

# Remains of the Day Contemporary Reliquaries

BY LYNN COOL



GINA WESTERGARD  
*Flor de Muerto*, 2013  
sterling, copper, gold leaf, black  
onyx, paint  
4 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 4 1/4"  
PHOTO: AARON PADEN



BECKY MCDONAH  
*Lost Connection: A Reliquary for the  
Telephone Cord*, 2012  
copper, sterling, fine silver, pearls,  
onyx, enamel, telephone parts  
11 x 6 x 6"  
PHOTO: BECKY MCDONAH



VENETIAN  
*Crescent of al-Zahir*, 1350  
 Fatimid rock crystal, gilded  
 silver mounting  
 Collection Nuremberg,  
 Germanisches Nationalmuseum  
 PHOTO: LYNN COOL

THOUGH SEPARATED BY thousands of years, an Egyptian sarcophagus within a pyramid, a Christian altar casket in a Gothic church, a Buddhist saint's *sarira* in a pagoda, and Jewish *tefillin* boxes that bind the word of God on the body, all contain a precious substance in a sanctified space. As reliquaries and relics, their stratified yet interdependent relationships slip between ritual, devotion, and commemoration.

The Latin *reliquiae*, meaning things “left behind,” provides an etymological underpinning for a vast thematic territory. In conjunction with its reliquary, a relic that is connected to a significant person, place or event aspires to transcend time and invite devotion. In addition to sanctifying a church, a Christian reliquary and its relic once brought prestige, power and wealth to a city through an influx of thousands of pilgrims yearning to be transformed. While the carved, jeweled caskets of early Byzantine reliquaries obscured saintly remains, later versions featured viewing windows.<sup>1</sup> Often bearing no resemblance to its interior relic, the medieval arm-shaped reliquary was chosen, as art historian Cynthia Hahn asserts, for its “potential for touch and gesture.”<sup>2</sup> These so-called “speaking reliquaries” reverberate between container and contained, communicating to the devout on multiple levels.<sup>3</sup>

It is intriguing to ponder the origins of the reliquary object, *Crescent of al-Zahir*. It is not known when, nor how, its 11th-century Fatimid rock crystal crescents, inscribed with a Kufic prayer to the reigning caliph, were transferred into the Venice treasury—only that in 1350 they were used to create a monstrance reliquary for a relic embellished with gold-threaded leaves and tiny pearl flowers.<sup>4</sup> Missing since the 19th century, its finial cross would have been a jarring cultural revision that counters with the rock crystal's affiliation with the Islamic world. The *al-Zahir* reliquary—with its cathedral architecture, near mystical, crystal crescents composed as an ethereal halo, and jewel-like central relic—presents a rich multilayered message, with all of its components coalescing to form an object of heavenly spirituality. Whatever the motivation for this consolidation, the amalgamated treasure represents a unique and imaginative object of devotion.

A contemporary work with a similar hybridity grew from Lin Stanionis's fascination with decorative ornamentation, creation myths and religious imagery. Her brooch *In illo tempore* is an expressive composite driven by an orchestration of movement. At the center of a cartouche, a shield appears to have been thrust with so much force that its edges melt against the impact. This action creates a golden drip-edged halo that radiates around a ground of tiny feathers prong-set with fossils and precious gemstones. Like the *Crescent of al-Zahir's* inter-blended timeframes and cultures, Stanionis's piece is a collision of physics, geology and anthropology and remains open to broad interpretation.

LIN STANIONIS  
*In illo tempore*, 2012  
 18k and 24k yellow gold,  
 tanzanite, dinosaur bones, pearls  
 4 x 3 1/4 x 1/2"  
 PHOTO: JON BLUMB



**To the contemporary artist, the reliquary format offers complex themes including commemoration, transformation, embodiment and fragmentation.**

To the contemporary artist, the reliquary format offers complex themes including commemoration, transformation, embodiment and fragmentation, especially when involving a visually accessible relic. Paul Thek's "Technological Reliquaries," from the mid-1960s,

combined geometric minimalism with a visceral component, such as a resin body cast or an unidentifiable chunk of flesh, visible within vitrines or cagelike grills, that speak about the body and its corruption. More recently, the collaborative reliquaries of Tim Tate and Marc Petrovich offer the duality of a visually accessible, yet impenetrable, glass barrier. Featuring found objects, hand blown glass elements and small video monitors, these works are a multisensual exploration of the human condition.<sup>5</sup>

The materiality of glass becomes an integral aspect of Becky McDonah's *Lake Defense: Reliquary for Mosquito Repellent*. McDonah retains the fervency of the divine, expressed through secular terms. The glass vitrine's partial accessibility, implies the relic's supreme worth and possible instability. The message of a prime element, in this case the bottled insect repellent formula, is further conveyed through the architectonic substrate of the reliquary itself. Beneath the bottle hangs a register of blood droplets; the deep red column overlaid with a weblike craquelure supports an outer ring of warning capsules; and at the base large metal mosquitoes dive headlong into troughs filled with a blood-like substance. In *Lost Connection: A Reliquary for the Telephone Cord*, McDonah abandons the glass membrane for a full relic-to-reliquary fusion of anthropomorphic telephone poles and inanimately splayed phone cord. Here the industrial relic opposes the ornamented reliquary base, embellished with twisted wire and jewels. Like souvenirs, or snapshots, McDonah's evocative relics are conduits of experience communicated through the reliquary framework.

Organic growth, a recurring thematic of reliquaries, is a favored metaphor for Gina Westergard, who creates both functional and symbolic funerary urns and reliquaries. In *Flor de Muerto*, the central element can be removed from the composite vessel of bowl forms, allowing one to carry the deceased's remains within a hinged compartment. The starkness of a hammer-textured silver exterior amplifies the interior's green foliage and dying blooms that convey a yearning for renewal. Although precisely serrated leaf edges seem to reverberate with the inevitability of decay and death, the work's vertical orientation directs one's attention upward to infer the promise of an eternal afterlife.

BECKY MCDONAH  
*Lakefront Defense: A Reliquary for Mosquito Repellent*, 2000  
copper, sterling, glass, citronella, repellent  
15 x 11 x 11"  
PHOTO: ALAN MCCOY





JOE MUENCH  
*Hank*, 2012  
 brass, steel, sterling silver, slate  
 5 x 7 x 5 1/2"  
 PHOTO: INSIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

While Westergard's reliquary has the ability to house actual remains, Joe Muench's *Hank* intermixes both physical and metaphorical aspects. When the lid is removed and placed alongside the box, an intriguing diptych reveals itself. The lid's straightforward portrait of an intricately chased and repousséd man contrasts with the interior's stepped plateau that hosts a seductive abstraction hovering above a slate bottom. Endowed with a metaphysical energy, the torqued anticlastic relic is Muench's original, yet it also references Heikki Seppa's iconic Hyperbolic Paraboloid Extension. As a prime signifier, the relic's enshrinement communicates

a reverence not only for the metalsmith's teacher, but also for the life-changing experience of enlightenment and growth.

Much like the late-antiquity practice of *spolia* (the reuse of architectural materials on new monuments), a modern-day found object can become a vehicle for creative subtexts. In near-surrealist fashion, Truike Verdegaal constructs a dialogue between her subject's bodily memento and juxtaposed found objects. In 2013, the Apeldoorn foundation commissioned the Dutch goldsmith to design a commemorative ring as part of the biennial Wilhelmina oeuvre-prize awarded to sculptor Hans van Houwelingen. To express the sculptor's ability to merge the historical and contemporary spheres, Verdegaal bezel-set van Houwelingen's two wisdom teeth within a gold crosshatched engraved ring. *Wilhelmina-ring (seal ring)* for HvH is a transmutation that can literally impress the dental relic—the very essence of the artist—into permeable wax, clay or paper, thereby substantiating the sculptor's character, prestige and autonomy. When not worn, the ring lives within a found fuse box, in itself a semiotic tie to van Houwelingen's unbending artistic convictions—in Verdegaal's words, his propensity for "sinking his teeth into his work" and persisting "until the fuse has blown."<sup>6</sup>

In a sense, all artists who incorporate found objects are connected to the reliquary, especially those who have researched its history. Joseph Cornell's reliquary-like organizations of the humble and ephemeral draw the viewer in, as if to decode some universal truth. Like Cornell, Keith Lo Bue integrates a plethora of materials

TRUIKE VERDEGAAL  
*Wilhelmina-ring (seal ring)* for HvH,  
 2013  
 18k gold, sterling silver, old fuse  
 casket, polish brushes, wisdom-teeth  
 of Dutch artist H.v.H.  
 casket, 4 x 2 3/4 x 1 5/8"  
 PHOTO: EDDO HARTMANN





KEITH LO BUE  
*Poetical Modesty*, 2010  
 antique glass with fused digital imagery, leather,  
 steel, 19th-century carved wooden box, candelabra,  
 brass, plated copper chain, cherry wood, dyed paua  
 shell, turnbuckle, 18th- and 19th-century coins, clock  
 winding key, nickel silver, silk velvet, Czech crystal,  
 steel key, brass drawer pull, waxed linen thread, fresh  
 water pearls, steel wire, brass flowers, soil  
 23 1/2 x 11 3/4 x 4 3/8"

into his works, and incorporates glass or magnifying  
 lenses to protect, obscure or enlarge the relic. In his  
*Poetical Modesty*, glass becomes the elemental object-

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turned-subject within  
 which viewers may  
 be transfixed. Lo Bue  
 reconfigures a 19th-century  
 glass ambrotype photo  
 as a digitally fused  
 image, then enlivens this

Victorian portrait of a woman by creating a kinetic multi-  
 sensual experience. In a video of the piece in action,  
 Lo Bue presents an altered perception of time through  
 tightly framed camera shots of enmeshing chain-  
 driven gears and a ratchety raising and lowering of the  
 ambrotype. Thus the viewer witnesses the unfolding of  
 simultaneously ponderous and fleeting existence.

Hungarian-American Agnes Pal avoids the traditional  
 reliquary form but retains its associations through  
 references to Holocaust survivorship. The wearer of *Icy*

AL FARROW  
*Trigger Finger of Santa Guerra (VIII)*, 2007  
bullets, guns, glass, shot, steel, bone  
19 x 16 1/2 x 16 1/2"  
IMAGE COURTESY OF  
CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY



*Descent*, a brooch with a rough-hewn upper register, diagonally traversing silver wires, and an uncut aquamarine, becomes a living reliquary, archiving Pal's experience of a forced-march camp relocation down a mountain.

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In another reliquary of personal and collective memory, Pal's sculpture

*Numbered* raises the question, "What would it take to burst someone's spirit?" Two hundred and twenty-four copper squares, hydraulically constrained into wrinkled, torn domes, bear portraits that symbolically represent family, friends and neighbors she noticed missing after the war.

Re-contextualized religious iconography offers much to contemplate within Al Farrow's sculpture. Farrow entices the viewer to closely examine his works' intricacies, in what appear to be medieval body-part

reliquaries, domed caskets and architectural places of worship. Only at point-blank range do we discover that the works are constructed of weapon and armillary parts. In contrast, the interior of a domed shrine in *Trigger Finger of Santa Guerra (VIII)* presents a human digit as the relic of Farrow's imagined saint. Through the work's materials and loaded architecture, the viewer is confronted with political commentary—literal and implied. Farrow asserts that the works' narratives do not criticize any particular group, but reflect his distaste for war that is often entangled with religion. And he is careful to avoid creating sculpture in direct conflict with a particular religion's edicts.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas Farrow questions the essence of religion, Kristin Diener's jewelry—with its exuberant conglomerations of glass eyes, toys, and beads—appears to channel and celebrate the multiethnic material culture of the Southwest Native American, Russian Orthodox and her own Amish and Mennonite backgrounds. Sharing ties to potent carriers of remembrance, such as pilgrim badges, memento mori and Victorian mourning jewelry, her pendant *Anti-War Medal: Nighty Night* masquerades its relic as a naïve bauble, but its peacefully sleeping cherub enclosed within a chain-linked bomb cloud asks the viewer to consider the potential of ultimate demise. A deceptively simple jewelry object, Diener's piece is eloquent as a relic abstraction of war's inherent outcome.

All of the artists here are united through their ties to the reliquary, but each follows his or her own schematic, with expressly divergent outcomes. In medieval Western Europe, the reliquary and relic helped guide and inspire those seeking reassurance of life after death. We may not be similarly transfigured by an object in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, the works here engage us in meaningful ways through their constructs of memory. Like these artists, we may delve further into the essence of the sublime through objects that speak with the voices of reliquaries and their relics.

1. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body" in *Medieval Religion*, New York: Zone Books, 271.
2. Cynthia Hahn, "The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries," *Gesta* 36, no.1 (1997):20.
3. Ibid.
4. Avinoam Shalem, "Histories of Belonging and George Kubler's Prime Object," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 3 (2011): 3.
5. See Julie K. Hanus, "2 by 2," *American Craft*, vol. 71, no.2.
6. Truike Verdegaal, communication with author, April 27, 2014.
7. Agnes Pal, communication with author, December 2005.
8. Al Farrow, YouTube.com, April 30, 2014. See also Jennifer Cross Gans, "Al Farrow: Peaceable Provocateur," *Metalsmith*, vol. 30, no.3, and Roy Stevenson, "Al Farrow's Modern-Day Reliquaries," *Sculpture*, vol. 30, no.6.

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AGNES PAL  
*Icy Descent*, 2004  
sterling silver, aquamarine  
2 1/2 x 2 x 1"  
PHOTO: DON CASPER

KRISTIN DIENER  
*Anti-War Medal: Nighty Night*, 2007  
sterling silver, fine silver, brass,  
synthetic ruby, toy, steel wire,  
ribbon  
3 1/4 x 2 3/4 x 5/8"  
PHOTO: MARGOT GEIST