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Janis Savitt Goes Solo With High-Fashion Line

By Caroline Tell

From creating high-impact earrings with Steven Sprouse to conceiving Ralph Lauren's Western-inspired pieces, Michelle and Janis Savitt of M+J Savitt are among the more influential players in jewelry today.

But after a 30-year partnership that began by crafting papier-mâché jewelry in their parents' New York apartment, one Savitt is going solo. The "J" in M+J Savitt is launching her own fashion jewelry collection: Janis by Janis Savitt for fall.

"I figured now is the time to start expressing myself as Janis Savitt, not M+J Savitt," Savitt said. "It's not easy but it's gratifying that I am doing what I want to do. I want to make things that are different but understandable to people."

The split came about when Michelle Savitt married and moved to California. She will continue designing for the M+J Savitt business with the third Savitt sister, Wynne, who handles sales for the firm. According to Janis, the separation was amicable; she was simply ready to branch out.

"I wanted to do other things," Savitt said. "I had all of these amazing offers and I never went for them. I thought it was the time for myself to do it."

Retailing from \$75 to \$3,000, Savitt's fall collection is, so far, one part homage to her mother's personal jewelry collection — with Harry Winston-esque pear-shape and marquee-cut Swarovski crystals mounted in heavy brass — and the other part modern, high-fashion pieces, such as braided steel chains mixed with pearls. One collection is based entirely on spheres — a pendant features clusters of cascading balls in gold-plated brass.

Savitt will show her line from her Upper West Side studio, and will participate in the Accessories Circuit next month. She expects the new collection to bring in approximately \$5 million in its first year at retail.

As she did at M+J Savitt, she is focused on designing pieces that walk the line between costume and fine jewelry, and the timing for her debut appears just right. The fashion jewelry market is gaining speed both on the runway and in stores. Given today's shaky retail climate, consumers want innovative designs that are not only affordable but well-made and stylish.

"In an economic downturn, customers are looking for more focused ways to stay abreast of trends," said Suzanne Hader, principal at 400twin Luxury Brand Consulting. "Jewelry is not replicated as quickly or as well as clothing, and you can tell the quality by looking at someone's neck. And the jewelry market has a lot of space for really powerful brands to be developed — especially in the costume part of it. There's Tiffany, Van Cleef & Arpels, Harry Winston — but when it comes to the middle range, there's more room for other designers to come and take over the imagination of consumers at the aspirational to luxury level."

Having been in the jewelry business for more than three decades, Savitt is keenly aware of her customers' need for luxurious, unique pieces.

"At one point I had to ask, 'How many pairs of hoops do people need?'" Savitt said. "You need basic things and then you need other things. And the other things need to be exciting. In this world, if you have something that's a little bit interesting and a little bit different, it's something that people want."

Photos by Robert Mitra; Portrait by Thomas Iannaccone