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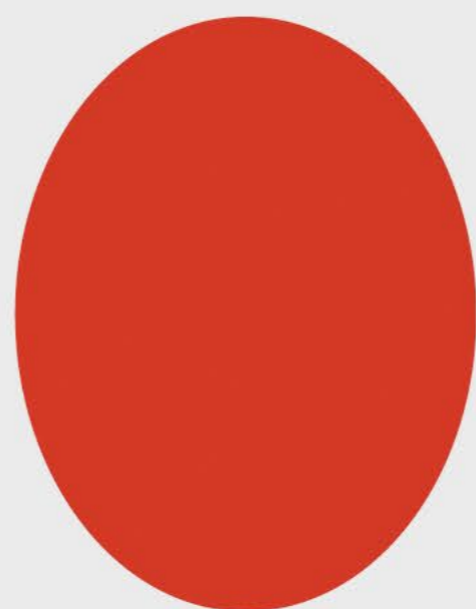


Contemporary
Cameos



Roberta and David Williamson
Pendant with Coral and
Porcelain, 2016
vintage porcelain hand,
antique French cameo,
sterling silver, fine silver,
sterling silver choker
3 1/2 x 2 x 1"

**REINVENTING
MEMORY**
CONTEMPORARY
CAMEOS



This ancient jewelry format is being revived today for the exploration of personal narrative, history, and social issues.

by Marjorie Simon

While best known for its prominence during the Victorian era, cameo jewelry has an ancient and colorful history. Cameos—small carved reliefs in stone or shell, with contrasting foreground and background layers—began to appear around 300 BCE, in the time of Alexander, when stone carving started to shift from intaglio to relief.¹ Banded agates, with their layers of brown and white, lent themselves to such reliefs. Artists carved images of mythic Greeks and Roman emperors in the white surface, leaving the dark background.

The ancient Romans used their glass skills of mold making and carving to create portraits in colored glass layers, and the cameo spread westward throughout the Mediterranean.² Centuries later, during the Middle Ages, the acceptance of Christianity in Europe unified the traditions of heavy, Frankish metalwork of the north and the fine gold filigree of the Greek south; skilled artisans of the Italian Renaissance added multi-colored shells as a material cheaper than stone. Colonial

expansion in the 18th century brought shells from the West Indies to Europe, where Italians continued their dominance in the form. In the early 19th century, Napoleon's enthusiasm for cameos, combined with commemorative jewelry customs during the reign of Victoria, added to the genre's popularity. Cameos were the only long-standing classical jewellery forms to survive into the Renaissance.³ Classical cameos are still produced today, especially among tradition-loving Italians. The coastal town of Torre del Greco,

for example, despite being repeatedly threatened by nearby Mount Vesuvius, remains a center for cameos carved from its lava stone and local coral.

Many contemporary jewelers have created cameos at some point in their careers, especially when approaching themes of memory and loss. While some artists reserve the form to honor personal memories, others seek to evoke public recollections. The longevity and familiarity of the cameo makes it a means for artists to address narrative, history, or



Tore Svensson
Iris (brooch), 2014
steel, gilt
2 x 1 5/8"
Photo: franz karl

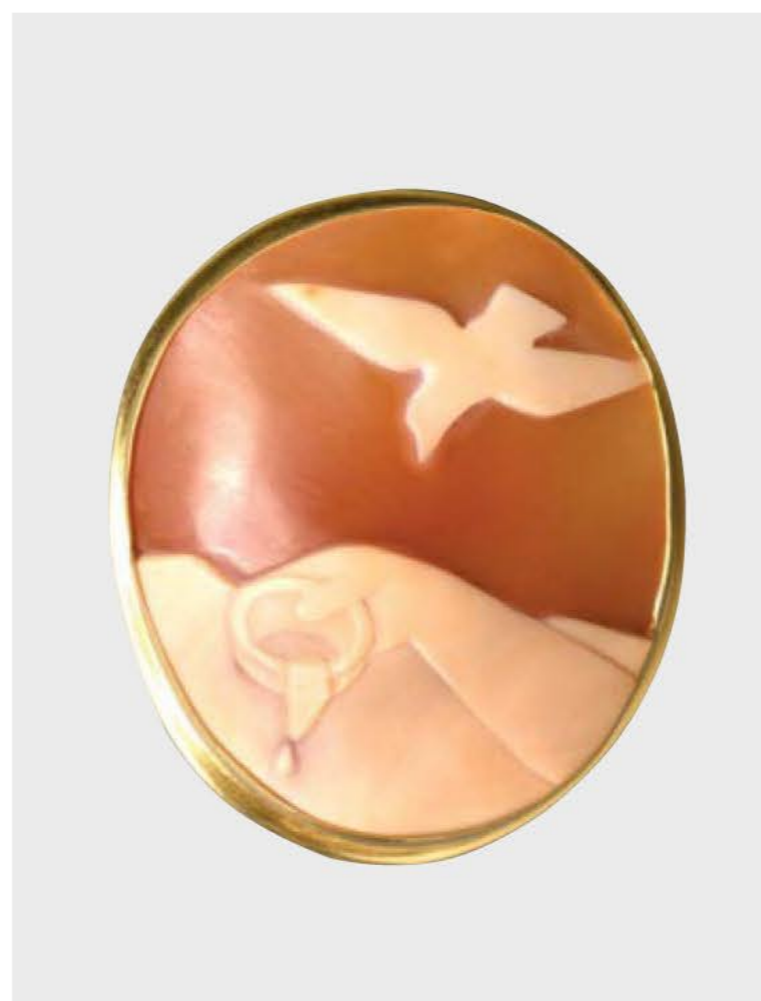
contemporary social issues. Constructed, enameled, drawn, etched, appropriated, or interpreted, cameolike images continue to be carried or worn on the body.

Tore Svensson and Randy Long are classically trained metalsmiths from different cultures who both make cameos for deeply felt, though quite different, personal reasons. Svensson, a quiet soul with a minimalist aesthetic, manifests his personal relationships by memorializing them in steel. In the 1970s, Svensson forged a singular path, coaxing velvety black bowls out of iron in his native Sweden. Starting in 2011, he began a series of cameos that continues to this day. Svensson's cameo series began with a single photograph and a memory. "In my parents' home there was a photograph of my grandparents from the late 19th century. As a child I liked the black and white photo in the old oval frame. I thought they looked very beautiful as a couple... I saw the similarity to a cameo... and decided to make more brooches using recent photographs."⁴

Svensson photographs his own subjects, drawn from his social encounters. Like classical cameos, they are distinct silhouetted profiles, and recognizable as fellow jewelers. He glues the photo onto prepared steel sheet, then etches with nitric acid to create layers

that will take on different colors when patinated or repeatedly burned with linseed oil. As with a memory, time will alter the image. Though anchored by his own recognizable self-portrait, Svensson's collection is about remembering others. It both honors the original cameo form and breaks new ground as a metalsmith's photo album.

American silversmith Randy Long may be the only contemporary artist whose work engages religious themes with neither irony nor sanctimony. Like Svensson, Long previously made vessels and silver hollowware; she was recently promoted to Distinguished Professor at Indiana University after a long career. She carves her own shell brooches depicting the lives of the saints. Long seeks to acknowledge the place of religion in all cultures, and to remind viewers of the importance of morality, charity, and sacrifice in contemporary life. Intrigued since childhood by tales of the saints, she isolated images from well-known paintings or sculptures by Italian artists. *Saint John the Baptist* (2002) depicts the water of baptism when the apostle John baptized Jesus, and the dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit that appeared at that moment. Among her other subjects are the saints Sebastian with his arrows, Mary Magdalene, and Catherine of Alexandria.



Randy Long
St. John the Baptist
(brooch), 2002
shell cameo, 22k gold
2 1/4 x 1 3/4 x 1/2"
Photo: Kevin Montague

Although separated by centuries, the ancient world and the Italian Renaissance were closely linked in art and architecture. Much of our appreciation of biblical and classical Greco-Roman myth is filtered through 16th-century painting and sculpture. Artists Kristin Beeler and Diane Falkenhagen allude to specific works of Renaissance art in their work, and their selection of female subjects underscores the male gaze and its place in depictions of female beauty.



Kristin Beeler
Stain (brooch), 2007
sterling, ink, pearls
3 x 3"

Beeler takes on Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty, later appropriated by the Romans and called Venus. The discovery in 1820 of a second century BCE statue of Aphrodite (now known as the *Venus de Milo*) on the island of Melos fed the Victorian lust for the classics. As if Aphrodite were not already the perfect woman, there is evidence that the statue had also worn metal jewelry with real gemstones.

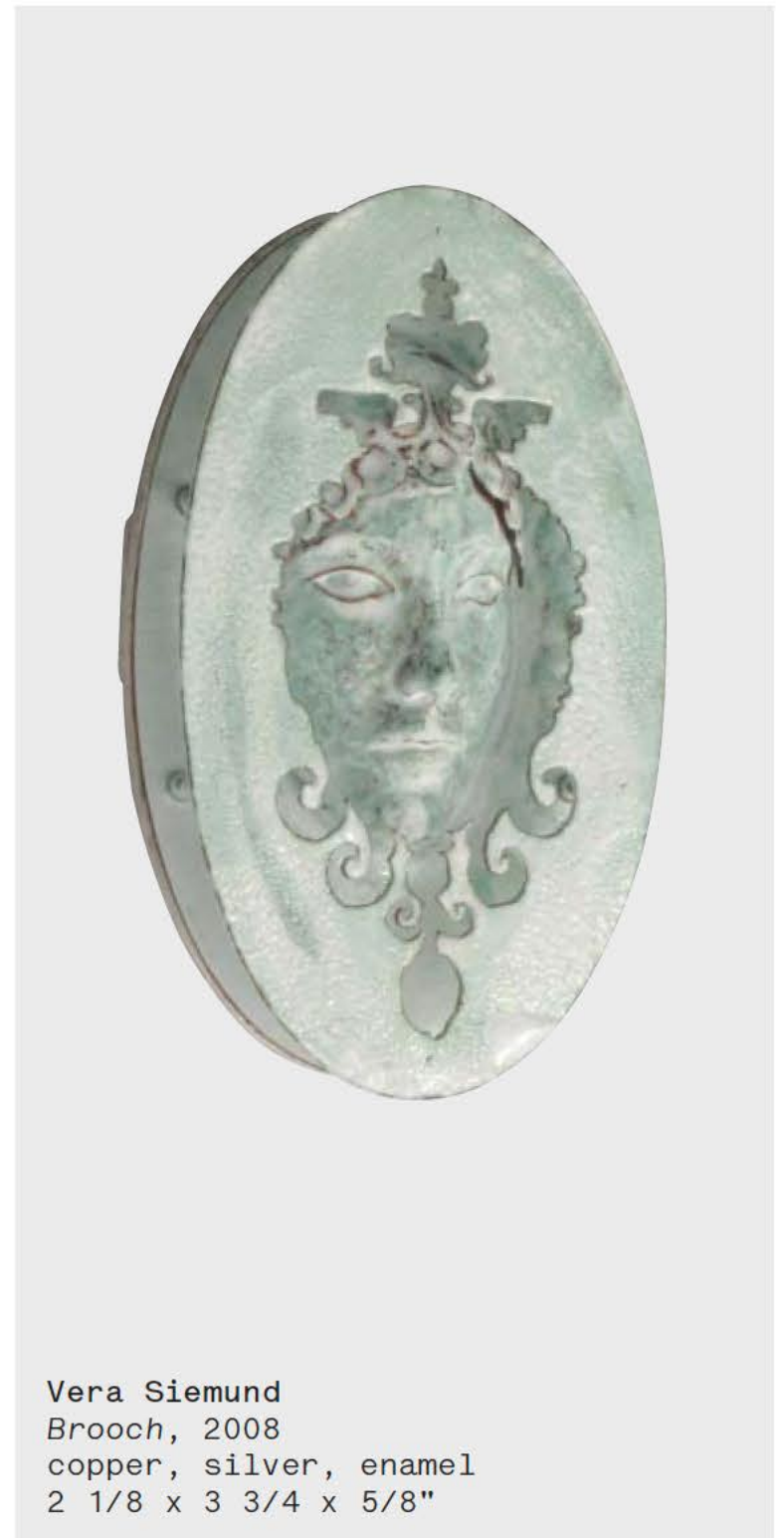
Beeler's arresting brooch *Stain* (2007) gives the nod to centuries of Greek hegemony in aesthetics. Based on a 19th-century print image of *Venus de Milo* used for measuring proportion, her splotched "drawing," rollerprinted from heavy etched brass, "defaces" the iconic, symmetrical beauty. The surface blemishes, known as foxing, mar the otherwise perfect face. Far from defacing the portrait, Beeler finds them beautiful, like a derelict building or peeling paint.

THE JEWELRY OF THE VICTORIAN ERA STILL HOLDS SWAY OVER CURRENT MAKERS.

But the original image already belongs to a vanished world. With hints of a once-baroque frame, surface pearls echo the spilled broken necklace of Mary Magdalene in Caravaggio's 1597 painting *The Penitent Magdalene*.

Diane Falkenhagen often pairs protean polymer clay with her flawless metalwork. Her portrait *Cornelia and her Treasures* reproduces the image of Cornelia, mother of Roman leaders Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, from a 1785 painting by Angelica Kauffmann. In *After Canova's Paolina*, Falkenhagen honors 19th-century sculptor Antonio Canova, and his life-sized nude marble statue of Pauline Borghese Bonaparte posing as Venus. Canova's depiction of the emperor's sister in the guise of a classical goddess raises her to celestial status, while Falkenhagen's fractured and suggestive relief grounds her prophetically in his defeat.

Falkenhagen's treatment of figures taken from art historical representations differs from that of the other artists in emotion as well as medium. She fragments the secular, even profane, image, whereas Long isolates and magnifies the sacred. Like Beeler, Falkenhagen's subjects look to the ancient past, using iconic paintings or sculptures that are themselves iterations of Greco-Roman themes. Their references are all historicized. As they are in the public domain, they belong not to the artist's reminiscences but to the shared history of the academy.



Vera Siemund
Brooch, 2008
copper, silver, enamel
2 1/8 x 3 3/4 x 5/8"

Between the French Revolution, expansion of the British Empire, archeological discoveries of the 19th century, and the long reign of the grieving, cameo-loving Queen, the jewelry of the Victorian era still holds sway over current makers. With Classicism receding, the effects of the Napoleonic wars could be seen in Berlin iron jewelry, which later dovetailed with Queen Victoria's black jewelry. At the same time, early photographic portraiture and hair jewelry became part of the new vocabulary. All these elements appear in today's cameos as well.

German jeweler Vera Siemund loves the rococo ornament of Victoriana. "I often work with...the classicism of the 18th and 19th centuries. And I love to show the beauty of decoration, for example, wall lamps or velvet cushions; old-fashioned designs as relicts of a lost cozy, bourgeois interior." Siemund's large-scale neckpieces and complex brooches openly play on existing forms. Her motifs are neither nostalgic nor personal, but intellectualized and historicized. Siemund's gendered layers of ornamentation include not only classic



Diane Falkenhagen
After Canova's Paolina
(brooch/pendant), 2010
sterling silver, Corian,
14k gold, 23k gold leaf
1 3/4 x 3 1/2 x 1"

female cameo silhouettes, but textile (gingham) patterns, women's clothing, and, often, lots of curlicues. She works in copper and steel, both metals that are popular with enamellists but also emblematic of Germany, where she has also been influenced by the baroque architecture of old theaters and opera houses. Siemund cherry-picks from history, layering themes, materials, and sensibilities like so much stratigraphy.⁵

For Jutta Klingebiel's fictitious enameled portraits, the jeweler creates stories for her invented personae as she works. One pair of earrings depicts a conversation between two facing figures; another shows a bird looking toward an empty branch. Rooted in the art of the miniature, the quirky products of Klingebiel's imagination seem to be unnamed inhabitants of the Black Forest.

Working in the modest scale of miniatures of ivory, shell and enamel, Melanie Bilenker deliberately evokes Victorian portraits and hair mementoes by arranging her own cut hair into sketches. Based on her own photographs, she shares "quiet minutes, the mundane, the domestic, the ordinary moments" in her works.⁶

As a young artist, Heather White van Stolk spent two summers conducting research at The Hermitage, the magnificent Russian state museum in Saint Petersburg, where she was particularly drawn to the sizeable cameo collection. She concluded that the "visual metonymy" of cameos was female; that

is, the female portrait in silhouette stands in for females in general. Thinking along these gendered lines, White van Stolk began a series of cameos when she returned home to the U.S. But it was access to the new computer technology of the 1990s that enabled her to fully realize her ideas, through manipulating the image to create the distorted profiles in her cameo portraits. Like Beeler, White van Stolk chose iconic, even generic, images of the head of a woman. They are all commemorative in a historical narrative, far from their pre-photographic origins, and still evocative of their Greco-Roman ancestry.

Bettina Speckner's singular cameos begin with a photograph. Her portraits tell stories in vintage and constructed tableaux that seem to accomplish the impossible: although largely flat, they suggest the 3-D quality of a stereopticon. Speckner's nostalgic, simply framed tintypes and photo-enamels are sparingly ornamented with gemstones, pearls, or coral. Natural objects such as shells or diamond-studded carved bone interrupt the surface and, occasionally, emerge from the picture plane. Sepia-toned or faded black and white, the subjects silently confront the viewer with a direct gaze, as if keeping their secrets from the next generation. Images that look like they are found tintypes might be just that. Landscapes, on the other hand, are her own photos. Speckner says that the tintype process itself creates the antique look, and "the impression that I only use



Melanie Bilenker
Comb and Gather
 (brooches), 2013
 hair, paper, gold, mineral
 crystal
 1 7/8 x 1 1/8 x 1/4" each
 Courtesy Sienna Gallery



Jutta Klingebiel
Ein Paar (earrings) 2005
 gold, enamel
 3/4" each
 Photo: Jutta Klingebiel



Heather White van Stolk
Protean Cameo #10 (brooch),
 1999
 silver, nickel silver,
 gold, velvet, patina
 2 1/8 x 2 1/8 x 5/8"

old nostalgic images is deceptive." Yet a necklace of linked medallions clearly evokes Victorian design. The democratic tintype documented ordinary life as the 19th century turned into the 20th, and portraiture ceased to be the privilege of the aristocracy. Speckner's pieces share a stillness that goes beyond the "snapshot" moment of the photograph. They work formally as well as emotionally, and despite their familiarity to contemporary viewers, they are never trite.

Before Kirsten Haydon documented her Antarctic memories in enamel, she created landscape cameos in the commemorative spirit of photographic souvenirs. Framed in sterling silver, and captured under acrylic, the artist's ghostly transparencies are "derived from Christmas cards of the early 20th century depicting idyllic scenes of New Zealand."⁷ Similar to a badge, button, or set of slides, Haydon's New Zealand photos are mementoes she shares with us. And like Speckner's landscapes, they evoke a place-memory that may or may not exist.

Roberta and David Williamson assemble frankly nostalgic elements of American childhood and family memories, in which appropriated vintage cameos allow them to create new narratives from old. Like Speckner, they begin with nature and landscape, casting their own foraged sticks and twigs. A vintage coral cameo, cupped in snow-white porcelain hands, becomes a charm pendant from another age.

THOUGH ROOTED IN MEMORY, CONTEMPORARY CAMEOS ARE NOT IMMUNE TO POLITICAL OR SOCIAL CONTENT.

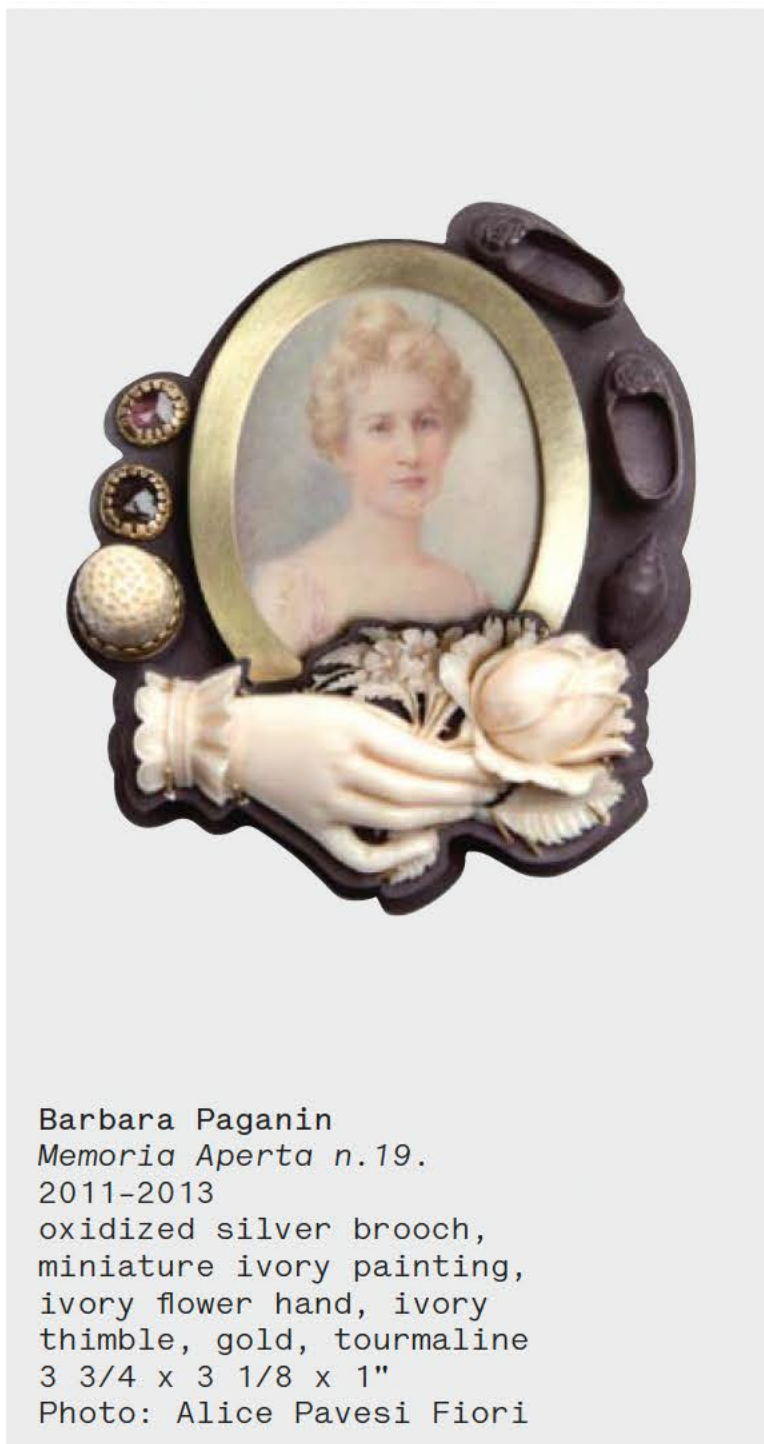


Bettina Speckner
Brooch, 2016
 ferrotype, silver, pearl
 3 1/4 x 2 1/2"

Along with the Italian master Barbara Paganin, the American Williamsons make use of found and cast natural objects. Many photos are sourced at flea markets. They create memory-laden work out of abandoned fragments of others' lives. But that's where the resemblance ends. Paganin's cameos hint at layers of memory in dark and somber reflection. Her mysterious world is a "tender bestiary populated by white mice peeping between tiny shoes, by croaking spotted frogs..., from snails and shells..."⁸ She takes full advantage of the obvious implied narrative. These objects were part of someone else's family, and the wearer can make up her own narrative too.⁹ The assembled objects serve to suggest a backstory for each piece. As explained by the artist, the groups of shoes symbolize abandonment, something left behind. Their repeated use hints at a treasured doll, as well as the haunted anonymous piles of shoes at Auschwitz. Even in our global village, the artists seem to represent their different cultures: the Williamsons' Midwestern openness contrasts with Paganin's darkly Venetian intrigue. Paganin's large, densely packed brooches are marvels of construction, complex ornaments just this side of rococo. She employs an unusual material, dental alginate, to create lightweight and translucent casts of vegetal matter. Her new body of work, *Memoria Aperta* (Open Memory), is made up of nearly two-dozen brooches with cameos.



Kirsten Haydon
Grandeur (brooch) in "Number 128 N.Z.
 Scenic Cameos" series, 2004
 sterling silver, acrylic, image, steel
 2 1/8 x 3 3/4 x 1/4"
 Collection te Papa Tongarewa,
 Museum of New Zealand



Barbara Paganin
Memoria Aperta n.19.
 2011-2013
 oxidized silver brooch,
 miniature ivory painting,
 ivory flower hand, ivory
 thimble, gold, tourmaline
 3 3/4 x 3 1/8 x 1"
 Photo: Alice Pavesi Fiori

Though rooted in memory, contemporary cameos are not immune to political or social content. Coreen Simpson, an African-American photojournalist who studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology, was once asked why there were no black cameos. In response, she designed and launched her signature jewelry piece, The Black Cameo®, in 1990, and created an entire line that she licensed to the Avon Corporation as a corrective to European standards of beauty. Perhaps Simpson knew that one of the earliest known black cameos, a 16th-century pendant set with rubies, emeralds, and pearls, is believed to have been given as a gift by Elizabeth I to Catherine Walsingham, “niece of her secretary of state Sir Francis Walsingham.”¹⁰ The front bears an agate cameo of a “Blackamoor,” a black woman flanked by two gold black amorini in Moorish or Arabian headgear. Like Victorian “blackamoors,” Simpson’s silhouettes are obviously and proudly non-European.

At the opposite end of the social spectrum from Simpson’s work is Joe Wood’s trio of brooches titled *Disgust*, *Discord*, and *Discourse*, a direct response to the dislocation of current events.

Each one of the three presentation boxes contains a single brooch, in which pairs of manipulated portraits have been rendered into decals and enameled onto copper. In *Discord*, Wood himself is virtually disguised as a contemporary demon, recalling the gremlin of Henry Fuselli’s terrifying 18th-century painting *The Nightmare*. To completely different effects, Wood and Bilenker use themselves to explore other timely topics. Wood captures the zeitgeist, the way the social contract has been rendered incomprehensible by rage. Fuselli’s swooning woman might stand in for all who feel they are living in a nightmare. Perhaps Wood is revealing

the monster inside us all when we are enraged. In terms of the history of cameos, this malevolent figuration is far from the traditional cameo’s calm profile of an aristocratic young woman, but it uses the tools of its time to project another facet of human community.

Cameos are everywhere among us. Rooted as it is in the human condition, the cameo’s place in the artistic canon remains secure, as generations of artists continue to explore and expand its rich storytelling potential. ♦

Marjorie Simon is a Philadelphia-based metalsmith and writer



Joe Wood
Discord, 2015
 vitreous enamel on copper,
 sterling silver, wooden
 and velvet box
 brooch: 2 1/4 x 3 3/4 x 1/2"

1 Alexander’s forays into the east (Persia) are thought to have brought refinements in jewelry, including mounting precious stones, using banded agates, and relief carving instead of intaglio. Hugh Tait, editor, *Seven Thousand Years of Jewellery* (British Museum Press, London, 1986). / 2 During the Hellenistic period there was much carving of colored glass within “stupendous luxury goods and relief carving in coloured [sic] stone.” Personal communication with Robert Baines, Emeritus Professor, RMIT, Melbourne, Australia. The emergence of relief carving in jewelry would have significant long-term implications for valuing ornament (relief) over function (intaglio), and by extension, fine art over craft. / 3 Tait, op cit, p. 151. / 4 Tore Svensson, *Portraits*. Gothenburg, Sweden, 2015. / 5 <http://www.caa.uk/exhibitions/archive/2011/surface-and-substance/vera-siemund/> / 6 Written communication with the artist, April 2017. / 7 Written communication with the artist, April 2017. / 8 *Memoria Aperta*. Introduction by Alessandra Chinaglia Cornoldi, 2017. / 9 Written communication with the artist, April 2017. / 10 Tait, op cit, p. 31.