

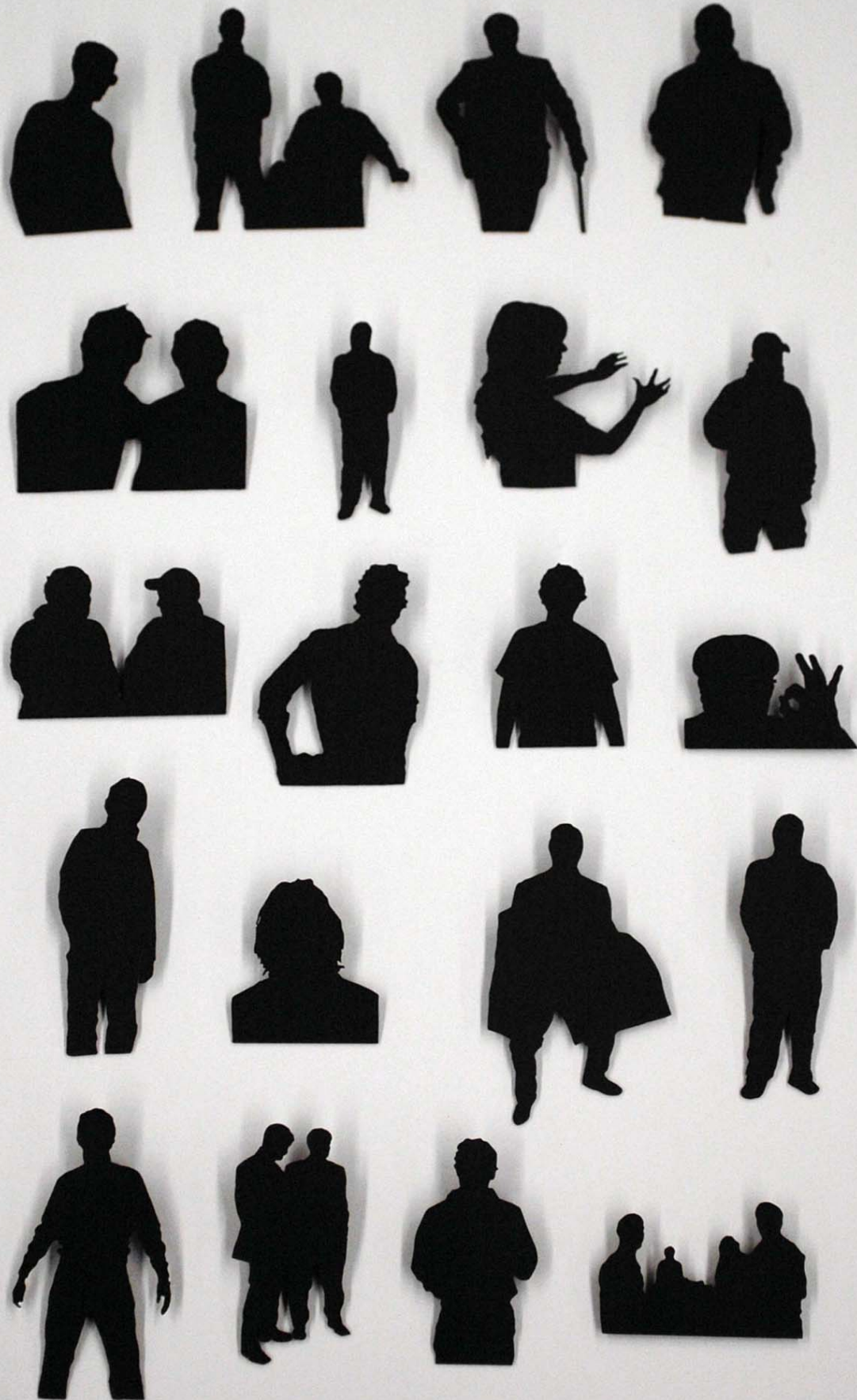
Graphic Content Counterculture Imagery in Contemporary Jewelry

BY GABRIEL CRAIG



MICHAEL DALE BERNARD
Hoist, 2009
aluminum, stainless
steel, sterling silver,
vinyl, powder coat
5 x 4 x 1"
PHOTO: MICHAEL DALE BERNARD

ARTHUR HASH
"Silhouette" Series, 2005–present
steel, paint, pin stems
dimensions variable
PHOTO: ARTHUR HASH



IN OUR CURRENT media-literate culture, images are integral to the way we acquire and understand information about our world and surroundings. We are confronted daily with all manner of print media, digital images (on LCD and retina screens), and time-based media (digital video, film, and television).

Despite this image saturation and our increasing visual literacy, contemporary jewelry and metalwork, primarily a three-dimensional medium, seldom borrows strategies and formal language from graphic art forms such as comics, graffiti, and photography—due largely to the difficulty in translating two-dimensional imagery into metal. Metal is a resilient material, limited in its susceptibility to chromatic mark-making. Contemporary metalworking paradigms uphold process and material experimentation, a working methodology that is arrived at honestly, a natural outgrowth of allowing the metal (or often other materials) to participate in the creative dialogue.

Producing images in metal requires a certain disposition, a persistence that borders on stubbornness. To render

precise images in metal, as do the artists presented here, the graphic form must first be created by another means—often digital—then later realized in metal through specific and exacting techniques.

If the initial image requires production in another two-dimensional medium, the logical question becomes, why make the extra effort to fix the image in metal? For Arthur Hash, Michael Dale Bernard, Loring Taoka, Marissa Saneholtz, and Andrew Kuebeck, the reason is undoubtedly a dual commitment to expressing identity and personal experiences while maintaining a love of craft process. But even more rare than the simple use of transparent imagery is these artists' use of graphic forms in the service of cultural commentary and even counterculture proclamations. The reason to use flat imagery in a medium that does not lend itself readily to such treatment is to enhance potent and communicative image-based work. These artists embrace the jewelry (or metal) object, recognizing it as a delivery mechanism for their message, but they also hold it at some distance by making decisions that favor communication over composition, marketability, or even acceptance.

Arthur Hash began his "Silhouette" series of laser-cut steel brooches in 2005, using silhouettes of figures that are identifiably modern in their dress, posture, and manner. While the silhouette form dates back to the eighteenth century, Hash's antecedent is undoubtedly silversmith Christina Y. Smith, whose work in the late 1980s and 1990s repopularized the silhouette in contemporary metalwork. However, through his use of distinctly pop culture graphic forms, Hash has more in common with counterculture silhouette titan Kara Walker.

For a number of years Hash's popularity rested on his ability to create flat images that subverted our expectations of their subject while increasingly

commenting on societal issues. Two of Hash's more successful series in this vein are his scattered *Guns* and the companion *Birds*. Made for the 2009 exhibition "Re/Thinking Design for Consumption," they are an overt commentary on the ongoing wars in Iraq and

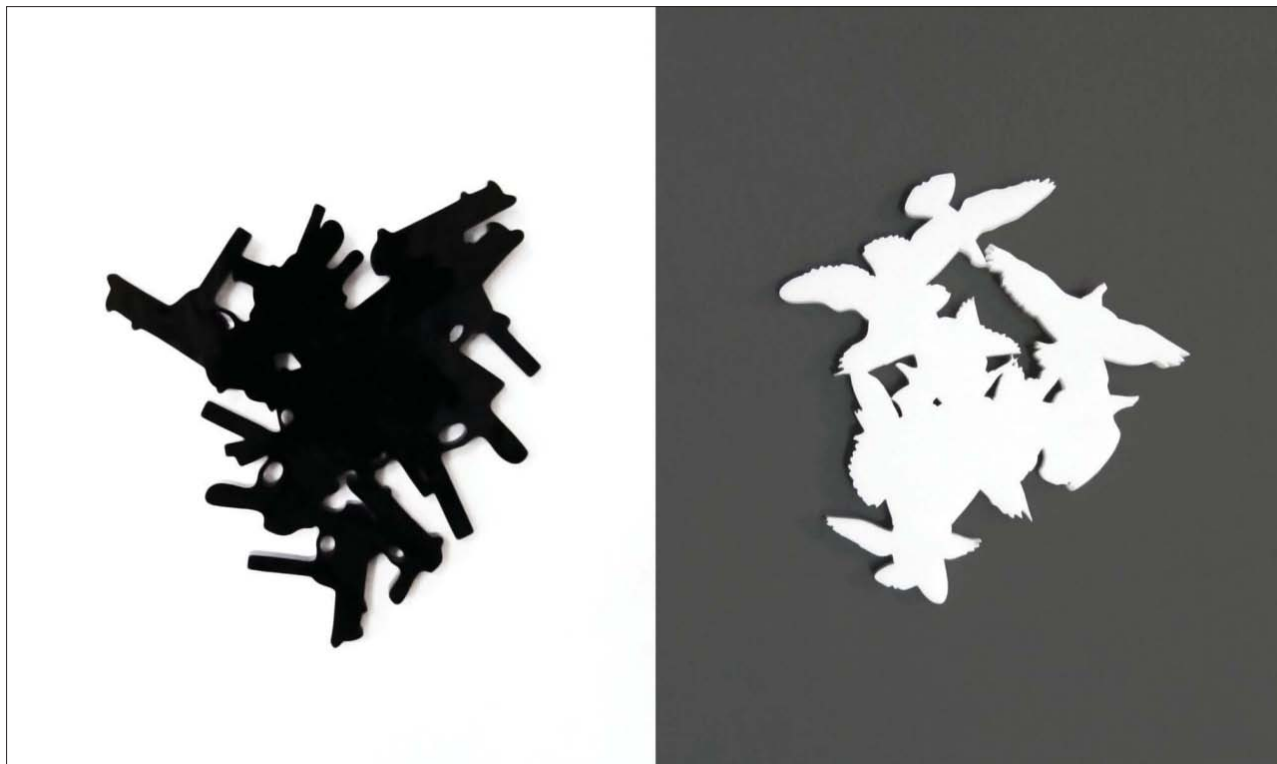
Afghanistan. But Hash's single most iconographic work is undoubtedly his pink chainsaw (*Chainsaw Brooch*), which renders an inordinately masculine object androgynous by the simple application of paint. The pink chainsaw is profoundly palatable; it is seductive.

The work of Michael Dale Bernard, which emerged simultaneously with Hash's, offers a bridge between metals technic and pure street art style and ethos. Bernard, an unabashed product of Los Angeles, constructs images in metal using the same cutout, layering, and stencil techniques as street art superstars Banksy, Swoon, and Shepard Fairey. The

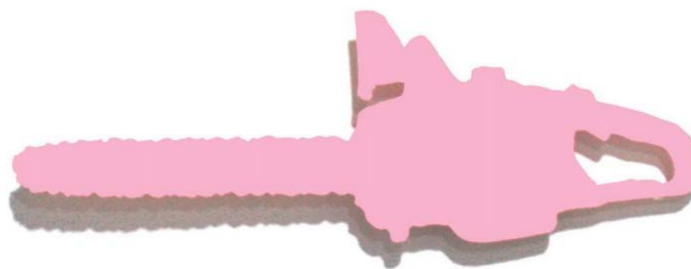
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BANKSY
Kissing Coppers, 2005
spray paint on wall
BRIGHTON, UNITED KINGDOM



ARTHUR HASH
Guns and Birds, 2009
laser cut Plexiglas, brass
dimensions variable
PHOTO: ARTHUR HASH



ARTHUR HASH
Chainsaw Brooch, 2007
steel, paint, pin stem
dimensions variable
PHOTO: ARTHUR HASH

assumed sociopolitical context of much street art permeates Bernard's work. Bernard's notable 2009 "Ornate Perspectives" series combined images of industrial diesel machines and decorative damask patterns in two-point perspective, creating a stylistic contrast emblematic of the street art approach. Though impressive and intricate, in terms of content "Ornate Perspectives" is some of Bernard's tamest work.

As he releases several new series each year, trying

to characterize Bernard is like trying to hit a moving target. In one piece from his 2009 "Urban LTD" series, Bernard merges a newsstand with a rabbit trap, while in another he amalgamates a nine-point trophy buck and a surveillance camera. "Urban LTD" rewards patient viewers who riddle out Bernard's collision of iconographic symbols, simultaneously humorous and critical.

Though Bernard works within a street art paradigm, he



MICHAEL DALE BERNARD
Buckeye, 2009
stainless steel, sterling
silver, powder coat
2 x 2 x 1/4"
PHOTO: MICHAEL DALE BERNARD

LORING TAOKA
(Untitled), 2010
brass, spray paint
4 x 8 x 4 1/2"
PHOTO: LORING TAOKA



flaunts a deep commitment to craft. Each piece features several intricately cut layers of metal sheet, finicky cold connections sometimes numbering into the hundreds, and an absolute obsession with surface. While at first the link between the heirloom permanence of craft and the transience of street art may seem incompatible, Bernard cites the obsessively hand-cut wheat paste posters of Swoon as commensurate with the highest standards of craftsmanship. Bernard's exhibition venues may be institutional, but his approach shares both dedication and visual strategies with street art.

The most curious thing about the metalwork of Loring Taoka is how, despite its overtly racial and confrontational subject matter, it remains so palatable. Taoka blends the banal language of modern abstract geometric sculpture (situated in front of glass towers the world over) with loaded symbols of Japanese culture, which he deploys through simple positive and negative shapes and spray paint. Taoka, an Asian-American of mixed ancestry, confronts the stereotypes he encounters by forcing us to see the racial epithets and "othering" he encounters, further drawing attention to their ignorance and perversity. Taoka's "50/50" series is painted yellow and white because that is how he is viewed by society. He uses symbols like chopsticks, soy sauce bottles, and ikebana scissors to further flaunt the indignity.

Yes, Taoka's imagery is blunt, but that is exactly the point. This blatantly confrontational reclamation strategy—of a victimized person or group using the odious symbols of their oppression to desensitize, disarm, and critique the language of their oppressor—is not unique. A simplistic reclamation tactic is also the mode of lionized artists of color such as Carrie Mae Weems, who, like Taoka, appropriates the symbols and language of oppression in her placidly subversive images. Work that directly engages race has been a very long time coming to the homogeneous

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field of contemporary metalsmithing. And while some of the excitement and mystique of the artist evaporates in their directness, for Taoka it is clear the desire to communicate is more important than the art object.

Marissa Saneholtz appropriates images from women's comic books of the 1950s and '60s, presenting a historical viewpoint yet to be challenged by the civil rights and feminist movements. The wholesale rejection of this type of sexist imagery by the feminist establishment over the past 40 years renders it a cultural orphan, detritus of a discarded gender stereotype. In the field of contemporary jewelry and metalwork that came of age concurrently with (and in many ways was defined by) feminist thought, gendered imagery and symbols are nothing new; one can't help but recognize a



LORING TAOKA
Sheer/Shear, 2010
brass, spray paint
6 x 2 x 4"
PHOTO: LORING TAOKA



ANDREW KUEBECK
I've Never Seen One Like That Before..., 2009
3 x 2 x 1/4"
sterling silver, fine silver,
enamel, toner decal
PHOTO: KEVIN MONTAGUE



ANDREW KUEBECK
A Boar and a Cad, 2009
sterling silver, fine silver,
enamel, toner decal
3 x 1 1/2 x 1/4"
PHOTO: KEVIN MONTAGUE

bit of Kathleen Browne, Jessica Calderwood, or even Roy Lichtenstein in Saneholtz's work.

However, by deftly and lovingly rendering these images in the labor-intensive technique of champlevé enamel, Saneholtz reclaims the images as kitsch from the collective memory of women. Personally, Saneholtz acknowledges continued gender inequality, but also recognizes that today an empowered woman does not fit into one archetypal mold; a stay-at-home mom can be just as "liberated" as a working woman. Saneholtz's imagery and approach function almost seamlessly within

inclusive, third-wave feminist doctrine, and pave the way for broader use of non-conforming gendered imagery within contemporary jewelry.

Like Saneholtz, Andrew Kuebeck appropriates his form language from the 1950s and '60s. In his 2009 "Figure Study" series he looks to alternative representations of men, specifically the hypermasculine and homoerotic imagery of male physique magazines. Occupying a precarious cultural position, publications such as *Champion* and *Athletic Model Guild* were produced implicitly as early gay pornography, but marketed as men's health and fitness

magazines to escape social censure. Their images are distinctly soft-core and tasteful, showing suggestive poses of scantily clad or nude men, not so dissimilar from today's *Maxim* or *Playboy* magazines.

Rather than directly appropriating historical images, Kuebeck generates his own beefcake imagery, hiring models and conducting photo shoots in his studio. Through careful direction, model selection, use of props, and sepia printing of enamel decals, Kuebeck is able to clearly articulate the earlier works' stylistic footprint. But rather than a mere voyeuristic homage to earlier homoerotica, Kuebeck creates his own images in order to confuse the model's chronological origin, giving us subtle visual cues such as distinguishably

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contemporary tattoos and posture. This anachronistic representation of the male nude, presented in a marginalized historic mode, becomes a critique of the continued taboo placed on the male body within our culture. An additional layer of gender politics is heaped atop the work by way of its

realization as a brooch, a gendered format in itself. Just as with Hash's *Chainsaw Brooch*, Kuebeck's figures confuse gender associations. He advances the gay male body in contemporary jewelry beyond the inert shock tactics of Keith Lewis by presenting a dynamic confluence of history, sexuality, and craftsmanship in the tradition of photographers Horst, Mapplethorpe, and Ritts.

Though these artists share much in common, including friendship and collaboration, it seems unfair to say that their activities constitute anything more than simply the studio practice of five contemporary metal artists. There is no underlying trend other than that image making is a potent means of communication, which enables jewelry to participate in cultural commentary and counterculture proclamations. There is a certain amount of sacrilege in denying the primacy of material and process in craft, but to look deeper: craft's marginal status, both as a means of manufacturing and as an art form, awards it the mantle of a counterculture mode of production. While rendering arbitrary their materials and process, these counterculture image-makers embrace a progressive and cerebral conception of craft that speaks of the moment, of identity, of difference, and of gender. But perhaps most important is that the work speaks at all.

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www.andrewkuebeck.com
www.arthurhash.com
www.banksy.co.uk
www.carriemaeweems.net

MARISSA SANEHOLTZ
Trophy, 2009
 copper, enamel, sterling
 silver, dollhouse tin
 7 x 11 x 1/2"
 PHOTO: TIM THAYER

MARISSA SANEHOLTZ
Trophy (detail), 2009

