STONE SETTING of silver, stone, Eskimo tool fragments. This setting at 17.78 x 27.94 centimeters includes the plate, spoon is 12.7 x 2.86 centimeters. The clay paper plate was made by Arte Papel Vista Hermosa, Oaxaca, Mexico. Opposite page: VERSATILITY of silver, stone points and spoon, hinged allowing different positions when worn (like folding knives), 5.08 x 6.35 centimeters. STONES AND WHORLS neckpiece of silver, Guatemalan clay spindles, stone, 30.48 x 16.51 x 1.27 centimeters. All artwork dated 2014. Stones are Neolithic African points. Photographs by Rod Slemmons, except where noted.
Framed by silver bezels darkened to resemble wrought iron or blue steel, exquisitely knapped stone projectile points serve as tacit evidence that the drive to perfect technologies is hardly exclusive to the modern age. In Kiff Slemmons's most recent work a respect not only for the skills of ancient artisans but also, and more important, for the adherence of those artisans to the highest of aspirations for their craft makes what might have been mere whimsical appropriation a moving reflection on some of the most praiseworthy facets of human nature. The series pays homage to ingenuity and adroitness, but more significantly it gives due recognition to the value of human patience and persistence: specifically, the dogged determination to achieve perfection that has invigorated human endeavor since the days when life truly was nasty, brutish and short. By giving a prominent place in her pendants to ancient stone artifacts and restraining her contributions to a complementary status, Slemmons is clearly less intent on emphasizing her own mastery of materials than on asserting that humans have always sought a better way—a more efficient technology and a more pleasing aesthetic—even millennia ago when their efforts were by necessity directed principally to the task of staying alive.

Through her use of ancient objects Slemmons courts controversy in this period of heightened concern for preserving cultural patrimony, but her practice is not without substantial precedent in the long history of jewelrymaking. The earliest people to recycle antiquities were the ancients themselves, who in their wanderings through the campsites, burial grounds and ruined cities of their forebears scavenged bits of the past to employ as tools, wear as ornaments, or simply marvel over as incontrovertible evidence that the present was not all-encompassing. How many Egyptians over the millennia between the Old Kingdom and the New donned ancient amulets lifted from the shifting sands at Saqqara or extracted from the silt of the Nile after the annual flood?

In the Americas, the Aztecs, in awe of the vast deserted architecture of Teotihuacán, made pendants of the figurine fragments they discovered in that crumbling city's empty plazas, and in Europe the stylish set during the Renaissance repurposed ancient Roman seals and cameos as gems in their rings and necklaces. In these and countless other instances across human history the reuse of antiques as adornments was clearly more than expedient. In the most interesting cases it might even be said to reflect a psychological imperative to wrestle with some of the most fundamental questions about human identity.

For Slemmons, integration of Neolithic stonework into jewelry was a natural extension of the found-object use that had characterized her work from its earliest phase, but at the same time it constituted something of a departure from that practice, since not all found-objects are of the same class. Age and rarity make the projectile points substantially different from pencil
contemporary Saharan peoples and their ancient predecessors. For Slemmons these objects without context have lost something valuable that, though not restorable, might at least be partly replaced. “I have a real respect for these things,” she asserts, “and I wanted to reinvigorate them by putting them in this other context. In a way I think of this as a kind of offering. We don’t honor our ancestors much these days. Everything is about what is new and now. I’m looking backwards in a sense.”

The retrospection embodied by Slemmons’s new series is really twofold, since it is as much about looking back over her own career as about prying secrets of the early days of human history from the craftsmanship exhibited by ancient stone tools. Her recent pendants are in some respects similar to pieces that she made at the outset of her career forty-five years ago. Not only did some of those early examples incorporate ancient stone beads from Mexico but they also made use of simple bezels fashioned with the same set of hand tools that grace her bench today. The technical similarities between past and present work were unintentional, and when she first noted them they gave her pause. “In some ways I was distressed to find that I seemed to be making things similar to when I first started,” she admits, “but I tried not to linger on that too long. I have to do what has some energy for me. There are many people who can make much better products, but I have never been concerned about showing off techniques in metal. My progression has been more about the flow of ideas.”

stubs that one might find at the back of a drawer, but more important the Neolithic points bear evidence of attitudes about tools and making that seem fundamentally different from those conveyed by a sharpened pencil. “I decided that these were another kind of found material,” Slemmons explains. “I was taken with the points themselves, the refinement in making them, and the fact that they were handmade things. They were tools but you couldn’t help but see that they had slipped over into something else, that when the makers were making them they saw them as beautiful in some way, so they kept them and didn’t use them. They were tools made by hand that at some point slipped partly from necessity to ceremony.”

Caches excavated at archaeological sites around the world suggest that ceremony may indeed have been part of the purpose of some ancient stone points, but those in Slemmons’s pendants, found by Tuareg nomads after strong Saharan winds exposed them, can give no clue as to their former contexts. Prior to the mid-1980s and the passage of laws against exportation of antiquities by nations such as Mali, Niger and Algeria hundreds of thousands of Neolithic Saharan artifacts were gathered by tribesmen and sold to local suppliers of galleries and auction houses in Europe and the United States. At no stage in this process of dispersion were records of origin kept, and little thought was given to the effects of the market on the cultural inheritance of North African nations and the connection between

TOOTED PICK pin of silver, stone, plastic comb fragments, 6.99 x 8.89 centimeters. CUTTING EDGES of silver and stone, 10.80 x 5.08 centimeters. Center: DOUBLE AX KIT double-sided pendants of silver, stone, Eskimo tool fragments, 10.80 x 8.26 centimeters.
In that respect Slemmons’s recent pendants have their closest connections to bodies of work produced for the exhibitions “Cuts and Repose” (1998) and “Re:Pair and Imperfection” (2004-5). The former involved integrating into jewelry images of hands cut from antique black-and-white photographs of unidentified individuals: found-objects that like anonymous Neolithic stone tools emphasized the absence of people whose personalities, familial connections, achievements in diplomacy, war, intellectual pursuits or athletics, social standing, hopes, and fears—nearly everything that made them unique in the world—had been lost in the passage of time. After some initial deliberation about cutting up the photographs, which had once been treasured mementos displayed on mantelpieces or preserved in family albums, Slemmons concluded that the opportunity to reinvest them with meaning in the present outweighed what little value they possessed as decontextualized and anonymous documents of the past. She recalls, “When I realized that their preciousness depended on their identity and that this identity had already been lost, abandoned, the possibility for a new presence eased my reluctance and I began to look at the hands to see what they said.”

As historical records, Neolithic stone points share some important characteristics with the found-object photographs in “Cuts and Repose,” but they differ in that their representation of anonymous hands from the past is not pictorial but rather indexical: in other words they refer to hands through the physical evidence of work. As handiwork they have entered Slemmons’s pendants less through appropriation than through collaboration. To some degree this act recalls pieces that Slemmons produced a decade ago for the Re:Pair and Imperfection series, which began with solicitation of damaged or unfinished parts from dozens of well-known jewelers and metalsmiths and ended with the production of works of jewelry in which contributing artists’ elements were complemented by a kind of framing or contextualizing on Slemmons’s part. This kind of collaboration differs fundamentally from that of such modernist examples as Robert Rauschenberg’s Bed, which implicitly emphasized the triumph of painterly expression over an anonymous hand-stitched quilt, or Erased De Kooning drawing, in which the erasure of a sketch simultaneously displaced the presence of one prominent artist while asserting the negating powers of another. Slemmons found-object collaborations are equally distinct from the appropriationist strategies of deconstructive postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s, in which the presence of artists was not so much erased as dismissed from the outset as a mere intellectual construct.

Slemmons’s frequent use of the word “respect” when describing her affinity for prehistoric artifacts suggests that in her recent series of pendants, as in the earlier Re:Pair and Imperfection works, the collaborative

Center: OFFERING 2 of silver and stone. 17.78 x 4.45 centimeters. KEYPOINT 2 of silver, 8.89 x 4.45 centimeters. STONE SAW of silver and stone, 7.62 x 3.81 centimeters.
process has more in common with the reverent recycling of artifacts by the Aztecs than with contemporary polemics over such concepts as originality, representation, or presence. “I’m arguing for the physicality of these things,” she says of the Neolithic points. “They were made by the hand and used in the hand, and the connection with the hand matters to me. I’m continuously attracted by the power of small things. I’m not saying that we need to go back to making things by hand, but I think that there’s a respect for handmade things that we might be losing.”

While the stone points were small enough to fit in the hand, worked with such finesse as to recall sophisticated forms of decorative art, and free of any chips that would indicate actual use in the field, Slemmons could not overlook the fact that their intended purpose was to kill. Ultimately, her attempts to reconcile this realization with her attraction to the objects as historical embodiments of early human achievement in technology, and even a form of art, would affect the compositions into which she integrated them. Regarding them abstractly as implements for cutting, she began thinking of ways “to repurpose them as other kinds of tools.” Positioned as blades of shears, snips, and saws, axe heads, and even an abalone shucker, the points are integrated into Slemmons’s pendants in such a way that they retain their original identities but gain conceptual value from their reemployment in representations of tools. As objects functioning only in an imagistic and ornamental sense, the tool-pendants become frames that encourage the viewer to consider the Neolithic stone points as Slemmons sees them: not merely as ancient objects intended for the hunt but also, and more important, as reflections of a discerning sense of the aesthetics inherent in highly refined utilitarian form.

There is often an undeniable beauty to parts of functional objects intended for killing—the intricately etched steel blade of a saber, or the sleek, blue-gray barrel of a firearm, for instance. For Slemmons, this quality in the Neolithic artifacts was to some degree disturbing, but she recognized that it could be contextualized to elicit more positive associations. “I was thinking about the killing of animals for food and survival and linking survival with ceremony,” she explains. “I thought of serving up the work like a feast in some way, an ancestral feast.” Consequently, some of the tool-pendants took the form of place settings in which more mundane utensils became, for example, a silver spoon with a corner-notched projectile point.
embedded at the junction of bowl and neck, a knife with a leaf-shaped Neolithic point for a blade, and a fork with trident-like tines fashioned from a trio of contracting-stemmed triangular stone points. These evocative utensil-pendants have proved to display effectively, both visually and conceptually, alongside handmade paper bowls, products of Slemmons’s recent experiences with craftspersons in Oaxaca, Mexico. What, after all, could be more appropriate for work that is implicitly collaborative with anonymous ancient ancestors than the context of a table reverently set for a convention of artists in absentia? 

SUGGESTED READING