

CRUCIBLE, LEGACY, AND EMBODIMENT: MJ TYSON

BY SASHA NIXON

Right:

MJ Tyson in her Hoboken, New Jersey studio, 2019.

Photo courtesy of the author

MJ TYSON CREATES POWERFUL PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF IDENTITY by manipulating the social legacy contained within collected objects, and the disconnect between the longevity of these objects and our bodies, for which she was recently awarded the 2020 Art Jewelry Forum Young Artist Award. Tyson splits her time between her artistic practice, teaching at Pratt Institute, and serving as education coordinator and instructor at Brooklyn Metalworks. For her, teaching is an opportunity to give back to the jewelry community and contribute to the growth of future artists.

A New Jersey native, Tyson maintains a studio nestled in a quiet corner of Hoboken, inside an industrial building converted for artists. Within, she has devoted a large area to crates and shelves containing the gathered remains of lives—her raw materials. The rest of the room holds a bench, a casting station, and a large wooden work surface. A couch and a flood of natural light filtering through semi-sheer curtains create a peaceful and comfortable atmosphere.

Upon my arrival, Tyson greeted me: “I know you had suggested that maybe I could make something while you were here, but I thought I could destroy something.” This suggestion epitomizes the mercurial divide between the acts of creation and destruction; one generates the other, in a continual cycle. This perspective is characteristic of Tyson’s process. Her invitation to destroy is the perfect introduction to how she perceives the world and processes it through her work. Tyson explains,

“I am interested in funerary culture; the way that we behave around bodies and around the objects people collect around

themselves, objects that become extensions of the body. What is passed on and what is deemed a significant object? What is deemed waste and gets pushed away or discarded? We all collect things around ourselves as if we’re going to live forever. There is this interesting behavior that I observe around what people do with other people’s stuff when they die. I think that this behavior is a reflection of how we think about lives and bodies.”¹

Tyson’s work focuses on the sentimental ties between people and their possessions. Her interest in material culture and the ephemerality of value inspired her to gather objects from estate sales and reflect on cycles of death and rebirth and destruction and creation through objects. In her studio, Tyson set right to work, pulling a heart-shaped jewelry box, a teapot, a sugar dish, and several platters from a large plywood crate. These objects were then subjected to the blows of a hammer as she removed any fabric or plastic and manipulated them into more manageable shapes. After this first step, these disparate objects would be melted together, their collective sentimental power distilled into a single form—



The Attic, 2019
Reconstituted jewelry
7 x 5 x 1 in.
Photo courtesy of the artist



Pray for Us (with detail), 2019
Devotional medals, sterling silver
9 x 9 x 1 in. (21 in. long)
Photo courtesy of the artist

a process that recalls the creation of a reliquary or cremation urn, where the essence of a religious icon or individual is compressed within a single venerated object. Using an unconventional casting method, in which she holds a torch to the edge of these objects while holding them aloft, Tyson lets melted drops fall into a mold as their forms liquefy. Other objects that were placed inside the mold before the casting remain partially visible, serving as signposts, clues hinting at past lives.

The ingot mold Tyson uses invokes the recycling and distilling process and resonates with the deep history of metalsmithing, as a tool that has been used to repurpose metal since the Bronze Age. Its rectangular shape also evokes the filled negative space inside a box, a space where precious objects are kept.² For her more sculptural series such as *Homes*, Tyson created molds that evoke the four walls of a house. Here, all of the objects she melted down to form each structure were sourced from a single estate. While working on jewelry series like *Inheritance*, she allows herself more freedom, selecting widely from her accumulated collection of jewelry, carefully choosing objects that she intuitively feels are right for each piece.

In her *Bodies* series, Tyson allows herself to break from her restrained system of working. She uses recognizable vessel forms to suggest human bodies and transitions. These forms undergo certain processes in which they break or deform, decay or grow. For Tyson, this is a return to funerary practices, and an exploration of modern Western society's aversion to change, even in our bodies. She uses wax as a stand-in for the body, forming and distorting it as a reference to the way life molds flesh.

This desire for, and futility of, a wish for consistency is the common link between these bodies of work. In Western society it is assumed—erroneously—that objects will stay the same forever if cared for properly. Tyson manipulates the transformative quality of metal, therefore intervening in the lives of these objects. The physical form of heirloom jewelry evolves as it is passed down through generations. It may gain engravings or morph from a hat pin to a pendant as owners and fashions change. Just as the physical properties change, the piece's emotional significance changes. Sentimental meaning accrues like a patina with each change of hands through a family until, if sold at an estate sale, all can be lost, a traumatic event in the life of the object that echoes the death of the owner.

Tyson's work is meant to be treasured as if it were the distilled remains of a life or lives. She makes custom boxes for much of her

small-scale work as an indicator of its preciousness. In her studio, displayed on a filing cabinet, are the remains of vintage jewelry boxes of all sorts. What fascinates Tyson most is that when the covering is removed, she often discovers that they are recycled from signs or other objects pressed from their original use into a new form. Her next project explores the potential of these cases, and their power to impart significance to any object within.

Recently Tyson has been working with devotional medals; one such piece, *Pray for Us*, was featured during Tyson's 2019 NYC Jewelry Week exhibition. "What are saints and other religious figures if not models for our own lives in the face of mortality?"³ she says. For Tyson, these medals, found while sourcing material, symbolize "concern for the body and wishes for things like safety, wellbeing, and belonging. They disperse one symbolic body onto many physical bodies."⁴ In works like *Pray for Us*, Tyson has combined a mass of individual medals into a single collective piece, symbolically connecting many bodies, hopes, and wishes for the future.

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1 MJ Tyson. Studio visit and interview with the author. September 17, 2019. / 2 Graciela Gestoso Singer, "Small Ingots and Scrap Metal in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age," in *There and Back Again—the Crossroads II*. J. Mynářová; P. Onderka; P. Pavúk (eds.). Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Arts, 2015: 89. / 3 MJ Tyson. Statement provided to the author, April 10, 2020. / 4 Ibid.