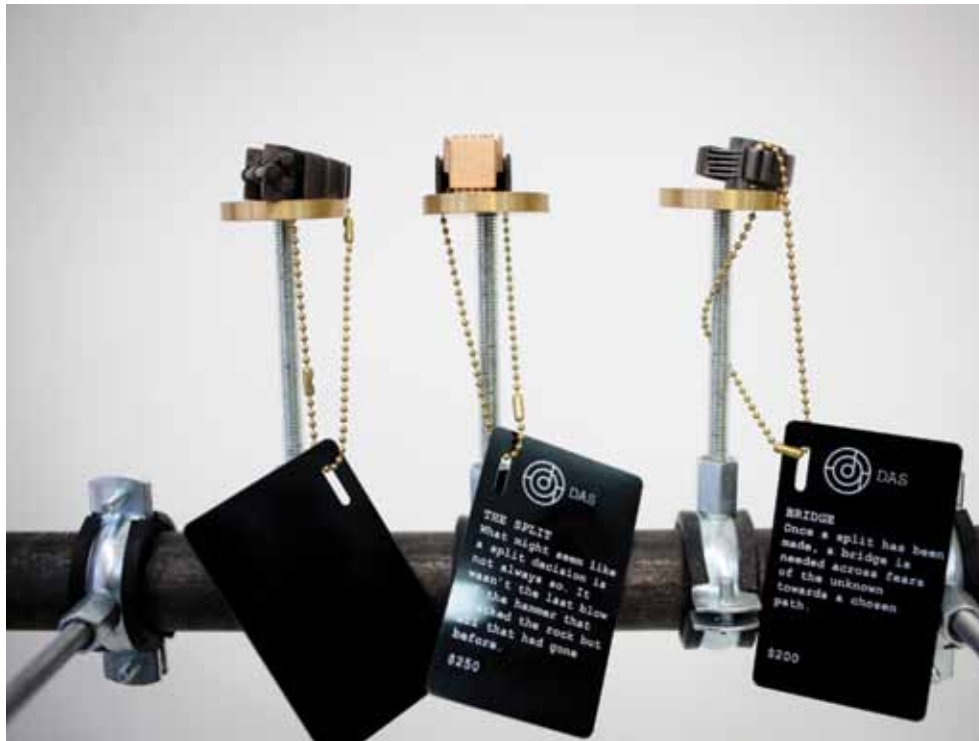




Industrial Therapy

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After inheriting his family's jewellery trade, Sevag Dilsizian is now engineering his own destiny with DAS – a tough jewellery line with a tender heart



Dressed in black, with knuckles clamped in rings reminiscent of animal traps and spare factory parts, Sevag Dilsizian seems unlikely to answer to anyone. He comes off as cool, introspective and frankly, like he doesn't care what we think. And for once, he probably doesn't.

Dilsizian realised at an early age that he would have little say in his future. His childhood dream of being a pilot was quashed by his parents, who, when leaving their home in Los Angeles, also demanded he moved back to Beirut with the rest of the family. Angry and resentful, he defiantly refused to return to school – but even that rebellion was short lived. When his diamond setter father urged him to go into the family business, he conceded, finding work as a jeweller's apprentice. Older and with experience, he returned to Los Angeles not to fly planes, but to work with a string of jewellery brands before joining his family's company in Beirut. It seemed at first that jewellery design would be a creative outlet for his frustration, a way for him to hammer out his emotions in precious metal. The only obstacle was his creativity, which flourished while his material became more restrictive;

pricey gold and diamonds are a limiting medium for experimenting with what Dilsizian calls 'going to the extreme.'

Three years ago, back again in Lebanon, Dilsizian made the decision to give up designing under someone else's vision and to finally put his signature on a collection of rings. And then he froze. After years of imagining this moment, the freedom of answering to no one but himself, he hit a creative block. It would be three weeks spent reflecting in the studio – there would be no sketches, no predetermined concepts – before his first ring would be finished. It was titled Cage.

There was no plan to sell the original ring, or the pieces that followed, until the entire Story Metal (CU) collection under his new DAS brand was complete; designing was as much about the process as the end result. Every day in the studio was worth an hour on a psychiatrist's couch, a therapeutic way for Dilsizian to exorcise his demons. When a friend began admiring the Cage, he politely declined her attempts to buy it – the designer couldn't bear to part with it. But her persistent efforts eventually paid off when, tired of





arguing, Dilsizian reluctantly slipped it on her finger. That moment, he says only half joking, was painful.

But when one door closes, another opens. Tala Hajjar, co-founder and director of Beirut-based non-profit designer platform Starch, was scouting for new designers when Dilsizian's friend showed up at an event wearing his ring. Hajjar approached the friend, gave her a business card to pass on to Dilsizian, and at their very first meeting unofficially told the designer to be ready for the next Starch season.

Dilsizian describes that meeting as 'seeing the light.' He'd been so focused on the metaphorical box he'd been trapped in that being asked to step outside it – and quickly – forced him to make a decision; either let his emotions get the best of him, or get to work. He chose the latter. In an instant, Dilsizian went on professional autopilot, pouring out his heart and soul into a collection of hand-moulded industrial rings that range from clean and simple to intimidatingly complex. He locked himself in his studio, working day and night to forge mechanical pieces in gold-plated copper and black rhodium, with the occasional onyx accent; his background was in diamonds and gold, but these were the only materials that conveyed the right meaning. When asked if he had any help in the

studio, he looks almost dumbfounded by the question. 'I was working through my inner struggle when I created them. Because my feelings are on the piece, someone else won't be able to do it.' There's no risk of a message being lost in translation when you're the one translating it. A few months later, Starch sent official word that he would be one of five designers in their 2012-2013 season.

At Starch's 2012-2013 launch, 28 DAS pieces were arranged on metal pedestals, each with a story hanging on a tag beside it. The collection read like a series of diary entries – the Unfit ring expressing 'the turmoil of being an outsider'; the Obstacles ring reminding its wearer that 'a path without obstacles does not lead anywhere'; and representing the mentality of Middle Eastern families, The Bird's Nest ring. 'They are attached to their kids and treat them like the golden egg,' says the designer of parents in the region. 'But sometimes that works negatively and the person grows up without a personality. The story says that even the shiniest egg can hatch and leave the nest behind.' The Separation ring has symbolically found a permanent place on the designer's own finger.

Given the hard, industrial aesthetic of the unisex collection and the sentiment behind it, Dilsizian





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correctly assumed it would appeal to men in their twenties and early thirties. Much to his surprise, though, his fan base sometimes skews much older. 'Clients over 50 are the ones who compliment me the most,' he says. 'They say that they're sick of seeing the same things everywhere, and that they're proud that someone is changing the concept [of local jewellery].' Fashion's in-crowd seems to agree; London-based 'cult couturier' Ziad Ghanem and even queen of androgynous cool, designer Isabel Marant, have been spotted in his pieces.

Three pieces that have thus far remained on display are from the one-of-a-kind Ups and Downs series, priced curiously at more than three times the rest of the collection. The reason? 'I don't want to sell them – I love them too much!' he explains. But if the Ups and Downs rings are a sentimental reminder of what it took to get here, other pieces might be an indication of where the designer is today. The Shield is an amulet against people jealous of success. Then there's the forthright FU ring, for, the designer says, when you don't care anymore if they're trying to hurt you.' Tellingly, Sevag Dilsizian's second collection begins with a ring called Breakthrough.