

WEARING THE WOUND

Susan Videler



Figure 1. Susan Videler, *Wearing the Wound* exhibition, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, 2018 (detail). Photograph: Jodie Gibson.

After writing, rewriting and coalescing this work with crafting over a period of months and years, the final trial in the educational ritual of the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) is staging one's own exhibition, with a side dish of documentation.

How to articulate all this? How to engage the curiosity of those who have no knowledge of your field, crop, stalk or kernel of interest? It is advisable to keep in mind this last hurdle while you are making and researching, and my supervisors kept me on point with this. At first, I had an interest in tactility and skin that was analytical and somewhat detached. As my work progressed, a distinctly feminine undercurrent developed that encompassed skin, wounding and the protective devices employed. A less clinical and more ritualistic, intimate space would be required to examine these relationships.

Because of its three dimensionality, size and relationship to the body, jewellery has always presented a display conundrum. Conventional jewellery – by which I mean gemstones housed in precious metals – has traditionally been a way to secure, display and pass down wealth. Affluence, taste and ownership have driven the mining, faceting and setting of gems and the mining of metals for centuries. The prosperous often wish to make their position in

the pecking order clear; and adornment with jewellery has long been one of the codes employed to demonstrate this. There is then the tension between display and security, whether on the body, in a safe or behind a glass case.

Contemporary jewellery or art jewellery – there are various names to describe the practice I am engaged in – uses an unlimited palette of materials to deliver a concept. The result may lie inside, on or nearby the body; it does not have to be worn to be considered jewellery. New Zealander Lisa Walker relies heavily on her glue gun, and her workshop shelves are littered with wood, plastics, fibres, fabrics, glitter and toys. I saw this first hand when a group of us from the Otago Polytechnic jewellery department visited her home prior to heading to Auckland for the annual *CLINKProject*. In another part of her Wellington house/workshop, her partner Karl Fritsch works among desktops covered in uncut gemstones, a haul of ancient rings sent to him by a friend, yet-to-be-completed gold and silver rings, castings and moulds, with various rings and valued trinkets dispersed on shelving around the walls. Both practitioners have distinct methods and both are internationally renowned jewellers.

Having worked with gemstones and precious metals prior to starting my MFA, I was excited by the challenge of new techniques that would need to be acquired for working with alternative materials: skin (rawhide), beef bone, antler, glass, fabrics (silk) and wood (ebony). Having developed a real addiction to working with silver, I included it, alongside gold and gold leaf, enjoying the unexpected relationships that developed between materials. Tactility became a focus in both writing and making; initially working with skin, stretching and wrapping it, I investigated touch within the sensory hierarchy. (I discuss this in my *Scope* #13 essay) ¹

Researching wounding and talismans used as protection, particularly during the medieval period, it became clear that tactility was inherent in the talisman. Not only in their construction, but in the sensation and assurance provided by having these items worn against the body.

These were dark days of religious persecution. Growing populations put pressure on economies, science and religion fought a battle behind the scenes, and out of this wrangling for control scapegoats emerged. Initially, the Jews and Muslims were driven out of Europe or killed. Then the spotlight focussed on the group of individuals who controlled matchmaking, healing, abortions and birthing – women. Effectively, we controlled population growth and this threatened both church and state. With the help of the newly devised printing press, propaganda was distributed by the church damning people, predominantly women, as witches. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches' Hammer), written by two Jesuit priests, became a handbook for the secular courts. "Women were accused primarily by men, tried by male juries, examined by male searchers, sentenced by male judges, tortured by male jailers, burned to death by male executioners."²

In these times the clergy, royalty and peasants wore talismans wrapped or hung about the body, secreted in clothing or worn as rings. They were as ubiquitous and functional to them as our cellphones are to us. They were a conduit to other realms, beliefs, gods, the deceased and the living. The talisman could be a piece of writing, an animal or human part, a stone or gem, plants, bones, iron or precious metals. Intricately worked with astrological detail or alchemical lore, incorporating the finest materials or hastily written words, a mix of biblical and pagan, wrapped to an arm or leg with silk. The belief engendered was the real locus of power.

In *Wearing the Wound*, I wished to create a space that generated an atmosphere representing evidence of an intimate feminine environment, a sense of ritual, mystery and loss. The bedroom was an obvious choice, a private space that could be read as distinctly feminine, furnished with pieces that announced ritual by their presence – a dressing table with a large mirror; a single bed, two chairs, a wardrobe and a bookshelf. It was necessary to bind these elements, and colour became the tool for this – matt black. It was an obvious colour choice, given the emphasis in my writing on the witch hunts, torture and death. Black speaks also of the shadow self, the unseen and magic, invoking the need for talismanic protection rather than adornment, an important point of difference.



Figure 2. Susan Videler, *Wearing the Wound* exhibition, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, 2018 (detail). Photograph: Jodie Gibson.

After considering other options, I chose the Dunedin School of Art Gallery for my exhibition, a neutral space that I could occupy and make my own. At first the amount of white expanse was daunting, but a darkened room and the use of spotlighting reduced visible space to selected units within the whole, each with its own narrative. The matt black was stark in this white space and even the glow of the spotlight did not settle the furniture into belonging, so I trialled brushing the bookshelf with graphite powder. Immediately, the surfaces changed and reflected the light instead of absorbing it, and this subtle patina gave a sense of depth to the furniture.

As I have noted, with jewellery the issue of tactility can be fraught. Against a desire to have the work touched and examined runs an equal desire to have it protected from damage or moved out of its narrative context within the exhibition. I witnessed people picking up and holding or examining the work and this was pleasing – presumably curiosity overcoming reservations about display.

Although most of my pieces were designed to sit around the neck, an ebony and antler flame ring and three antler brooches sat on or in the drawers of the dressing table. *Panoptes' Wand*, an antler and sterling silver wand with 100 eyes cut into the silver (referencing Panoptes the sleepless, all-seeing Greek giant with his 100 eyes), lay almost secreted in a bottom drawer. A place of reflection both literally and figuratively, the dressing table has, like our bodies, hidden compartments and surfaces for display. Two neckpieces on the wall opposite the dressing table mirror were spotlit, ensuring that their reflections could be seen as soon as one entered the gallery. Glass and mirrors have featured in both my BFA and MFA shows, and this initial glimpse of work in the mirror was an acknowledgment of this. One neckpiece, *Breastplate for the Heart*, an asymmetric sheath of antler slices bound together with fine silver wire, was designed to cover chest and heart. The second was a rosary of sorts – a stag antler rose carved with a Christian cross on one side and the Egyptian ankh on the other; suspended on a chain of antler rings and knotted skin, the hollows in the rings occupying the spaces where the missing rosary beads would be.

The single bed, with its grey sheets pulled aside as if someone had just emerged, had a sterling silver capsule hanging from one post. This was a protective measure for sleep. Sterling silver invokes the moon and inside the capsule was a piece of rawhide tattooed with an ancient Wiccan symbol of the Triple Moon, correlating three moon phases – waxing, full and waning – with the three phases of a woman's life – youthful promise, womanly power and the wisdom of the crone. On the bedsheets lay a glass vial containing deer velvet stoppered with antler, sterling silver and raw silk, the contents alluding to reproduction and fertility.

The bookshelves housed a collection of four glass talismans filled and stoppered with the full range of my materials. They were displayed as books are, ready to be chosen as required. Lying on the top of the shelves was a Spanish higa hand (protection against the evil eye) carved in ebony, attached to a three-dimensional sterling silver solar cross. This hung on a piece of black raw silk that was literally held together by two ebony hands that slide along the silk to provide the fit around the neck required. These are 'eye catching' items – in other words, designed to draw the evil eye away from the wearer and onto the talisman itself.



Figure 3. Susan Videler, *Wearing the Wound* exhibition, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, 2018 (detail). Photograph: Jodie Gibson.

The human must protect himself or herself against the penetrating gaze of others. That requires covering oneself – even if, as in many cultures, this is done merely through symbolic ornaments or a specific inner attitude that regulates the act of looking. What we are dealing with is the archaic fear of the magical, possession taking the gaze of the other; a fear of a look that can rob one of something if one is not careful, and at the same time with that fear of being fascinated and blinded by what is seen, the desire for possession and incorporation.³

In the wardrobe, a black silk dress hung, and about its neck the *Chainmail Choker*, linked ovals of polished stag antler sealed with gold leaf, wrap and rustle protectively, like the warrior's form of protection, about the throat. A phallic antler was reduced to a series of circular, feminine links. Hanging in the darkness of the wardrobe were a pair of

fallow deer antlers. Dangerous on the beast, they still held an aura at once of damage and beauty, even hanging upside down. Some of us have hung these about our necks – the natural curve of the bone splays out – and around the hips and pelvis, oddly protective and heavy.

Hung on the wall, the final neckpiece, *Forget-me-Knot*, encapsulates all aspects of my talismanic language. Made of a lambskin rawhide I had prepared, it is knotted together and stretched over wax-covered sterling silver bells and glass magnifying domes, under which lie bone, antler and silver.



Figure 4. Susan Videler; *Wearing the Wound* exhibition, Dunedin School of Art Gallery, 2018 (detail). Photograph: Jodie Gibson.

The glass domes, the sound of the bells, the scent of beeswax and the knots formed an amalgam of the senses and of the techniques I worked on during my Masters. Since Mesopotamian times, knots have been used to control the forces that activate both men and nature. "During the witch-hunts, a frequent accusation was that certain women had the capacity to deliberately make men impotent. Many women put on trial by the Inquisition under suspicion of practicing magic admitted to having made ligatures at the request of other women, and even of men, so as to arouse love or to prevent a certain man or woman from having sexual relations with other people."¹⁴ This talisman references pagan times, evoking reactions relating to my use of primal materials; it is a reminder of corporeal power, particularly involving the senses.



Figure 5. Susan Videler; *Forget-Me-Knot*, 2017, rawhide, sterling silver, nickel silver; glass, 400 x 300 mm. Photograph: Jodie Gibson.

Unconsciously, I had laid the furniture out in the form of a cross. Chairs faced each other, as did the wardrobe and bookshelf, with the bed in the centre. The upright lone male hero of the crucifix was replaced with an absent horizontal female, her empty bed the crux of the matter. I had been made aware during my research how pervasive the tale of the lone male hero has become, and how in these histories women are portrayed as negligent and unaware, at best. At worst, as enemies (mothers included) that must be destroyed. It was the crucifix that first alerted me to the reality of ancient symbolism and Christianity tangled within the talisman, a pagan symbol embellished with a tortured, dying man.

Even as I despised what has been done to women in the name of Christianity, I was unable to escape my own conditioning, resulting in the emergence of the cross, although black and subverted.

Wearing the Wound occupied the gallery space as I had hoped it would, echoing the dualities I have addressed in my dissertation: absence and presence, the hidden and the exposed, magic and science, male and female.

Susan Videler completed her Master's degree in 2018. She runs her practice from a jewellery workshop shared with three others and teaches a jewellery nightclass once a week at the Dunedin School of Art in New Zealand

1 Susan Vidler, "Wound and Talisman", *Scope: Art & Design*, 13, 2017, 131-136

2 Anne L Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco, CA: Pandora, 1994), 9.

3 Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 99.

4 SA Nashim, *The Book of Women's Love* (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2014), 61.