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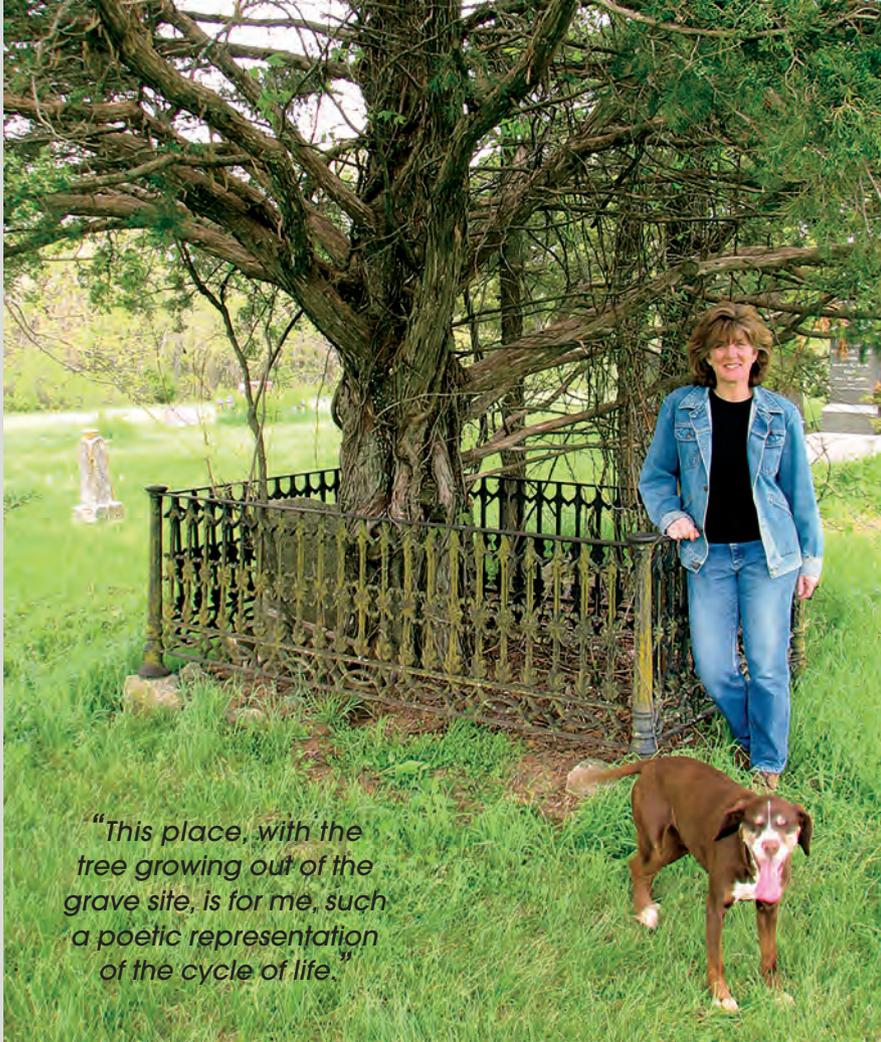
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LIN STANIONIS



"This place, with the tree growing out of the grave site, is for me, such a poetic representation of the cycle of life."

THE BEAUTY OF PATHOS

Glen R. Brown

A symbolism of pain, suffering and desire for transcendence pervades the work of metalsmith Lin Stanionis both as a product of engaged reflection on the inescapable mortal coil and as the result of a more detached and intellectual analysis of aesthetic and spiritual forms as diverse as prison tattoos, Baroque *vanitas* images, Eastern Orthodox Catholic imagery and the art nouveau jewelry of René Lalique. In Stanionis's recent series of large and intricate brooches, begun in 2006 under the title *Marks of Deliverance*, the dark and anguished flow of blood, venom and tears is paced by the syncopated buoyancy of clouds, feathers and brilliant light. Together these varied emotive elements form a tenuous harmony that ultimately neither descends irretrievably to the depths of despair nor revels in heady triumph over the sting of death. Stanionis's territory is the ambiguous fearful/hopeful ground between extremes, and her brooches encompass both beauty and pathos—in fact the beauty of pathos, which inheres in that curious condition by which all that we cherish in life is made sweeter by the knowledge of its ultimate ephemerality.

Stanionis, a professor of metalsmithing and jewelry at the University of Kansas, has, since her days as a graduate student at Indiana University in the early 1980s, credited metalwork not just with ornamental or utilitarian value but with the potential to cut to the heart of human experience and reflect the eternal issues that plague

Rock Creek Cemetery, Overbrook, Kansas, 2009. Photograph by Alan Detrich.



VIA, VERITAS, LUX BROOCH of eighteen karat gold, sterling silver; cast, constructed, 8.89 x 7.62 x 1.27 centimeters, 2006. Photographs by Jon Blumb unless noted otherwise.

humanity simply as repercussions of birth into a world where living things are materially finite. Her early work involved relationships between eating and ritual. Later, this general tendency developed into a more focused investigation of religious paraphernalia, a project partly prompted by her childhood fascination with the mysticism practiced by her father's Eastern European relatives. Her hollowware in the mid-1990s, still evocative of functional form but not intended for utilitarian purposes, drew on the curious confluence of ritual, acts of ingestion and latent eroticism in the context of religion. In particular, transubstantiation—in Catholicism the process by which sacramental wine and the bread of the Eucharist transform into the blood and body of Christ—became the subject of several sculptures incorporating vessels and naturalistic representations of the human heart.

Her recent brooches, which Stanionis describes as striking somewhat closer to her intended target conceptually than had much of her previous work, continue to invoke some familiar symbols drawn from established iconographies, particularly those of the Christian tradition. Though not herself a practicing Catholic, she nonetheless finds in these symbols powerful evocations of universal human concerns as well as connections to the long history of grappling with such concerns through the medium of art. At the same time, her inclinations are not simply to experiment within the confines of an established vocabulary of symbols but rather to augment and modify that existing corpus through personal exploration. Accordingly, she has discovered ways of personalizing the symbolism of life, death and the desire for transcendence through cycle-of-life references involving objects, particularly the remains of small animals, collected from her thirteen-acre rural property. "I pick up a lot of things," she explains. "When you live away from the urban environment you become more aware of the forces of nature, when spring starts and when fall comes, because everyday you see a bit of change. There are all sorts of things that you wouldn't see anywhere else: evidence of life, growth and death."



An example of such evidence, the tiny skull of a bird, rests immobile at the center of *Via, Veritas, Lux*: the sterling and eighteen karat gold brooch that initiated the *Marks of Deliverance* series. Too delicate to cast directly, the skull served as a model for the wax version that Stanionis employed to create the piece in silver. True to natural scale (an important feature of the found-object castings that she incorporates into her jewelry), the skull is both a *memento mori*—a reminder of the inevitability of death—and an object of fragile beauty that recalls the positive rhythms of the great cycle in which every living thing participates. Caught at the center of a stylized spider web that Stanionis cast in silver and set into a flat, circular frame, the skull is both bound in the weave of mortality and suspended on gossamer threads that impart to it a sense of hovering lightness. Beneath the Latin inscription for “way, truth, light,” the skull becomes ambivalent as a symbol, marking both an end and a beginning. Typical of the brooches in this series, it mingles the expression of loss with the sentiment of hope, the reality of entrapment with the dream of transcendence.

Beneath the skull, a sterling sash lies symmetrically draped over two gold bosses in the shape of blooming roses. Both funeral shroud and triumphal banner, the sash serves as another ambiguous symbol situated between the extremes of despair and joy. Deliberately cracked at the lowest point of its sag, it seems less a representation of a fabric swag than of a marble sepulchral ornament, but the crack is also reminiscent of the stark symbolism of broken-heart tattoos. Particularly moved by certain tattoos of prisoners—images expressive less of physical pain than of emotional suffering and the desire for atonement and release—Stanionis consciously incorporated allusions to these in *Via, Veritas, Lux*. Roses appear with frequency in such tattoos, perhaps echoing the long tradition of employing images of freshly cut flowers—delicate and beautiful but doomed to wither and crumble—in *vanitas* paintings of the Christian tradition since the late Middle Ages. Though the references to tattoos are strongest in *Via, Veritas, Lux*, they recur in later brooches in the series as well, both in the general



DESCENT INTO LIMBO BROOCH of eighteen karat gold, sterling silver; cast, constructed, 7.62 x 7.62 x 1.27 centimeters, 2006.

tendency toward symmetry and clarity of form and in the particular kinds of symbols that Stanionis employs.

The symmetry of *Between Nature and Grace*, chronologically the next brooch in the series, is emphasized by an axis in the form of a reptilian vertebral column that splits and separates a piece of fruit into halves resembling a pair of lungs. Through this juxtaposition of death and breath, of a *memento mori* and vital organs, Stanionis also evokes the symbols of temptation and original sin. Though the fruit is not explicitly an apple (it looks, in fact, equally like a descending pear) the tendency to read it as a source of downfall is reinforced by the teardrop shape of the exposed seeds, which suggest the flow of blood from two open wounds. The rootlike forms extending from four white *pâte de verre* flowers, seem to seek this central gaping organlike fruit as a source of nourishment, and, in accordance with Stanionis's tendency to emphasize the shifting, unresolved nature of symbols in the context of uncertain fate, the pips could easily be read as the seeds of hope. In another wrinkle of ambivalence, they could, after all, represent the seeds of destruction, since apple pips contain amygdalin, a substance metabolized into poisonous hydrogen cyanide that the body must detoxify.

This may, of course, be going too far. To over-analyze the symbolic potential of Stanionis's brooches would be to neglect the obvious importance she places on the aesthetic and emotive aspects of her work. Purely from a design perspective, her brooches can be stunning. *Between Nature and Grace* exhibits a masterful combination of geometric and organic forms that simultaneously conveys a dynamic energy and an underlying stability. The framing device of a perfect square seems to throb along its borders where the four irregularly shaped floral elements cling, and within the frame the complex interlace suggests a perpetual flow of forces. Deriving partly from reflection on the Biblical crown of thorns, this interlace has a definite Victorian feeling to it and could be compared to vine patterns in William Morris wallpaper or the complicated interweave of tendrils in Art Nouveau ornament, in particular the

PERFECTION BROOCH of urethane resin; cast, constructed, 9.53 x 9.53 x 1.90 centimeters, 2009.
GRACE BROOCH of urethane resin; cast, constructed, 9.53 x 9.53 x 1.90 centimeters, 2009.
PENITENCE BROOCH of urethane resin; cast, constructed, 9.53 x 9.53 x 1.90 centimeters, 2008.

designs of René Lalique. “I love his work,” Stanionis asserts. “He’s been largely dismissed by modern taste, but when you really look at the jewelry, it’s about life and death. The designs can be powerful, even grotesque. There’s an example of a decapitated rooster’s head with a gigantic amethyst in its beak, and I imagine a woman of high society wearing that in her hair. He must have enjoyed the irony of that.”

Representation of bird parts has figured into several of Stanionis’s own compositions, including the gold and sterling brooch *Descent into Limbo*, which features a sculpted ring of feathers embracing a tiny keyhole. The scores of plumes, each carved separately in wax to produce the master for casting the final form in gold, conjure the ephemerality of a cluster of dandelion seeds before its dispersal on a breeze. In contrast, the frame of bones, cast in silver and fixed at its corners by four protruding golden nails, conveys an earthy heaviness. Between the ethereal ascent implicit in the feathers and the fall into the abyss indicated by the bones, Stanionis seems to ruminate on a purgatorial state of uncertainty. The lock, around which a vision of the other side is opened by the spaces left between the feather shafts, promises a kind of release while simultaneously demanding that one produce the proper key. Chance, invoked by the heart/spade forms projecting from each corner of the brooch, seems to heighten the state of limbo and underscore the desires that it prompts.

The general themes of optimism, uncertainty and anguish—and their more specific associations with heaven, purgatory and hell—carry over into three brooches that Stanionis created late in 2008 and early in 2009. Identical in form but differing in color from black, to clear to white, the brooches represent a departure from her ordinary materials. Cast in monochromatic resin, they express a strong unity between the parts that compose them, even though the uneasy triad of hope, ambivalence and despair continues to inform their symbolism. Here—surrounding a quaternity of flowers, a mouthlike ring and a flaming mandorla—four stylized, Baroque formations of knobby clouds alternate with four stupa forms cast from a rattlesnake rattle. This latter element carries personal significance for Stanionis, as it was cut from the tail of a timber rattler that once inhabited the brush on her property. “I had to kill it because it was too near the house,” she explains. “I felt terrible, but I used a lot of the parts of it. I wanted to celebrate it in a way: to make sure that it didn’t die without purpose.”





LOSS OF INNOCENCE BROOCH of eighteen and twenty-four karat gold, sterling silver; cast, constructed, 8.26 x 8.26 x 1.27 centimeters, 2008. The brooch nestles in a stand of cast, stacked and patinated sterling silver bones.

The rattle also serves as a prominent aesthetic and symbolic component of Stanionis's recent work *Loss of Innocence*, an elaborate two-part arrangement that consists of both a brooch and a nest-shaped stand into which that provocative piece of jewelry snugly fits. The nest, composed as a bird might carefully organize twigs, is constructed of slender silver bones, darkened as though scorched by the flames of a funeral pyre. The brooch, in contrast is lustrous and in parts even radiant. Nine silver rattlesnake rattles direct themselves inwardly like reticulated petals waiting to unfold while the narrow spaces between them contain golden rattlesnake vertebrae that suggest delicately formed, stylized birds. These cast silver and gold snake parts lie upon a bed of feathers that gives way to nine golden thorns dripping with blood, venom or tears. In the center rests a hollow golden eggshell, the vacant interior of which is a haunting evocation of absence, or, as the title suggests, loss. The metaphor of birth as entry into a realm of beatitude and suffering, joy and despair, tranquility and pain, piety and sin, encapsulates the thematic program and complex iconography that runs through all the brooches in Stanionis's *Marks of Deliverance* series. The beauty of pathos, the sweet strains of life tainted inevitably by the tragic, pervades these works and imparts to them the unavoidable insights of reflection on those eternal issues endemic to human experience in the world. ☞

SUGGESTED READING

- Bodine, Sarah.** "Focus: Lin Stanionis – Chalice for Transubstantiation." *Metalsmith* Volume 9, No. 4 (Fall 1989): 30-3.
Brown, Glen R. "Lin Stanionis: Eros and Pious Cannibalism." *Metalsmith* Volume 19, No. 5 (Fall 1999): 12-21.
Holt, Susan. "Making Meaning: Metalsmithing, Objects and Contingencies in the Next Millennium." *Metalsmith* Volume 23, No. 3 (Summer 2003): 49.
Irvine, Madeline. "Lin Stanionis – Vestiges: Visible Traces." *Metalsmith* Volume 17, No. 3 (Summer 1997): 50.