

MJ Tyson: The Last Objects

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By Barbara Paris Gifford

The need to be remembered beyond our lifetime is often fulfilled through the passing down of precious possessions to our loved ones. There is comfort in knowing that a child, for example, might cherish wearing a pin her grandmother once wore. Heirlooms have the ability to bridge generations; their mere existence is replete with love and meaning. The reality, however, is that often

these prized objects sit in storage only to see the light of day during nostalgic moments and lose relevance for the current generation.

Recognizing this, MJ Tyson's work in the exhibition *The Last Objects* at Brooklyn Metal Works makes the practical argument that as generations change, so too should their objects. In her practice, Tyson partially melts down family treasures, leaving some fragments visible while creating sublime new pieces with the rest of the material. The show included twenty of Tyson's reincarnated jewels, displayed in plush-lined cases, and seven molten metal sculptures standing in front of paper scrolls with inscriptions, including sentimentalities, brand names, and metal type. As I glimpsed at the half-melted reading glasses, golden charms, and thin necklace chains, I wondered: were the memories that were once contained in them maintained or lost? Does the metal itself hold the meaning, or does the object?

Rhode Island School of Design-educated Tyson grew up in New Jersey and was

spellbound by the jewelry her family kept inside boxes in safe places. As Tyson recounted during a recent lecture, "When the jewelry came out of the box, usually a family story came with it." With each generation, the jewelry took on more meaning, not only as a vessel for memories from a grandmother, but from a daughter too. The objects' physicality often changed as well: a ring with a stone that once was a cherished aunt's pendant; a grandfather's bill clip that was later engraved; a growing collection of trinkets that were added to a family charm bracelet. Tyson became inspired by metal's ability to shape-shift and absorb new stories, all the while playing a key social role in keeping family lore alive.

Metal can be the perfect transformative substance: through the process of heating and cooling, it captures the materiality of change and exhibits a state of impermanence. When Tyson inherited a box of outmoded metal objects from her grandfather, she examined the pieces and melted them down to make new jewelry. She

left some of her grandfather's objects recognizable in the new pieces and showed the messy melting phase in between. Most of her jewelry reveals three states of being: the original metal object; the melted transformation; and the new, sublime piece. Each piece is kept in a velvet display box, specifically crafted to hug its form. The case is part of the artwork itself. Sumptuous fabric and startling colors emphasize the beauty and preciousness of the piece cradled inside.

Tyson transitioned from altering her loved-ones' metal to pursuing objects from estate sales. Empathizing with the deceased's family's hope that their metal items might have a new life elsewhere, Tyson carefully recorded the engravings from each piece she acquired before repurposing them. *30 Priscilla Street* shows the metal objects once contained within this address melted down, reshaped, and sitting, as a vessel, on an inscribed paper scroll. A shovel was left visible; an innocuous object now laden with symbolism.

Among the striated molten layers of a different sculpture, she



MJ Tyson, *30 Priscilla Street*, 2018, personal objects from the deceased residents of 30 Priscilla Street. 15 x 6 x 5 in.
Photo: MJ Tyson



MJ Tyson, *Nick*, 2018, objects from Nick's past. 11.75 x 10.75 x 1.5 in.
Photo: MJ Tyson



MJ Tyson, *35 Norman Avenue*, 2017, objects from the deceased residents of 35 Norman Avenue. 13 x 6 x 5 in.
Photo: MJ Tyson

35 Norman Avenue, Tyson left recognizable a charger and a fork that once dressed a beautiful dining table. An incised and repoussé tray reveals the owner's penchant for travel to far-away places. Burned and destroyed, the metal's current state invites nightmares of a devastating fire, a nuclear holocaust, or even a dystopian government

takeover. In this form, the narratives pile on — from the owner, from the maker, and from the collective imagination. Yet this is just an object, a large hunk of metal. Tyson initiates an examination of the larger field of material culture itself, specifically how people live on through their objects and how objects in turn live on through their

material. Tyson shows these objects and inscriptions together to reveal a collective peeling apart.

Taking in Tyson's work is unexpectedly emotional, inspiring contemplation of the gifts and losses in life. These alluring objects are simultaneously cruel, fatalistic, optimistic, joyous, and hopeful. Tyson's feelings toward each

piece, however, are surprisingly straightforward. "I feel comforted and satisfied that I brought the object new life," she says.

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