

Verdi Yahooda: Photographs

Verdi Yahooda was invited by Romilly Saumarez Smith to photograph a selection of her found metal objects before they became part of her jewellery. Over a series of visits to Romilly's house she began placing the metal fragments, sometimes individually, sometimes in groups, on areas of the heavily worn floorboards of the 18th century building. In this playful process, the wood grain, pitted with nails and with stains, marks and scratches began to trigger ideas, suggesting imaginary landscapes – not unlike the fairytale terrain that Romilly and her family came across on the island, with its layers of rock and sediment, lichens and moss.



Verdi takes these long buried items, marked by time, and creates new stories for and around them. Scraping Buckles, Aligned Thimbles, Seedheads, Three Shields (Right Bank) - the titles of the photographs are a clue of sorts. Yet if narratives are suggested, they remain ambiguous, out of reach, and it is this elusive quality that pervades the work.

A dark sea recedes. A heap of ancient buckles, each shaped like a shiny figure of eight, lie on the shore, washed up by the tide... Old metal thimbles, squashed and disfigured, emerge from a dark crevice, some still holding earth, like broken shells filled with sand... A lone pearl, tiny, white, round, suggests a flower emerging from the soil. A handful of ancient nails - some curved, some bent - dance across the horizontal wood grain, like seeds or falling petals, or musical notes broken free from the stave... Tiny insects crawl, one behind the other, like blobs of amoeba...

Verdi's working process is meticulous. First the careful selection and placing of things; then waiting for a soft natural daylight; then to the darkroom, where thoughts run free. Hands-on she manipulates the photographs directly, changing exposure times to give some areas more light - the metal a glint - while holding back elsewhere, rubbing here, smudging there as the image, the landscape emerges.

She works predominantly in black and white photography, often experimentally, and as in the images presented here, humble objects recur, often in isolation against a plain or textured background, and become animated, protagonists in some enigmatic drama. Her work has something of the uncanny - in which the familiar disturbs - and these new photographs, despite their subtlety, are no exception. They bring us close up to the floor, as Verdi with her lens, so that we can see every mark and texture, giving the objects an aura. And yet they deny us intimacy. Both playful and melancholic, there is a formality about them. In the careful and deliberate placing of the modest and ordinary, they have something of the still life in which every day objects are staged before a blank wall and removed from real life; and in particular the vanitas, a reminder of the vanity of material goods and the transience of life.

Who knows what lives they have lived – these buckles, and clasps, and nails and fragments of jewellery. But here in Verdi's photographs, before they join the material world once again, they seem to hold a curious latent energy. Perhaps borne of patient years buried beneath the soil, waiting to be found.

Pennina Barnett

Left:
Verdi Yahooda
Aligned Thimbles 2015
Silver Gelatin print
Private Collection

Cover:
Romilly Saumarez Smith
Kindly Stag 2013
Medieval bronze bridle charm, silver
Private Collection

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Romilly Saumarez Smith: Newfoundland

In 2011 Romilly Saumarez Smith began to pick up fragments being sold on eBay by metal detecting enthusiasts: Anglo-Saxon and Roman nails; gimlet-like watch winders; paste jewels come loose from their mounts; thimbles; buckles of all sorts; buttons, coins and clasps; bridle charms, brooches and pins. Around these survivals of past lives, now brought to the surface, she has made her new collection, embedding found objects in mounts to become rings or earrings, pushing new growths through old holes or breaks, riveting and sewing metal to metal to fuse and join the antique and the new. Each is at once a wearable piece of jewellery and a small-scale sculpture in which the components combine to make a sumptuously wrought landscape.



First, the landscape. Though many of the techniques and shapes here – drilling tiny holes through the metal, bending and hammering wire, an accumulation of small elements, a balanced asymmetry – are common to Romilly's work from her days as a bookbinder and from her early jewellery, this new collection has its genesis in a voyage in Newfoundland in 2001. Left by a boatman on a remote offshore island, Romilly and her family walked to the far side across a layered landscape of rock and bog on which had built up a dense latticework of blackened roots, with lichens and moss and low bushes, pinned, as she describes it, with cranberries and cloudberries. 'We walked across a fairytale that no one had ever walked across before.' This landscape is remade, or transformed, in these pieces; but not only this landscape. Over the next decade Romilly's line of vision necessarily shifted. In the wheelchair she is nearer the ground and notices it. Periods of waiting turn into times of looking. Long forgotten pictures do their associative work in the sub-conscious and then come to the surface. After a silence of 30 or 40 years the undergrowth in the work of Arthur Rackham came back. Onto this rich landscape the found pieces are grafted, so that the new and the old are juxtaposed. Far from being conceptual, this dialogue is concrete and visual. The pieces bear their meaning in, and on, themselves.

Second, the wrought element. The word pick up, that I used at the beginning, is necessarily metaphorical and the process electronic. The making part of Romilly's work, the meditative repetition of touching, twisting, riveting, sewing, cutting, buffing: this is done by Lucie Gledhill, with whom Romilly has worked since 2009, and by Anna Wales and Laura Ngyou, who joined her subsequently. Lucie, Anna and Laura are more than Romilly's amanuenses. Their work with her is an act of translation, if we use that word in its original sense of something magically changed but remaining itself.



Romilly does not touch the work with her hands, but she can see it feelingly. Loss of sensation is only exterior; in the mind the senses do not atrophy. Though an outer body may fall away, as belt leather does over time from a buckle or wood from a nail, the touch of the fingers on an object is vividly real and can be summoned acutely. Romilly, as well as those who work with her, can feel what it is like to wear one of these pieces, the heft and weight of a pendant on the neck, the pull on an ear lobe, the slower lift of a finger with a ring. And then, the pieces themselves will move, unconfined. They go where their wearer goes, walking, running, dancing. They are adornment, pleasure, an addition to the body.

The third element of this work: its extravagance. Despite their precision and smallness, these pieces also have elements of the baroque and the belle époque. They are joyful and radiant. They echo the freedom and curvaceous asymmetry of Grinling Gibbons and the tangled, fanciful lines of Rackham. They are dense, made up of hundreds of tiny slivers, discs, spheres, whisks and cones. They use the richest materials, as well as the most ordinary ones. Silver and gold might enclose eighteenth century paste, gold wire sews seed pearls or diamonds onto a turret brooch.

Some pieces burst with new life in an almost surreal way. Look at the *Kindly Stag* bridle charm. Silver branches spurt out in place of his lost antler. Many have a partner - necessarily so for the earrings (though these have sometimes different shapes, one a circle, the other a rectangle). The wreath of gold, seeded with jewels, is matched by a smaller one in black, their reverse sides dense with metallic undergrowth. Buckle rings, *King and Queen*, might be worn side by side. A silver thimble, *Thimbleweed*, fringed with vegetation, is matched with a blackened iron one, *Flowering Thimble*, on which growth sprouts out from an erosion in its side.



Many parts of these pieces have a kind of freedom; they move with the wearer, they hang, or are strung together, and shake out spores, nodding as seed-heads do. A simple crescent-shaped pendant is made of dozens of tiny match-like rods of silver, scattered with pins, that have pushed up together in the way that flotsam does against a bridge head or a river bank; though they don't move, we feel the dynamism in them, the current.

The taciturn boatman in his strange gondola who rowed Romilly and her family across the choppy sea to the island in 2001 was a sort of Charon, ferrying her to the new found land. Where he took her, though, was not to the underworld, but to a place of renewal and life, and these tiny landscapes celebrate it. They have the quality of another fairy-tale island, the one that belonged to the magician Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest*: 'Those are pearls that were his eyes: Nothing of him that doth fade, But doth suffer a sea-change Into something rich and strange.'

Stella Tillyard