

WOUND AND TALISMAN

Susan Videler

Embarking on a master's degree is like going on an extended fishing trip. You bait your hook with an idea and drop it into the rivers of your imagination and the still deeper pools of your subconscious. Images and impressions tug the line and the haul can be slow and seemingly irrelevant, but each catch becomes a flickering, wriggling thought on the line of possibilities. The making, I have found, is a way to think aloud, to identify in three-dimensional form those flickering concepts. There is nothing more satisfying than playing with, testing and bringing an idea to life.

I am a jeweller, painter and drawer, and inevitably all three disciplines intermingle. After studying the skin as mask and surface in my Bachelor of Fine Arts paintings, as a jeweller I became curious about the skin and what lies beneath. This led me to examine the wound. For centuries we have fashioned talismans to prevent wounding, to ward off the evil eye and various malevolent dangers, both physical and psychic.

The talisman as a piece of jewellery has been deeply imbedded in all cultures for centuries. More than just decoration, a talisman embodies a protective belief by the maker and wearer. One of the more iconic objects of this type would have to be the crucifix, an uncanny blending of Christian protection and perpetuated wounding. This icon integrates my understanding of a protective talisman (the cross which predates Christian use) and the effect of the wound on body and psyche.

My initial forays into making included a skin-like substance, rawhide and pieces of glass, referencing not only the eye, but lenses in general used to magnify and observe. Effectively, I made cuts and wounds in the damp skin, stretched it and inserted a lens that became imbedded in the openings as they dried and hardened.

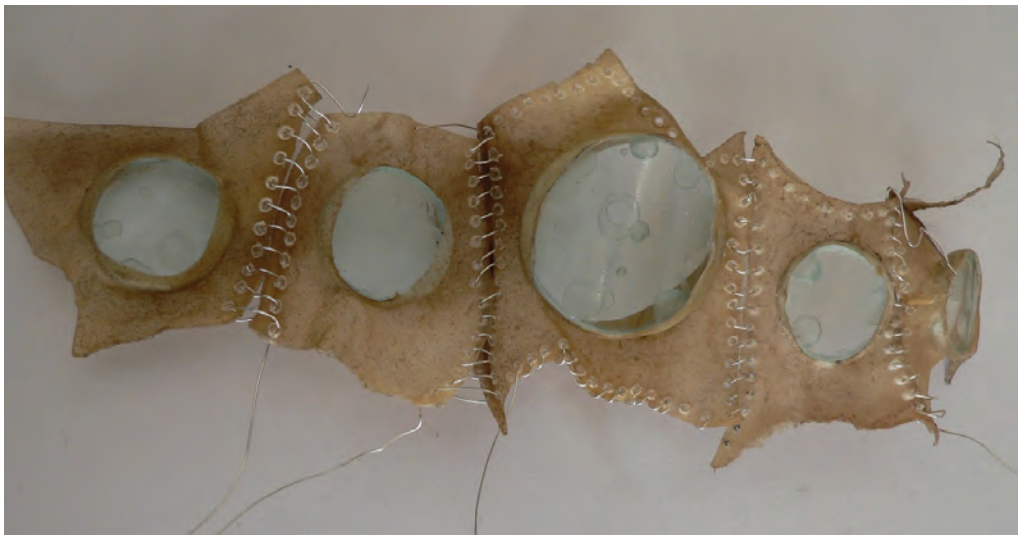


Figure 1. Susan Videler, test piece, 2015, rawhide, glass, sterling silver.



Figure 2. Susan Videler; test pieces, 2015, sterling silver; fine silver; sandblasted glass, rawhide, seaweed, cotton, 45 x 45 mm.

These early works exuded an uncanny quality that was described during an early critique as 'talismanic'. The rawhide polarised reaction to my pieces, and I realised then that how we react to skin is highly individual and often primal. I suspect the inferred wounding heightened the response to my work.

In my early research, I discovered the hierarchy of the senses; a belief that a particular sense has superiority over the others, more often than not sight – and, more often than not, touch lingers near the bottom rung of this particular hierarchical ladder. Ironically, my first pieces were a blend of skin and lens, so I was already involved in this debate from a tactile perspective. An advocate of touch in all spheres of my life, I found the notion of a hierarchy disconcerting and in both my making and dissertation I have highlighted touch as a major player, questioning the supremacy of sight. Take away any of the other four senses, and life, although difficult, is possible. When touch goes, however, we lose the feedback loop from our skin to the brain; we lose ourselves in space, unable to sense gravity, or any pressure at all. We effectively float, disoriented and unable to control our own limbs; unable to walk, eat, communicate or protect ourselves.

Touch, then, is pivotal in my making. I intend my pieces to be tactile and evocative, making use of rawhide, bone, glass, sterling silver and gold. I have made several pieces using antler; echoing the lord of the Celtic forest and centuries of fertility and magic associated with the stag. Imbedded in my work is the understanding that protection and wounding are two sides of the same coin. I think that antlers speak eloquently of this duality.



Figure 3. Susan Videler, *Chain and Horn*, 2016, antler, gold leaf, 18ct gold, 1007 x 25 mm (left). *Horn*, 2016, antler, brass, gold leaf, 10 x 60 mm (right). Both from the *Paesidium* collection, 2016.

Chain and Horn and *Horn* harness the protective iconography of the antler, infused also with a reference to the golden horn of plenty. The elements in *Chain and Horn* are sliced in sequence from a single antler, a simple reconfiguration transforming the antler into a wearable item. I enjoyed working with an animal byproduct that is shed naturally and has been used for centuries. Eight polished and cut eagle talons found in Croatia, and thought to be 130,000 years old, are considered the oldest evidence of jewellery. Were they talismanic or decorative?

I am drawn to earlier times, particularly the medieval period. It is gratifying to know that many of the tools and habits of the jeweller's workshop have remained the same since these times.

However, one of the unfortunate aspects of the medieval period was the preponderance of wounding in its various forms: justice meted out by secular authorities (slicing off a nose or an ear); flagellation and scarification; torture of various kinds inflicted by purpose-built mechanisms; burning and drowning, associated with the Inquisition and the witch hunts. Thousands of women were imprisoned, tortured, sexually abused and publicly burned on the evidence of hearsay, envy, mistrust and ignorance. The flames of these fears were fanned by the church, the state and the universities, who wanted women removed from their positions in communities as midwives, healers, makers of talismans, matchmakers, abortionists and confidantes. Essentially, women had control of the health and growth of the population, and this did not sit well with the patriarchal institutions.

These times were fraught with many dangers; even in sleep there was no real peace, as night was the time when the devil might claim the unwary. Thus, numerous protective talismans were tied or bound to the body secretly with silk or cotton; others were worn overtly as neckpieces, rings or bracelets. Pieces of writing from Christian Scripture or an amalgam of magic and Scripture, various metals, animal parts, stones, plants, bones, skin and entrails all contributed to the array of protective measures employed.

While we live longer than those medieval ancestors, we are still plagued with the same fundamental fears: poverty, disease, hunger, wounding and death. The advertising tide in which we swim has teased out various threads of these basic fears and magnified them, ensuring a continually insecure populace spending money to delay the inevitable and ensure maximum comfort and attractiveness along the way.

We may find it amusing that the evil eye for so many cultures was (and still is) a reality, requiring protective amulets and signs to prevent a curse or illness being inflicted. We have our own evil eye, however: Constantly keeping us under surveillance, the ubiquitous screen gathers information about us; we are observed and our decision-making is then able to be influenced and predicted.



Figure 4. Susan Videler, *Panoptes Wand*, 2016, sterling silver, stag antler; 300 x 40 mm.

Panoptes Wand with its one hundred eyes references Panoptes, the many-eyed Greek giant whose unsleeping gaze was ever watchful – a protective reminder of the evil eye in contemporary society.

We still maintain ceremonies around the wearing of talismans – wedding vows accompany the exchange of rings, designed to bear witness to the sanctity of marriage and provide tactile proof of the union. The crucifix is worn and mimicked in ceremony. We see gemstones advertised for their protective and healing properties. Saint Christopher is still the patron saint of travellers and many cultures sell amulets to ward off the evil eye. The protection afforded by jewellery is not necessarily overt; it can be highly personal, the mere sensation against the skin offering tactile comfort. Talismans are symbols, after all, and through sight, touch and sound they can trigger powerful subconscious reactions.

By slicing and threading, I have dismantled and remade the phallic antler into two neckpieces indicative of protection using circular female forms. The asymmetric *Breastplate for the Heart* speaks of those unseen wounds perpetually inflicted on our hearts and often kept quietly therein. The fine silver connecting threads allude to a possible solution for the broken heart. Although the *Chainmail Choker* feels light and can be adjusted to fit comfortably, it speaks of restriction as well as alluding to medieval protective suits. There is a gentle noise created by the links, both when the piece is being placed around the throat and while it is worn on the moving body, that has inspired me to investigate sound as a talisman. I am currently working on large neckpieces incorporating silver bells, with a view to adding sound to the two other senses of touch and sight.

My extended fishing trip has brought up unexpected catches and I have seen into my own psyche as well as the collective mind, particularly when examining the extended and unnecessary wounding of women. Through this history runs a reliance on symbols and materials as a means of protection, worn as points of reference to channel a belief or to divert the evil eye. The function of jewellery has often been talismanic: it acts as a warning, a diversion, a touchstone, a signal of belonging or a conviction. Jewellery is more than just decorative; it provides tangible coded signals, not just to the wearer and viewer but to the historian.



Figure 5. Susan Videler, *Breastplate for the Heart*, 2016, antler, sterling silver, 410 × 340 × 4 mm (left). *Chainmail Choker*, 2016, antler, sterling silver, gold foil, 620 × 11 × 4 mm (right).

While I anticipate that a series of large protective neckpieces will signal the end of my master's work, several months away, there is still time for new ideas to be pulled up from the depths.

Susan Videler completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting in 2011 at the Dunedin School of Art. Since that time, she has had a studio where she has painted and taught life drawing. However, she has always been drawn to the three-dimensional world of jewellery. After working part-time with a local goldsmith for a couple of years and not painting at all, she decided to return to the Dunedin School of Art, take advantage of the jewellery workshop facilities and stretch her mind and skill base with a master's degree.