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K.R.M. MOONEY: MATERIAL ALCHEMY

BY REBEKAH FRANK



JEWELRY THINKING

Strike i-iii, 2020
Cast bronze, olivine sand
8 x 9 x 10 in. (each)
30 x 12 x 10 in. (overall)
Photo: Kyle Knodell

JEWELRY INVITES THE BODY TO INTERACT.

Traditionally, jewelry embraces the finger, rests on the chest, dangles and drapes from the neck, the wrist, the waist, the ankle. So, what happens when the body is separated from jewelry? What happens when the body experiences the material, tooling, textures, and relationship of bodily-related objects from an adjacent perspective?

K.R.M. Mooney is an artist grounded in the material tradition and processes of jewelry. His sculptural metal objects converse with and about the body using the materials and techniques unique to jewelry-making from a contemplative and unexpected perspective. "As a gender-nonconforming artist, coding and being encoded by others ... I learned to recast how materials emerge through their interaction with the body ... to establish modes outside of normative values."¹

Currently based in Brooklyn, New York, Mooney studied metalsmithing at the California College of Arts—when it still had the word "craft" in its name and its campus stretched between Oakland and San Francisco—where he majored in Jewelry/Metal Arts with a minor in Visual Studies. Ornamentation, with its connection and attention to the body and its relationship to material culture and performative identity, became a place for him to extract meaning. Instead of applying jewelry-making to the production of jewelry, Mooney pauses

to contemplate the possibilities found in the series of steps and accumulation of material knowledge. One example familiar to jewelers and of interest to Mooney is how steel binding wire can both securely join two pieces as well as purposely (or accidentally) copperplate metal surfaces, which are two very different actions. He finds invitations to explore, question, and redefine these processes where the personal and abstract body is ever-present. He shares: "There's an intimacy and a closeness to the body that I've learned alongside metal, it's been my teacher, I've learned of my own body in this way. The body also holds and accumulates trace elements of metal, we are closer to one another than typically perceived." The studio becomes a place of cross-functional discovery in addition to material disputes, like when gold unexpectedly meets lead. There's an alchemical contemplation required in a metals studio.

Mooney experiments with reframing specific jewelry-making processes using traditional techniques and materials in nontraditional ways. An example is the soft bone from a cuttlefish, a member of the cephalopod family whose bone is used by jewelers as a mold for casting simple forms. The cuttlebone is cut in half—the two sides ground flush—then carved into the desired shape, incorporating a sprue through which to direct the molten metal. The two halves are bound with steel wire before the metal is poured in. When the halves are released, the surface of the cast metal retains the marks of the bone.

"The tools and facilities found within this field are significant to me. They are my collaborators—coproducers in finding new bodily capacities." —K.R.M. Mooney

In *Deposition c.*, Mooney places a geometric silver cuttlefish casting within a sterling silver, electroplated, structural steel channel, which is hung on the wall. In the casting, the characteristic material surface ridges resembling fingerprints remain visible. The channel's perpendicular corners create a rigid frame, truncated top and bottom, that embraces the casting in an unconventional pairing.

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This is a multipart series celebrating artists whose practices illustrate *jewelry thinking*. These artists may or may not have a background in jewelry, but their work exhibits qualities that jewelry artists will recognize, including commitment to materiality, respect of process, and focus on the body.

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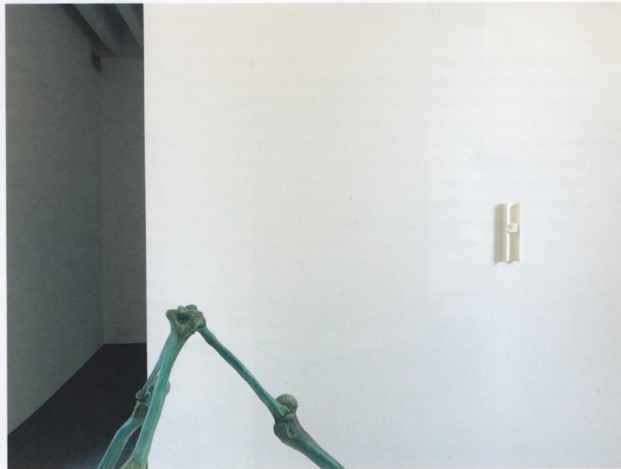
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Deposition c. (ii), 2021
Electroplated steel, silver,
cuttlebone, aluminum
10½ x 2¼ x 3 in.
Photo: Chris Grunder

Installation view of
Deposition c. (iii), 2021

Photo: Tony Chenkra



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Partials (ix-xii) (detail), 2021
 Gold, silver, brass,
 solder, neodymium
 1½ x 1 x 1 in.
 Photo: Christian Andersen

The piece invites close looking and questioning. Placed as it is in a traditional gallery, it is barely distinguishable from the white walls. Mooney researched the biomechanics of the cuttlefish to understand how the part repurposed for casting was used by the living animal: why it is porous, how it is heat resistant, what other uses it has, its scientific makeup, if it is actually bone. He considers possible connections, seeking alliances between disparate materials by highlighting the sameness of their differences.

Deposition c.'s structural steel channel, which is used to create vertical space in buildings, connects to the structure of the cuttlefish bone, the buoyancy of which lofts the animal through water. The structure of the cuttlefish bone also incorporates an *indistinct siphuncle*, a tube-like column that connects the layers of its internal shell. Which leads to the question: What does it mean for a structure to be *indistinct*? This is perhaps answered by Mooney's use of silver plating, unifying the materials in a color that melds with the white wall. This treatment unifies them, requiring the viewer to look closely to distinguish the individual elements.

The equally treated disparate materials, the process taken out of context, the architectural space they are situated in, and the viewer are all brought together in an uneasy conversation in Mooney's work. *Deposition c.* presents questions without providing answers: Why are these materials together in this particular space? How is the body missing yet still felt? The conversation proceeds nonlinearly—not quite arriving at a definitive meaning, but reaching toward new modes of understanding. Mooney hopes "to produce a space of looking and being that requires reading with our senses in otherwise muted registers while implicated in practices of difference, legibility, and care."

Eutectic c. (i) also features cuttlefish casting. This time a delicate branch of mistletoe with an attached silver ring is presented in a specialized jeweler's vise. With this piece, Mooney arrests the action of making, bringing the entire ensemble into the gallery space. The tool becomes a means of display, the object becomes a sculpture, but the



Below, left:

Installation view of Eutectic c. (i), 2020.

Photo: Robert Divers Herrick

JEWELRY THINKING

Below, right:
Eutectic c. (i) (detail), 2020
 Specialized jewelers' vise, mount,
 insulation, cast mistletoe, silver,
 steel, bronze
 7 x 4¼ x 7½ in.
 Photo: Robert Divers Herrick





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division between the two isn't clear. They are joined, frozen in a procedural moment.

It is important to note that Mooney came to sculpture within the context of the Unmonumental and the Expanded Field, two modes of art and contemporary critical practice that rejected traditionally held ideas of what sculpture could be. In her writing on sculpture of the late sixties and early seventies, Rosalind Krauss highlights how the discipline was becoming infinitely malleable.² Within the jewelry conversation, incorporating the tool into the final piece removes the direct presence of the body while still implying the body, Mooney is creating *not-jewelry*. Applying the logic of Krauss: something that both is and isn't simultaneously. The ease of defining something solely by what it isn't becomes harder when the boundaries between categories break down. "Jewelry thinking can be a very procedural mode of working. There's a pleasure in this for me—to have certainty in the work I must do, and [having] it clearly laid out ahead of me. [At the same time], everything is in question."

To convey his ideas, Mooney moves his practice in and out of the jewelry studio as needed. The studio provides context, a recognition of the body as both the maker and the performer of the finished work. The histories of the tooling, the materials, and the procedures—as well as the measured thinking jewelry requires—all become the conceptual underpinning of the work. When a jeweler comes across Mooney's work in a gallery, there is a recognition—followed by a questioning of the seemingly out-of-context placement of, for example, a vise on a gallery

Installation view of *Ores*, 2019.

Photo: Max Slaven

wall, or the strangeness of a cuttlefish casting held within a structural channel. Mooney's work rejects "the hierarchies between objects and their spatial determinations." His work isn't contained by the binary of wearable and not wearable. Instead, by separating the body from jewelry, Mooney brings jewelry and all that it encompasses into new spaces and new conversations. There is a poetry in his work, a new alchemy that invites the viewer—especially one steeped in jewelry methodologies—into alternative meanings for the familiar.

K.R.M. Mooney will be showing work at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York in November 2022 and Progetto in Italy in March 2023.

¹ All quotes from K.R.M. Mooney are from responses to a written interview on April 20, 2022; a video interview on May 26, 2022; or a follow-up via email correspondence with the author. /

² Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 31–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778224>.