

Norman Weber



Flocked Balls #7 (ring), 2014
silver, goldplated, plastic, flock, 18k gold
1 1/2 x 1 7/8 x 3 3/4"

The Shock of the Now

BY ANDREA DINOTO



Grusse Dich (Hello) (necklace), 1994
sterling silver, 18k gold
length 28 1/2"

Auf Ewig Dein (Eternally Yours) (brooch), 1992
plastic, lacquer, silver
3 3/4 x 3 1/2 x 1 3/8"



Tumbtum (brooch), 1992
plastic, pigment, steel,
garnets, gold
3 1/2 x 2 3/4 x 2 1/2"



A TRIP TO GERMANY was out of the question, so instead I visited Ornamentum Gallery in Hudson, New York, where owner Stefan Friedman had agreed to talk to me about Norman Weber, a jewelry artist known widely abroad—less so here—for his artfully eccentric and formally diverse oeuvre. Ornamentum had recently presented “NOW: 20 Years Norman Weber Part 1,”¹ a retrospective of his work, at the Collective Design Fair in New York. When I arrived at

the gallery, 13 pieces from that curated exhibition had been set out for me to examine.² My hand went automatically to a shiny black plastic brooch in the shape of an upside-down heart. This voluptuous, decorative, and intriguing piece was fringed with sprightly, sperm-like ornaments and bannered with the sentiment *Auf Ewig Dein (Eternally Yours; 1992)*. Because of its inverted position, Friedman pointed out, the heart was intended to subtly suggest a butt, and as such was an example of Weber’s self-described “playful eroticism.” Next to it was another black brooch, *Penisier Orden (Penis Badge, 1992)* in which somewhat menacing squiggles frame a gold and garnet center. As I would learn, these were but two of Weber’s several brooches in which anatomical parts are either vaguely implied (*Rosentau/Rose Dew, 1992*) or more graphically suggested (*Tumbtum, 1992*), each adorned with garnets set in gold. What next?

As I glanced at the other jewels surrounding these visually potent pieces, I was struck by how distinctly different one was from another: evidence of Weber’s formal virtuosity and prodigious technical skill. Pendants were patterned with silkscreen printing on metal, or laser etching on plastic; two flocked ping pong balls provided the surreal jewels for blingy gold rings; a necklace of silver discs featured the subtlest of

wax-cast brushstrokes. Weber uses a repertoire of these and other techniques, combined with masterful metalwork, to investigate multiple themes and genres drawn both from material culture and his own “personal mythology,” as one of his series is titled. His approach can be sculptural, painterly, constructivist, or architectural according to how he conceives of his pieces: mainly brooches, but also rings, pendants, earrings, and a recent series of remarkable “colliers” in the

form of linked discs, each of which functions as a canvas for painting, graphic design, and photography.

One could say that, for Weber, jewelry was destiny. He was born in 1964 in Schwabisch Gmund, Germany, a center for silver and gold handcraft since the 14th century. He studied for four years at the State College for Glass and Jewelry in Kaufbeuren-Neugablonz, Germany, where he has taught since 2011. The city is an important center for the manufacture of costume jewelry, a genre that ranks high among his many interests. (He once spent several months working in one of the city’s factories.) Among Weber’s notable awards and honors was his appointment, for the year 2011, as City Goldsmith of Schwabisch Gmund.

Also, inevitably, one might say, Weber is an alumnus of the Munich Fine Art Academy, where he studied in the Masters program from 1989 to 1996 under professors Hermann Junger, Otto Kunzli, and Horst Sauerbruch. Like numerous fellow graduates of the Academy, Weber took a conceptual

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approach to jewelrymaking that reveals, in his case, art-world preoccupations with constructivism, surrealism, Pop art, semiotics, and memoir. His pieces can be bold and eye-dazzling, or minimally scaled and visually understated. But regardless of size or concept, a Weber jewel is invariably produced with a touch of irony, poetic inflection, and, as in the case of the inverted heart, true sentiment. One such piece is *Grusse Dich (Hello; 1994)*,

a necklace made from a tangle of silver and gold chains and other jewelry. As one lifts this piece, unaware of its inspiration, one unconsciously shares Weber’s own memory of looking through his mother’s jewelry box. “When I tried to remove one piece,” he says, “a whole cluster of jewelry would emerge, the pieces interlocked and hanging on each other.” Weber was fascinated by the “composition of chance,” in which real and imitation became entwined. While *Hello* appears to be a random assemblage, it is of course nothing of the kind. With the exception of one chain, each item is a handmade dummy jewel, including what Weber describes as a “playful allusion” to Gerd Rothmann, the esteemed German jeweler known for his fingerprint motifs in gold. In addition to the “Rothmann” ring, Weber added a tiny gold heart pendant that refers back to *Auf Ewig Dein*, but this time right side up. What this necklace is about, says Weber, is how all the different pieces “communicate among each other.”

Such interplay of real and fake, past and present, is the recurring motif that runs through Weber’s art. In *NOW: Jewels by Norman Weber*, the catalogue³ for the artist’s 2010 three-city exhibition in Germany, Bernhart Schwenk, curator of contemporary art at Pinakothek de Moderne, Munich, observed that the artist’s work “is a play on fleeting

Rosentau/Rose Dew (brooch), 1992
gold, plastic, pigment,
haematites, steel
3 x 3 x 2"



Penisier Orden (Penis Badge), 1992
plastic, lacquer, spring steel,
garnets, 18k gold
3 x 2 3/8 x 2"

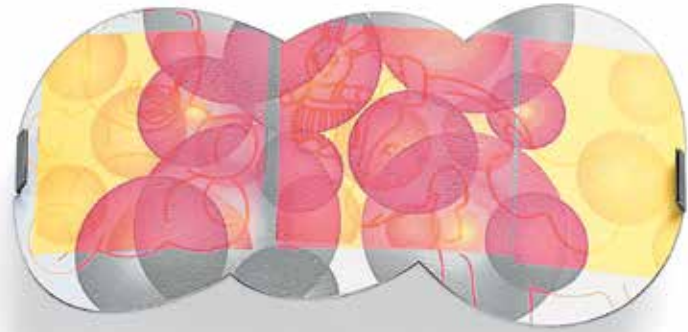


entities...” and that Weber “is concerned with the aura of a piece of jewellery as spiritual and intellectual energy: as memory, as wish, as the idea of possibilities.”⁴ This fascination with illusion and longing is evident in the “Object” series, for which Weber constructed faux found objects from stainless steel, finishing their surfaces to a rusted-iron *trompe l’oeil* effect of age and use. They appear to be vaguely functional, with their boxy tabbed construction and shapes suggestive of little

mechanical devices: one resembles a coin holder; another a timer bearing the letters L-O-V-E, with the O a golden button. But what these pendants actually “do” is provoke a fake *déjà vu* experience in the viewer, a feeling that maybe we’ve seen—or even owned—such things before. Lest we think of them as mere objects, though, Weber adds touches of gold because, as he told me via e-mail, “only through this do they become wearable.”

While these real/faux objects remain fanciful and illusory, actual artifacts from Weber’s childhood provide the visual basis for two related series, “Private Mythology” and “House and Garden.” In the former, images of his parents, of stuffed animals, a playpen, and his father’s chair are laser-etched on white plastic discs, which are then framed in silver and set with brightly colored glass stones from the ’60s and ’70s, which in turn allude to his love and appreciation of costume jewelry. As with “Objects,” Weber lacquers and sands the metal to impart the appearance of vintage, if not ancient, artifact. The warmth and gentleness of these nostalgic pieces, reminiscent of dreamlike children’s book illustrations, contrasts dramatically with the cool abstractions of “House and Garden,” for which Weber used photos, his own and his mother’s, of details of his parents’

Object #7 (pendant), 2001
stainless steel, lacquer, 18k gold
4 1/8 x 1/2 x 3 1/2"



House and Garden #18 (brooch), 2003
silver, steel, C-print
4 7/8 x 2 1/2 x 7/8"

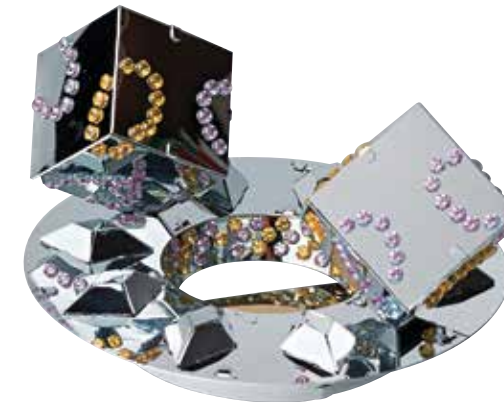


Flock Balls #4 (brooch), 2014
silver, plastic, flock, steel
4 5/8 x 2 7/8 x 3 1/2"



Private Mythology #1 (pendant), 2001
nickel silver, plastic, lacquer, glass
4 3/8 x 3 x 7/8"

Dazzler #4 (brooch), 1997
aluminum, synthetic stones, gold
4 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 2 3/8"



home. Images of wallpaper, carpet patterns, toys, and such were then Photoshopped into unrecognizable patterns, which were transferred as digital images onto shaped metal plates held by oxidized silver structures. Dating from the early 2000s, these brooches, pendants, and rings—with their precisely engineered constructions supporting minimalist designs—are among Weber's most striking modernist work.

But Weber is essentially a postmodernist who relishes the use of funk, flash, and Pop to make his points. His "Flock" series, in which he uses the age-old texturizing technique, comes as a shock, as flocking conjures images of cheap packaging and bourgeois simulations of velvet and brocade, mainly on wallpaper. Nevertheless, Weber applies it in candy colors to thin aluminum sheets for a collection of "big but light" mechanistic flower brooches—some of which bear the names "Imagination," "Classic," and "Valuable"—whose meticulous construction incorporates synthetic stones, steel, and gold. The curator Ellen Maurer Zilioli, in her catalogue essay "Hot Stuff,"⁵ notes that "flock covers the metal blooms like fine fur, like moss," calling the objects "bold, powerful, majestic," but also "at times grotesque, at others bizarre or even eccentric outgrowths of Weber's phantasmagoric botany of jewelry." But these pieces appear downright sedate next

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to Weber's recent collection of gold rings and brooches mounted with flocked ping pong balls in clusters of two or three. These surreal, near-weightless baubles invite comparison to bubble

gum balls and soap bubbles, but also to mega-jewels and molecular structures—atoms at play, perhaps, in yet another example of Weber's mastery of illusion and irony, his playful challenge to the wearer to embrace art as value, not vice versa.

The challenge is implicit, as well, with the "Dazzler" (*Glanzstück*) series from the late 1990s, together with "Show-Piece" (*Schaustück*, 2007–2009), two bodies of work—shown in full in his

book—that interpret the fabulous in jewelry variously with fantastical daring and sculptural élan. For the "Dazzlers," Weber works in starchitectural/constructivist mode to create large brooches of highly reflective aluminum set with glittery synthetic stones. Pristine cubes or Gehryesque fluted structures are mounted flat or angled on bejeweled bases, suggesting radiant, futuristic cityscapes that, in Munich University's professor of literature Barbara Vinken's phrase, "flaunt artificiality."⁶ By using the same tabbed sheet-metal process he employed for "Objects" and "Flock," Weber, says Vinken, reveals "skilled goldsmithing that cleverly conceals its artistry in order to state it all the more effectively." With "Show-Pieces," Weber disguises huge free-wheeling body sculptures as brooches and bangles that incorporate plastic stones and beads in silver settings. Though plastic, these faceted and cabochon jewels—as accents in metal armatures or set in gigantic pavé—assume an uncanny elegance, another instance of Weber as master of the fake.

With the "Portraits" series, settings become the jewel itself, complex bejeweled screens behind which Weber sets faded images of the Pop icons Barbie, Big Jim, and Dr. Steel so as to appear either receding or looming in memory. The largest of these oversize pieces, simply titled Portrait #7,

Untitled (necklace), 2010
sterling silver, silkscreen on plastic
7 7/8 x 11"



is a roughly 4-by-5-inch brooch—admittedly unwearable, says Weber—whose frame is constructed as a children’s roundabout, its silver rails colored pink and mounted with nine pink plastic skulls with the sugary aspect of macabre all-day suckers. In the center, a floating silver disc—a trampoline?—bears a digital print of disembodied pink lips, evocative of Man Ray’s surrealist painting *The Lovers*—or is it simply a lipstick blot on a tissue? Or are these Barbie’s lips? (Weber says yes; blonde Barbie.) It doesn’t matter, because in considering the layered meanings of this memento mori, all interpretations are possible, and even probable in a piece that so deftly balances allusions to iconic art, popular culture and found objects within one meticulously constructed object. But it deserves a better title: Childhood’s End?

Weber’s interest in such dramatic sculptural narratives in no way negates his focus on more conventional jewelry forms. His colliers, he points out, “belong to my exploration of precious (stone) jewelry,” in which he uses different methods to reference images of tradition jewelry.

Untitled, 1995, one of two colliers I viewed at Ornamentum, is comprised of 11 silver discs, each of which displays a faint brushstroke, achieved by removing wax prior to casting, but

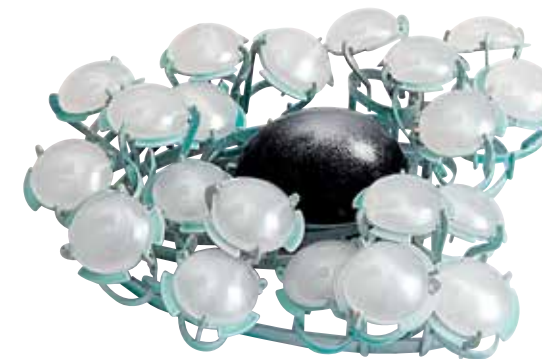
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the result is the illusion of an addition—Weber’s real/fake dichotomy in action.⁷ With the stunning *Untitled*, 2010, the collier has evolved into a deconstructed canvas for multimedia art. Each disc is a silkscreen print on plastic of “disappeared”

Portrait #7 (brooch), 2008
silver, plastic skulls,
lacquer, digital print
5 7/8 x 4 3/8 x 1 7/8"



Show Piece #1, 2007–2009
silver, plastic stones, lacquer
4 7/8 x 4 3/8 x 1 7/8"



images of jewelry overlaid with stripes of color “to give the effect of a fading memory,” in Weber’s words.

What seems to unite Weber’s varied and many collections is a streak of romanticism that posits an emotional connection—through jewelry—to art and life, and assumes the artist’s task to be a perpetual seeking of expressive forms in which to unite material and spiritual realities. In 2008, Otto Kunzli

put it more succinctly, in stating the central thesis that governs his own philosophy of art and teaching: “We are proud to be applied artists in the sense that we see our strength in the specific link between objects and humans, a feature which is quite unique to jewellery.”⁸ Weber would surely concur.

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1. May 13-17, 2015, followed by gallery installation through June 20. “NOW” is Weber’s signature, a translation of the German “jetzt” (“now” or “of the moment”).
2. Pursuant to my gallery visit, Weber answered questions about his work via email, as he was leaving for the “Body Alchemy” show in Hangzhou, China. Quotes are drawn from that conversation and from the gallery’s website.
3. Zilioli, Ellen Maurer (ed.) *NOW: Jewels by Norman Weber*. Essays by Ellen Maurer Zilioli, Berhart Shwenk, and Barbara Vinken. Arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart, 2010.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
7. That it bears comparison with Gerd Rothmann’s gold fingerprint disc necklaces is not surprising, as Weber worked for Rothmann for several months in the mid-1990s and considered his work “an icon for contemporary jewelry for me.” So perhaps the brushstrokes are Weber’s own gestural fingerprints, an homage to Rothmann.
8. Quoted in www.curatedobject.us. *The Fat Booty of Madness: Jewellery at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich: The Künzli Class*, March 1–May 18, 2008.