

GIFT *from the Sea*

BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON



When Aleksandra Vali's diamond engagement ring slipped off her finger and disappeared into the Mediterranean, the sea returned the mushroom coral that would become the focal point of her new engagement ring, *Le Mirage*.

Vali loves contrast, so she juxtaposed the rough dome with a high-polish back plate and bezel, and set diamonds as accents around the opening in the dome.

To create an ancient-looking dome to house the coral, Vali made her own carving medium using items from her pantry: She combined basic all-purpose flour with coarsely ground millet flour, mixed them with glue, and let the material harden into a block before carving the desired shape. When burned out and cast, the flour-glue model material gave Vali exactly the surface she had desired.

Le Mirage by Aleksandra Vali

Winner
Jewelry—Silver with Stones
2012 NICHE Awards

While enjoying a romantic getaway on the Mediterranean with her husband, Chicago-based designer Aleksandra Vali's diamond engagement ring slipped off her finger and disappeared into the sea. Although her husband dove repeatedly trying to find the ring in the coral beneath them, he never located it. But, in almost mythological fashion, the sea returned a gift just as precious when her husband surfaced from the water holding a small 1-inch diameter skeleton of mushroom coral.

The coral would eventually become the focal point of Vali's new engagement ring, *Le Mirage*, which won in the Silver with Stones category of the 2012 NICHE Awards. Because it was a gift from the sea, Vali thought of putting a shell-like formation around it that would not only protect the fragile, gill-like structure of the coral, but also expose its beauty at the same time. Her preferred method of working is to carve a wax and cast, but she is intensely interested in the surfaces found on ancient artifacts, especially fossils and objects recovered during archaeological digs. She had been trying for several years to find a carving medium that could re-create a similar surface in her metal work.

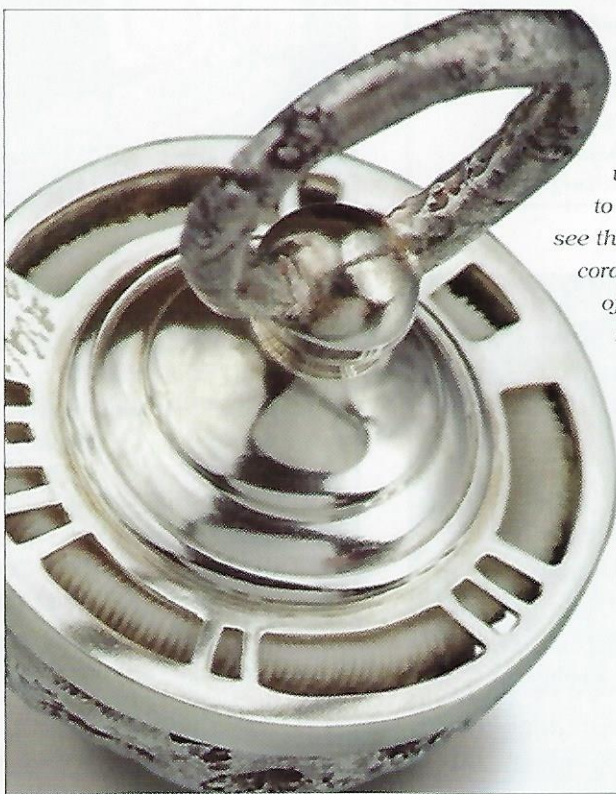
Vali first tried directly torch texturing the metal when designing this ring, but the result was not what she had envisioned. She decided to attempt to make her own carving medium using items from her pantry: She combined basic all-purpose flour with coarsely ground millet flour, mixed them with glue, and let the material harden into a block. After carving a shell-like dome peppered with circular holes that echo the shape of the coral itself, she broke out the center to create an irregularly shaped window. When burned out and cast in silver, the flour-glue model material gave Vali exactly the surface she had desired. "I think I have found my signature," she says, having since created a line of bells using the same technique.

Vali also carved the shank from the homemade flour-glue model material. Because she wanted the textured surface on only the outside of the shank, she coated the interior with hot wax to produce a smooth, comfortable wearing surface.

The entire ring is not composed of this eroded surface, however. Vali loves contrast, so she juxtaposed the rough dome with a high-polish back plate and bezel. In addition, she set diamonds as accents around the opening in the dome. "The diamonds are expensive, shiny, and valuable, but the coral I can find on the beach," she says.

The back plate is rhythmically pierced with rectangular holes to allow the viewer to see the underside of the coral. The irregularity of the size and spacing of the holes is "like music," says Vali. "Sometimes music is slower, and then it's faster." Though the back of the ring is rarely seen by others, it's her little secret.

To set the slightly out-of-round coral, Vali created an inner



The back plate is rhythmically pierced with rectangular holes to allow the viewer to see the underside of the coral. Though the back of the ring is rarely seen by others, it's Vali's little secret.

bezel to hold it snugly inside the silver dome so that it would not shift and break during wear. She soldered the ring back and bezel to the shank, then set the coral and the dome as one piece into the main bezel.

Vali, who is now preparing another piece to enter into next year's NICHE Awards contest, says that overall she was not upset by the loss of her engagement ring to the sea. "I lost my ring," she says, "but I found something more beautiful." ♦