

Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder

Chunky stones and forged spears are some of the features of jewelry designer Tonia Kim's new and edgy line.

by JAMIE MORGAN



PHOTO BY JAY LEWIS.

IN MARCH, the Windy City's lifestyle magazine *Chicago* ventured into vanity with its first-ever "Model Citizens" feature, otherwise known as the 50 Most Beautiful Chicagoans list. The new Weight Watchers "it" girl and diva songstress Jennifer Hudson graces the cover, and on page 80, we meet Tonia Kim: 35, married, Wisconsin native, jewelry designer and, now, one of Chicago's most beautiful people.

She and 49 others made the list via hush-hush nominations. Right smack in the middle of a full-page spread, with five other beauties flanked on either side, Kim, wearing chic black, is resting against a folded ladder with her feet decked out in green strappy heels—all her own clothes. She's also wearing her own jewelry, a necklace from her sort of self-named line Toki.

Toki, which means "rabbit" in Korean, is her Chinese astrological sign. It's also her childhood nickname and a combination of the first two letters of her first and last name. Though people no longer call her Toki, Kim says the name "just made sense."

What doesn't quite make sense is exactly how Kim got here. On paper, her schooling speaks of an academic life—a pre-med student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, set to follow in the footsteps of her father, and later, a Chicago Kent College of Law graduate. Her path even hinted at a media career. While in law school, Kim freelanced as a fashion writer for *CS*.

But, just after graduating and with law school on the horizon, she traveled west to Los Angeles to collect on some post-college life experience and ended up landing a job as a stylist and sales associate at the Ron Herman Fred Segal on Melrose. "I was around a lot of creative people," Kim recalled. "I started learning how to make jewelry for myself, and it was a creative outlet. It wasn't anything serious in terms of metalsmithing or anything like that at the time, but it got those gears turning a little bit."

While in L.A., Kim had even won admirers of the beaded jewelry she made for herself. Once the summer was over, Kim returned to Chicago to refocus on school. Still, the law student couldn't get thoughts of jewelry out of her head and after finishing law school, she took classes in metalsmithing and other jewelry making techniques. In 2007, she went full force, producing two to three collections a year with 30 to 50 pieces in each—bracelets, earrings and necklaces.

On the day this reporter met her, we drove to her Bucktown studio, tucked in an industrial setting, and she showed me necklaces—her favorite item of jewelry—from her current line, Nomades. In the past, Kim said her pieces were more delicate—earrings with small clusters of dangling gold. This summer 2011 line is more rustic and tells the story of a female nomad, traversing lands and collecting stones, relics and artifacts. Kim, quite the traveler herself (she says Seoul is the real city that never sleeps), was inspired by a 2007 trip to Prague, Czechoslovakia. In her studio there is a picture of her and traveling buddies playfully harassing a guard. She says the country still has an old-world, medieval feel to it and so does this jewelry line.

And it's not just in the way the line looks, but also the process and materials Kim chose. She and her production assistant use metalsmithing, oxidizing, torching and sawing techniques to create her self-designed and all hand-made jewelry.


It's tough to imagine the petite Kim, at 5-foot-2, with a torch in hand, but the hands actually do say it all. The skin is rough from irritation, and her nails are cut short.

A long oxidized chain necklace with five gold triangles on one side and three larger triangles on the other is an asymmetrical piece that takes half a day to create. Untouched stones are a big feature in this line and help make conversation pieces like a prayer bead-like necklace with dangling dull, metal spears and an as-is stone right of center.

Kim used to mix her own aesthetic with current trends to appeal to the mass market; not so in this line. "I was doing so much of the rhinestones, and it was like, OK, enough with the rhinestones," she said. "In this line, I had to stay true to what I really like."

Fortunately, others like it too. Kim is sending out orders to boutiques across the country and in major cities like p45 in Chicago, and Steven Alan boutiques in New York and Los Angeles.

Kim's aesthetic has an androgynous quality, and she said the "right" man could wear her pieces. She would love to see her necklaces adorned on eccentric, rock types like Lenny Kravitz, Russell Brand or Chris Cornell from Sound Garden. And perhaps one of them will, as she defines her voice, steps away from the rhinestones and into her own.

"It's probably the moodiest jewelry I've created, and I like the imagery it provokes," she said. "It's dark in color, has hand forged spears, chunky stones in their natural form and definitely has an antiquated feel. Although I enjoy this collection, I hope my next favorite collection is the upcoming season." 



PHOTOS BY KRISTYNA ARCHER.