two people to help with media, bookkeeping, website design and customer relations. While he invests in some paid advertising, his most valuable contacts come, he says, through direct interaction with customers, curators, and gallery people whom he meets largely through shows.

Born of a Puerto Rican father who fought as a Marine in the Korean War, and a Mexican mother who immigrated to the States as a teenager, Reyes was raised in Chicago, where he lives with his wife and two sons and maintains a studio/workshop. His father, a carpenter, who died when Reyes was 11, made precious-metal jewelry as a hobby. "I often accompanied him to workshops he attended to learn the craft of jewelry making," Reyes recalls, which awakened in him "a desire to create." Reyes attended art school at the Art Institute of Chicago, and also the Chicago Bauhaus Academy where he says he developed a strong understanding of and appreciation for architecture and the finer aspects of woodworking. After turning to jewelry,

Rings, 2009
oak, bog wood with birch liner

Organic Coil (bracelet), 2010
cherry wood
3 x 3 x 3"

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After turning to jewelry, Reyes began to view trees, the source of his material, as "gems of nature."

Reyes began to view trees, the source of his material, as "gems of nature… part of our evolution, something we accept and that society puts in its place." Reyes's modernist sensibility, coupled with his skill with laminate technology (view the process at: http://vimeo.com/32805862) enables him to create lightweight but incredibly strong forms—circles, hoops and arcs— destined to become rings, necklaces, brooches, pendants, and in a new twist, lamps. One of his recent bold, sculptural rings features a base of bog oak supporting a sculpted top of red wood and ebony (reclaimed from a bass violin) set with freshwater pearl. For durability, all of Reyes's pieces are finished with a light coating of beeswax, which, he says, affords a softly glowing patina plus "good protection"; although, he cautions, wood jewelry should never be immersed in water.

Reyes distinguishes between his limited-edition GR Art Jewelry line, that sells best to more mature collectors, and his phenomenally successful production line of wedding bands called Simply Wood Rings, which has tapped a niche market among young people "comfortable with spending money on the Internet." (He estimates that he has produced more than 4,000 wedding rings.) In fact, says Reyes, the Internet accounts for 80 percent of his sales, especially among ecologically minded customers looking for jewelry made from sustainably obtained materials. "people very conscious of not using metal bands or diamonds." A Reyes wedding band often features an inlay of semiprecious stones—turquoise, amethyst, mother of pearl from crushed buttons—to provide color and textural contrast to his earth-toned, satin-finished woods. Reyes's philosophy about wood and the ephemeral nature of life itself might be summed up in the name he's given to his bestselling wedding band design: Love is Now. Set with a faceted moissanite, a synthetic diamond, the ring can be made in a variety of woods. "The material will go back into the earth eventually," Reyes explains, "so if you don't cherish it now, you won't have it forever." But trees have feelings, too. As Reyes's tag line reads for Simply Wood Rings, "Let the tree hug you!"

Andrea DiNoto is a New York based writer on arts and design.

Gustav Reyes' booth at the ACC Baltimore show, February 2012

Furthermore:
www.gustavreyes.com
www.simplywoodrings.com

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Andrea DiNoto, "A Bent for Wood," Metalsmith, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2012), pp. 14-15. Two-page feature on bent-wood techniques, salvaged materials, contemporary jewelry, rings, Organic Coil, and Reyes's ACC Baltimore presentation.

2020
Phoebe Mogharei, "FOUND: Arc Builder," Chicago Magazine.

2017
Brigitte Martin, "Around Life's Curves," American Craft.

2017
Sarah Grosspietsch, "Artists Up Close: Witnessing the Beautiful Manipulation of Wood," Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Ornament, Vol. 36.2
Patrick R. Benesh-Liu, "The Irrepressible Spirit." Six-page profile on process, bent-wood practice, material philosophy, studio life, and the relationship between Gustav Reyes and Simply Wood Rings.

2012
Andrea DiNoto, "A Bent for Wood," Metalsmith, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 14-15.

2011
Stephanie Manriquez, "Vida En Madera," Revista Contratiempo.

2009
Victoria Gomelsky, "Warm, Honest, Wooden," The New York Times.

The Ornament scan is marked 36.2.2012 while a later CV lists Spring 2013; this packet uses the neutral issue citation Ornament, Vol. 36.2.



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