

metalsmith

ART DESIGN JEWELRY METAL



Out of
the Dark

Matter and
Meaning

Silver Linings

Objects
at Hand

Between Object and Idea



Teem IX, 2015
nylon, dye, pigment
3 1/8 x 3 1/8 x 2"

The Jewelry of Timothy Veske-McMahon

BY TONI GREENBAUM



Teem XI, 2015
nylon, pigment
5 1/8 x 5 7/8 x 1 1/8"

Sloom I, 2012
aluminum, veneer,
powdercoating
4 x 3 1/8 x 2 3/8"

Sloom II, 2012
aluminum, veneer,
powdercoating
5 1/8 x 2 x 1 5/8"



TIMOTHY VESKE-MCMAHON INVESTIGATES the space between reality and fantasy, material and ephemeral, substance and symbol, exploration and revelation. Using materials and tropes harvested from personal experience—what he terms “oneselfishness”—Veske-McMahon makes jewelry that speaks of “the delicate balance of adult life.”¹ Through collectively recognized logograms, he prompts us to view the truth from different perspectives in order to debunk fundamental assumptions: “A boy is like a boy, a marriage is like a marriage, and hunger is like hunger.”² The results are mysterious, provocative, eloquent, and universal.

Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There by Lewis Carroll provides a fitting metaphor for Veske-McMahon’s practice. In the opening passages, Alice disputes the tableau she glimpses within her drawing room mirror. Like Alice, Veske-McMahon realizes that mirrors do not reflect but rather reverse what is placed before them, presenting a world that is backwards. A mirror is something we take for granted as conveying fact, but it gives false representation. “We seek out and delve into mirrors for clarifying affirmation,” he states, “but...are met with a foreign body [taking] hold of our sense of familiarity, slyly perpetuating an alienating sense of self.”³ In his artist’s statement for “Mirror Milk,”⁴ a recent exhibition at Brooklyn Metalworks, Veske-McMahon writes: “[The] perceived closeness of similarity and familiarity is a deception. A fictitious shorthand we use in identifying ourselves within society and relationships.”⁵ His jewels, likewise, question what is real; they distort the characteristics of common objects, offering inversions as certitudes.

In 2012, inspired by contemporary Estonian jewelry, particularly that of Tanel Veenre, as well as encouragement from Iris Eichenberg, head of the metals department at Cranbrook Academy of Art, where he was pursuing a MFA, Veske-McMahon visited Tallinn for two months, renting bench space in a collective studio and “just walking around.” He was captivated by the local building vernacular, which features drain pipes, ornate, brightly colored doors, and ironwork, and that visual integrity, along with his lack of funds and access to metalsmithing supplies, inspired him to experiment with readily



Teem XII, 2015
nylon, dye, pigment
4 1/2 x 3 1/8 x 3/4"

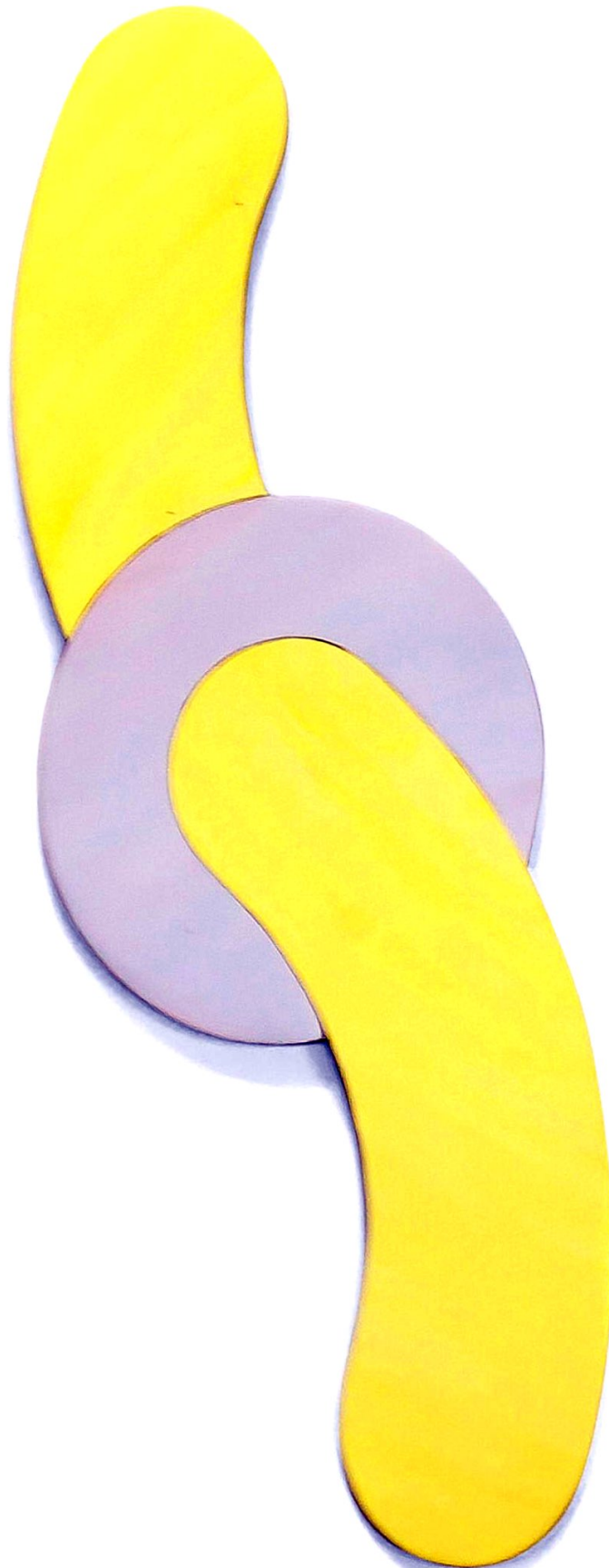
available materials. He sawed cheap aluminum stock into flat shapes that recall kayak paddles, drilling them with holes to evoke the patterns found on brushes. The shapes were annealed, bent, and spray-painted to form "speculative objects," titled "Sloom," an old English word for "slumber," a state where everything is experienced slightly off kilter. As a result of their folded position, these works maintain a condition of perpetual self-observation, as well as the illusion of reflexive encounter with an entity having no front or back.

Upon his return to Cranbrook, Veske-McMahon developed the "Sloom" series further by adding surfaces of high polish, powdercoat, inlay, or wood veneer. These ambiguous, pseudosexual forms are reminiscent of both industrial tools and domestic utensils, with some surfaces partially sandblasted to convey wear but also endurance, indicative of Veske-McMahon's overriding optimism.

The "Helve" (archaic term for "grip") series derives from tool handles found in a Tallinn hardware store, familiar but at the same time different from those sold in America. Haunted by them at Cranbrook, Veske-McMahon began to

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Borne III, 2014
repurposed plastic,
aluminum
5 ⁷/₈ x 2 ³/₈ x ³/₈"

Helve IV, 2012
ebony, sterling silver,
powdercoating
3 1/8 x 4 x 2 3/8"



Helve IX, 2012
ebony, copper, powdercoating
14 1/2 x 13 x 4 3/8"

turn wood on a lathe, which resulted in organic, erotic shapes—some equivocal, others more explicit—a portent of the frank sexuality to be embraced by the “Glyph” and “Teem” series to come.

After completing his MFA, Veske-McMahon returned to Estonia for six months, three of them as artist-in-residence at the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn. Feeling isolated because of the cold winter climate, long dark days, and difficulty with verbal communication, he again sought accessible, inexpensive materials with which to make “badges” that expressed his feeling of alienation. Remembering the ideas that ensued after spotting tools and implements at the Tallinn hardware store, he scoured an office supply center, finding boxes of untouched but nonetheless faded children’s plastic paint trays, “saddened,” as it were, by a weak manufacturing process and/or disuse. Though old and worn down, to Veske-McMahon they exuded an aura of hope. He laminated the trays with textured aluminum and cut them into everyday shapes to compose a lexicon of glyphs. Some of the characters are instantly recognizable, if abstract; for example, a baby’s pacifier, dollar sign, ampersand, or mitten. Others are more oblique and vaguely phallic. He coupled some symbols, hanging each pair from a neck cord handwoven to recall

friendship bracelets, and even fabricated two large, dense necklaces of interlocking elements that bring to mind Otto Künzli’s *Big American Neckpiece*. Some glyphs, called *Borne* (bearer of a coded message), were fashioned as brooches to function as emotionally loaded insignias of affiliation or viewpoint that “simultaneously offer and withhold information,” he says.

If a single theme keeps recurring in Veske-McMahon’s practice, it is the longing for home and family, and the comfort, stability, and perceived permanence that they promise. In the “Sloom” series, some of the shapes were inspired by 1950s armoires and vanities, with colorations derived from the era’s gentle pastel hues, adopted during a time when post-World War II hopefulness was at its peak. His work channels the redemptive spirit of Robert Gober’s sculpture, which also employs markers of domesticity, such as sinks, chairs, and playpens, to probe sexuality and relationships.

Veske-McMahon lives in Brooklyn, New York, but is married to an Estonian man living in Vilnius, Lithuania. Since his marriage, he has developed a deep affection for Estonia, a Baltic country of pagan origin, spiritually rooted in nature, with a history of conquest by Viking, Danish, Swedish, and Teutonic invaders and, later, Soviet annexation. Estonia has been a democratic parliamentary

Borne X, 2015
repurposed plastic, aluminum
4 x 4 1/4 x 3/8"

Borne VI, 2015
repurposed plastic, aluminum
5 x 3 3/8 x 3/8"



republic since 1991, but folk traditions have been proudly maintained to produce a strong material culture based upon the native vernacular. Veske-McMahon discovered examples of such imagery when he unearthed a layer of block-printed wallpaper beneath sheets of old newsprint and clumps of overgrown moss at his in-laws' house in Haapsalu. Similarly, in the archives of the Estonian National Museum in Tartu, he viewed distinctive village knitting patterns on display. Upon returning to New York, Veske-McMahon embarked upon a system to "blow up" renderings of the indigenous motifs he had documented by "wrapping them around" nylon 3D printed brooches through marbling and hydrographic transfer—the perfect techniques for objects that he views as thoughts "willed into being."

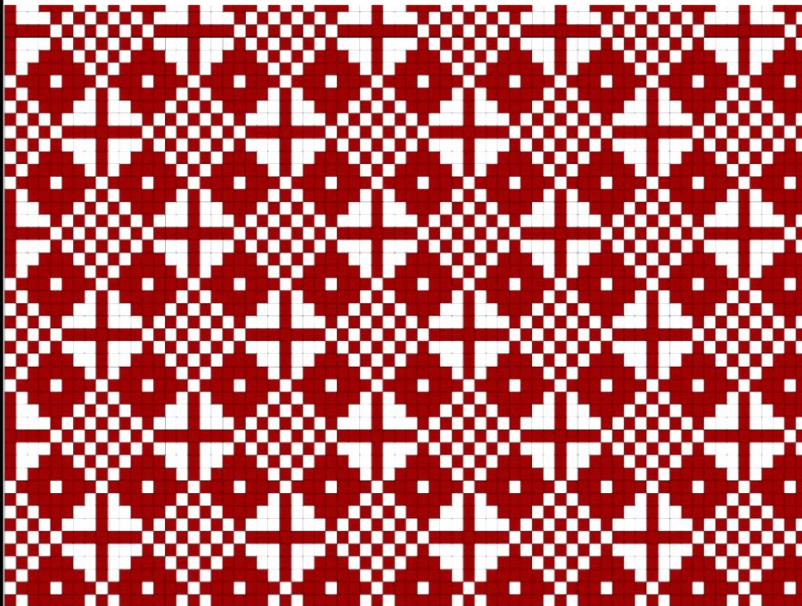
The "Teem" series, born of this 3D printing process, "indicates a theme of life-bearing, a want of lineage,"⁶ Veske-McMahon says, concepts with which he wrestles. *Teem XI* conjoins childlike innocence with grownup sexuality, taking the form of an open-ended pretzel that terminates in a Mary Jane sandal on one "foot" and an exposed sock—or is it a condom?—on the other. A pattern, adapted from his grandmother's vintage Marimekko textiles, covers the surface of the brooch, contributing a sense of nostalgia as well as intergenerational bonding. He fashioned *Teem XII* as "knitted knitting needles," printed with an 1880 pattern adapted from a pair of Suure-Jaani mittens in the collection of the Estonian National Museum. The two "needles" comprising *Teem XII* are twisted and intertwined because they have no yarn, perhaps emblematic of the artist and his partner's childless union, while the homey surface pattern teems with both matrimonial bliss and an aesthetic enchantment with his husband's country of origin.

Despite its pathos, there is surreal humor to Veske-McMahon's purposefully bewildering iconography, which hands the viewer only enough information to stimulate "a new kind of itch."⁷ The improbable combinations that comprise the "Glyph" and "Borne" series span toys to toilets: a broken comb sits atop a hot water bottle; a bone protrudes from a sandwich; a mustache intersects with a chicken drumstick; a ring encircles an undulating sausage (connoting the ever-present condom).

In her 1967 installation, *Three Spoons*, which, in actuality, involves *four* spoons, Yoko Ono played with the "gap between language and object,"⁸ stating that the work hinges on "illusional beliefs, illusional situations, illusional relationships."⁹ A supplemental object—the fourth spoon—completes an ill-defined set, standing in for the neglected, alienated, isolated, and ignored. Veske-McMahon charts a similar course, where words for things hold meaning apart from their materiality, possessing a related but independent function. They are "thoughts and feelings that have pristine clarity internally, but are awkward and unreliable once spoken,"¹⁰ he says.

Timothy Veske-McMahon's jewelry combines intellect, emotion, signifiers, and things. It encourages

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us to perceive the world in all its variety and nuance. He strives to make “loss-less” objects “that are confounded enough to avoid...sudden definition and compartmentalization by prior experience,”¹¹ he says, believing that it is only in a “choreographed middle space” between object and viewer that one can synthesize information and meaning. His oeuvre bravely inhabits that region, raising our awareness of life’s many facets and fictions.

Estonian knitting pattern and knit sample from Suure-Jaani (used to hydrographically transfer onto *Teem XII*, 2015)

Toni Greenbaum is a Brooklyn-based art historian specializing in 20th- and 21st-century jewelry and metalwork.

1. *mirror milk: New Works* by Timothy Veske-McMahon, April 18–May 26, 2015, exhibition announcement, Brooklyn Metal Works.
2. *Ibid.*, “From the artist.”
3. *Ibid.*
4. The title is inspired by Alice’s query to her pet kitten as to whether it thinks it would be given milk in the flipped world, and, if so, would it be good to drink?
5. *Op. cit.* 2.
6. Timothy Veske-McMahon, email to Toni Greenbaum, 21 June 2015.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Wall text accompanying installation of Yoko Ono, *Three Spoons*, in *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971*, May 17–September 7, 2015, Museum of Modern Art, NYC.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Op. cit.* 6.
11. *Ibid.*

Furthermore:
www.timothymcmahon.com