

A burning desire to forge beauty out of raw materials: North Beach jeweler and metalcrafter carries on familyâ??s legacy business

Description

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Dan Macchiarini was just six years old when his father started teaching him how to torch, solder and braze metal.

Peter Macchiarini, described by some who knew him as a classic â??San Francisco beatnikâ?• and artist, mentored his son through his teen years and into adulthood. Dan â?? DannyMac to his friends â?? went on to perfect his metalcrafting skills at John Oâ??Connell Technical High School while attending San Francisco State University as an art student.



Macchiarini transports a metallic heart he created for a friend on a Valentineâ??s day long ago. (Photo courtesy of Dan Macchiarini)

In the â??80s, he found jobs at U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel, whose San Francisco shipyard was looking for welders for both the BART tunnel and Alaskan Pipeline barges. Welding was his occupation; art was his vocation. Like his father, he created sculptures and jewelry.

While a shipfitter at West Winds, a small repair shipyard in San Francisco, he crafted a steel heart for a friend on Valentineâ??s Day. It was so admired by his fellow workers that within hours, more than 100 were creating their own.



Patrons check out the merch as well as wine and cheese at Dan Macchiariniâ??s shop during a recent First Fridays event in North Beach. (All photos not provided by Macchiarini are by Robin Evans.)

Today, Macchiarini is the patriarch of Macchiarini Creative Design Jewelry and Sculpture, a San Francisco Legacy Business. Started by his father in 1948, the North Beach shop is the oldest continuous design house, production studio and gallery for modernist metal arts in the United States. Its existence spans two centuries and three generations of Macchiarinis, including Danâ??s 68 years. A more recent addition is a school that trains some 30 artisans a week in various metal crafts.

â??Iâ??m lucky enough to work with my daughter,â?• he said. Emma, who holds a masterâ??s degree in art, â??started the school with me seven years ago.â?• She describes him as â??a wonderful father, co-worker and teacher.â?•

The â??Burnâ?? years



Macchiariniâ??s metalworks school is set up behind his design shop in North Beach.

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It was Emma, still in high school, who took Macchiarini to his first Burning Man Festival, in 2000.

As part of its â??leave no traceâ?• ethos, participants recycled the aluminum soda and beer cans that proliferated by melting them down and turning them into temporary bike stands and art forms. But their process still produced some pollution.

In the meantime, Macchiarini, who went on to join Burning Man for the next 16 years, had developed a nearly non-polluting, 100-ton mini-press. Festival-goers in 2010 used it to make coins out of cans they turned in. He and his daughter designed the stamp for that yearâ??s coin, based on the festivalâ??s Metropolis theme. The coins became a burnersâ?? collectorsâ?? item as the stamp image changed with each yearâ??s theme.





That year, he also had an idea to integrate a smelter into a sculptural piece. The 30-foot â??Dragon Smelter,â?• which spewed fire out of its head and tail, was made of trashed woks, wrecked circular blade saws and a piece of stove pipe from his fireplace roof stack. It became a festival hit. For the next decade, burners gathered for casting events to create metal sculptures that provided glowing evening entertainment.

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A new kind of party



Above, Burning Manâ??s first memento, a coin made from recycled aluminum. The stamp, based on 2010â??s theme, Metropolis, was designed by Macchiarini and his daughter. Underneath is that yearâ??s â??Smelter Dragon.â?• (Photos courtesy of Dan Macchiarini)

Back at home and many years later, it was Emma who suggested a â??First Fridaysâ?• event for North Beach artisans after visiting â??First Tuesdaysâ?• at downtown galleries. Itâ??s become a tradition in which galleries, artists and artisans throw open their doors, putting out snacks and wine to an admiring and curious public â?? not only potential buyers but students.

An imposing figure in black hat and glittering rings, Dan Macchiarini towered over the people who crowded into his metal arts workshop on a recent First Friday.

The event drew throngs to North Beach â?? to his shop and others as well restaurants and bars and a makeshift rostrum where some neighbors read aloud their poetry. â??Next time, for April Foolsâ?? Day, weâ??ll include comedians,â?• he joked.

A South End â??legendâ??

Macchiarini is not only a staple of North Beach and the local art community, but a â??a legend around the South End,â?• said Fran Hegeler, president of the venerable South End Rowing Club at the Aquatic Park Pier, a place that hosts rowing, handball, running and swimming in the icy waters of San Francisco Bay. â??Heâ??s fiercely loyal to the club, lots of gusto and always ready with a grin or an opinion. I swim earlier in the morning than Dan, so I am more likely to see him in passing.â?•

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Macchiarini demonstrates the 100-ton press that was used at Burning Man to recycle aluminum cans into coins representing the festivalâ??s theme.



Macchiarini in his workshop.

Macchiarini culled the filth he found while swimming to Acatraz. Then he nudged Supervisor Aaron Peskin, a fellow swimmer and fellow member of the North Beach Business Association, into codifying keeping the waters clean; today, that is a stewardâ??s official job.

Macchiarini has â??always been a grassroots advocate on behalf of progressive causes,â?• said Peskin, who presides over the Great Basin Land and Water, which buys water rights on behalf native American groups).

He and Peskin also share an enthusiasm for Bay swimming. â??I was down there at 6:45 this a.m.,â?• Peskin said. Danâ??s father â??made my wedding ring 30 years ago,â?• he added. Peskin was also involved in naming the Kearney Street steps after Peter Macchiarini and presided over Emmaâ??s wedding. â??So, I would say I have been inextricably linked to this family.â?•



The master worker whose life encompasses the heady aromas of burning metal and frigid saltwater, is philosophic: â??Weâ??re not here for a long time,â?• he said. â??Weâ??re here for a good time.â?•

Heâ??s not just referencing fun and games but appreciating life while we have it. His wife died six years ago. While â??lots and lots of peopleâ?• offered support in the immediate aftermath of Joanâ??s passing, â??2020 was really tough,â?• Emma recalled. â??I was concerned about his health. Heâ??s not super old but old enough to be concerned.â?•



Above, a Macchiarini sculpture graces the entrance to Macchiarini Creative Design Jewelry and Sculpture. Below, some of his jewelry.

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Her father still struggles with the loss, she said, but added, â??I wouldnâ??t say he is looking for a girlfriend. I would just say, it would be nice if he met someone.â?•

Queenie Moon was the stage name of his wife, Joan Mankin, known throughout San Francisco and beyond as a clown and actor, first in 1970 as a member of the San Francisco Mime Troup.

She later appeared in major roles in the American Conservatory Theater, Aurora Theatre company, Berkeley Rep, San Francisco Playhouse and the California Shakespeare Theatre. She also performed at the feminist Lilith Theater, of which she was artistic director for two years in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Then, the woman who spoke four languages and memorized lengthy passages from Shakespeare developed frontal temporal dementia. â??All of a sudden in 2014, she lost the ability to remember peopleâ??s names,â?• said Macchiarini, who nursed his ailing wife for four years.

The loss, both to herself and her family, was profound.

â??It is very hard,â?• Emma said. â??Everyone still misses her. She was always there â?? taking part. Spent her life savings, which kept our building. Everybody has a story like that. Helpful and kind, she was.â?•

Soothed by icy water

Family, work and swimming in the San Francisco Bay sustained him. Macchiarini had taken it up in 1985, on a friendâ??s recommendation after hypnosis failed to help him quit smoking. His wife joined him and when Emma was eight, he started training her to swim the Golden Gate. Fording the frigid waters became a regular family activity.



Macchiariniâ??s rendition of one of the more colorful characters San Francisco has tolerated and even celebrated, Joshua Abraham Norton. A commodities trader and real estate speculator, he declared himself Emperor of the United States in 1859.

Filmmaker Judy Irving, a Bay swimmer since 1986 who has won Sundance and Emmy awards for films including the â??Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill,â?• has trained her sites on the Macchiarinis, a family sheâ??s known for decades, in â??Cold Refuge.â?•

Irving hopes the film, whose subtext is â??get back to nature,â?• inspires viewers to recalibrate their priorities as they emerge from the social isolation of the pandemic, turning to real experiences \rather

than online abstractions.

Itâ??s â??not about setting records for time or distance,â?• she said, â??but about how swimming in cold water helps mitigate lifeâ??s difficult hurdles such as grief, loss, disease, discrimination, disability, and stress.â?•

â??The sounds alone beat a sort of calm into swimmers,â?• she writes. â??Waves on beach, rigging in sailboats, seagulls calling, wind, flags flapping from flagpoles â?¦â?•

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