The Tribe: Talismans, Amulets, and Objects of Remembrance

Steven Gordon Holman

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BIO

Steven Gordon Holman was born in 1988 in Leaminton, Utah. His work is a reflection on his rural upbringing, a collection of stories, myths, and iconographies both personal and cultural. Holman’s work has been included in many exhibitions, including the Granoff Inaugural Exhibition at Brown University in 2011 and Insight On Site: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Historic Huguenot Street in 2012, as well as in printed publications such as Doingbird Magazine, Remix Magazine, Oyster Magazine, and Current Obsession Schmuck Paper. He held his first solo exhibition, Grounded, in 2011 at the List Art Center in Providence, RI. In 2013 Holman was the recipient of the Finlandia Foundation National Cultural Grant for creative research in Northern Europe. Holman received B.A.’s in Visual Art and Architectural Studies from Brown University in 2011, and is currently a M.F.A. student in the SUNY New Paltz Metal program in New Paltz, NY. In March 2014, Holman’s work was featured in the international competition and exhibition, Talente 2014, as well as a special exhibition, Staring: in HINDSIGHT in the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Motif-laden and anecdotal, my current works are a series of artifacts from The Tribe. The Tribe was born out of the West Desert and contemporary hunting culture, its shaman the rabbit and its oracle the magpie. Tapping into myths, Norse, Native American, and personal, passed down from my parents, their parents, and so on, my works are a reflection of childhood experiences and the rambling landscapes of western Utah. In the creation of these artifacts I grapple with notions of hunting, gathering, and storytelling, and their influences and appearances in contemporary culture at large, attempting to reconcile the misconceptions about what it is to be a hunter today. Each piece is approached as a material investigation, a constellation of unexpected parts brought together in unexpected ways.

Through this work I attempt to form new material allegiances, each component a place marker, each coming together with the whole to complete the narrative. By combining natural, archaic materials with technologies of contemporary rural culture I attempt to present to a demographic that is often overlooked. I make jewelry for The Tribe, jewelry about the contemporary hunter-gatherer, for the contemporary hunter-gatherer.
steven gordon holman
MFA
suny new paltz
may 16 - 20
2014

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THE TRIBE: TALISMANS, AMULETS, AND OBJECTS OF REMEMBRANCE

INTRODUCTION:

Fetish. Token. Talisman. These terms conjure ideas of ritual, mystical objects; objects of reverence, respect, and desire. Our relationship to such artifacts is dictated by deep instinctual impulses built upon centuries of cultural heritage. It is innately human, the need for food, water, shelter gives impetus for the creation of objects that fulfill those needs, to carry, cover, conceal. I would argue that there is a fourth function that an object can perform, one that is seated in the others, perhaps conceived in utility, but marked for it’s spiritual, emotional value: to adorn. I make adornment for The Tribe, adornment about, and for, the contemporary hunter/gatherer.

I am interested in the capability afforded in systems of adornment to signal both the ideological and class structures of the wearer and maker. Objects of adornment serve as markers of position, documents of loss, honor, achievement, and facilitators of story and conversation. Why is adornment important, and to whom? What physical, metaphorical, and mythic links can be discovered through the making and wearing of ornament?

My work is an attempt to reconcile what I know from my upbringing in the West Desert of Utah and conceptions of the hunter in contemporary culture. In this paper I will define The Tribe, and what I believe its role to be in contemporary culture.

The Tribe was born out of the West Desert and a contemporary hunter-gatherer culture. It is a sect tied to nature, built out of its own myth and hunting, gathering, and husbandry practice. Conceived from an amalgam of respect for natural
forces and desire for control, *The Tribe* grew out of the west. However, its connections to past and present hunting cultures from around the world expand its definition to allow for a wider understanding of hunting and gathering, ritual and mythmaking, in contemporary culture. The myths, stories, and attitudes, the very belief system, that *The Tribe* embodies is rooted in the deep currents of the world at large. *The Tribe* has an unapologetically raw relationship with nature, ritual, and mythmaking. It is a sub-culture that is generally considered backward, or is at least accused of lacking in progress, in terms of intellect, ethics, and foresight. While it may be true that the “cultured” in our society may have something that the “un-cultured” lack, there is danger in acknowledging that such a dichotomy exists, or that one culture is high and the other low. It could also be said that the “cultured” lack what the “un-cultured” have, a far more sustainable lifestyle and a relationship with the earth that is visceral, intuitive, and deeply emotional.

**NATURE:**

*The Tribe* is not defined by geography or status, but by a close relationship with nature, a respect for the wild, and an understanding of its offering. It has a long history with nature; in fact, it is defined by its relationship to it. *The Tribe* interacts with nature for sustenance, for survival, and for sport. The degree to which we, as human beings, see ourselves separate from nature varies, but without it there is no culture, because culture grew out of nature and is generally defined by its opposition. Claude Levi-Strauss addresses this idea through the binary opposition of the “Raw” and the “Cooked,” wherein the raw is untouched (and presumably closer

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to nature) and the cooked is processed (and therefore cultured). The descriptions “raw and cooked” apply to all aspects of culture, from thoughts and ideologies to physical objects and utilities. In our contemporary, Western “cooked” society it is sometimes easy to forget where the things that are consumed come from, where they are processed, or how they come into being. We would then consider ourselves more cooked than we were in the past (as a whole) and more cooked as we urbanize, which leads us to believe that more raw cultures are not only less advanced, but also rural. Although *The Tribe* was conceived out of these stereotypes, those of hunters, gatherers, farmers being typically rural, less advanced, less cultured, it transcends those bounds.

There is another side of hunting and gathering that arises from nature, namely the sport of it; the hunt, the kill, the power of one over another, the moment you catch it and it’s yours. This tends to be the focus of the cultured of our times, and their main argument for hunters being brutish, ignorant, or uncaring. Even as they consume the spoils of the hunt, trophy mounts, fur, skins, leather, and meats, they condemn hunting as a practice. There is an instinctual, primal urge behind the hunt of something, and a satisfaction in the kill or capture, whether what is sought is living or inanimate. It is interesting to turn the lens back onto the more “cooked” culture: What is “the kill” for a businessman, a politician, or an artist? What is their goal, and is it more or less noble? It is in this kind of question that we realize we haven’t really left our instincts behind, and that the lure of the hunt is hardwired. As humans we all hunt to survive. We all have our rituals.
Each year hunter’s head into the wilderness in search of sustenance, solitude, and sport, fishermen to the lakes, streams, rivers and oceans, and farmers and gardeners into their plots. These rituals are embedded in what it is to be human. While the founding principles and utilities behind them remain largely intact the implementation, the actual physical practices, and the motives behind them have evolved. There are certainly rituals that are a necessary adaptation in implementing a harvest, the repetitive sowing of a field, the cleaning of a gun, the tying of flies; these functional rituals play an important role in the culture of The Tribe. However it is the purely habitual rituals, the superstitions and seemingly arbitrary motions that interest me. Often these rituals are preparations and meditations surrounding the harvest of fresh game. One such ritual is Blooding, a rite of passage that dates back to the first-century in France, in which blood from the freshly killed animal is smeared on the face of the hunter, typically shaped as three crosses, one on the forehead and one on each cheek. The lore behind these actions is rooted in the story of St. Hubert, the patron saint of hunters. Hubert was an active hunter, and valued nothing higher until, while stalking a large buck he was guided to the clergy. The buck, known thereafter as the Christ-Buck, turned to face Hubert who was struck by the sight of an illuminated cross glowing between its antlers. The bloody crucifixes on the face of the hunter pay homage to St. Hubert, referring to the illuminated cross and the two antlers of the Christ-Buck.² Today hunters from around the Western world still participate in blooding while most are unaware of the specific history behind the practice.

Like all ritualistic practice, ideas around fresh harvest evolve over time, and individual practices vary. Field and Stream Magazine contributor Nick Bass detailed his own traditions in *The Ritual: After Death, Before Venison*:

The first part of my ritual is easy; it’s what our parents told us a long time ago … I say thank you—very quietly, under my breath really—to the mountain I’m on and to the animal. Then I set about cleaning the animal. … I make sure the carcass that remains—head, vertebrae, ribs—is positioned on its side, with each part as it was, back in the brief assembly of life. I place each foreleg and shin in its appropriate pairing, so that the animal is positioned as if in midflight … ‘an extra-emphatic leap into the hereafter.’

Lastly, I place my brass bullet casing against the trunk of the tree where I was sitting and position a rock over it. … I like to think that someday, maybe a century or more from now, a hunter might be sitting against that same tree in the fall and, should he or she dislodge that oddly tilted stone—which would be lichen-covered by then and gripped with a webbing of kinnikinnick—might notice the brass and understand that once upon a time there was another hunter like him or her.³

The idea of the bullet casing as a token of the hunt signifying a member of *The Tribe*, an object imbued with the history of a specific moment, interests me as both a jeweler, maker, and hunter. I am especially interested in the power of objects and adornments used in ritualistic practices. Costumes, talismans, charms and amulets

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have played a huge role in the ritualistic behaviors of every culture, finding themselves at the center of the mythic structures that they are connected with. Whether it be a token on a hunt, an amulet to dissuade that which might cause you harm, or a piece saved in remembrance of a place or thing, these objects hold a distinct power, and the mythos around them is important.

The Zuni of what is now northeastern New Mexico, who called themselves the Ashiwi, practiced very specific object-centric rituals when stalking, harvesting, and processing an animal. In preparation for a hunt the Ashiwi hunter crafted a talisman from wood, stone, antler, bone, or shell in the likeness of an animal or natural force. The talisman was specific to the hunt; a puma might be carried for deer hunting, a coyote for rabbit, a wolf for antelope. The talisman was held to the mouth when the hunt was initiated so that the hunter could breathe in its spirit in order to charm his prey. After a successful kill the hunter would wash the token in the fresh blood of the animal to strengthen its talismanic properties. The history of the talisman as both a source of power and remembrance is illustrated and tightly intertwined with the function of adornment.

Warwick Freeman, a contemporary jeweler, is the creator of a ring that is both amuletic and memorial. Earth Ring is a piece that is inherently ritualistic. The wearer removes the round nylon ball that crowns the ring, revealing a silver tube. The tube is pressed into the soil in a location of the wearer’s choosing, and when lifted contains a “core sample” of that location. In an article for Art Jewelry Forum, Damian Skinner wrote: “it seeks solutions for remaining connected to place in spite of all the movement … Freeman makes place and region – through soil, the very

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earth itself – critical to the meanings of his ring.” There is a specific moment in the action of taking this earth sample in which the ring transitions from object to amulet. The ring itself serves as a vessel, which during the singular ritual of its use transforms the soil into something more. Combined, the ring and the soil take on a power, an understanding of a specific moment translated and elevated into myth.

**MYTH:**

Out of nature and ritual comes myth. The fear of nature, the impulse to try to understand it, and the comfort and stability afforded by ritual storytelling give rise to myth. Myth and story can be found in every culture, and are an extremely important mechanism for relating to, coping with, and recording the world. These stories can serve as fables, omens that predict our future, and/or facilitators of expectation and relationships within a community. There are some myths that are universal, told in different iterations but with the same premise, narrative, and cast of characters. The hare, for example, is used by the people of Utah’s West Desert to predict natural patterns of feast or famine. In Nordic mythologies hares are said to carry the lights of the dawn and move between the realms of life and death. These notions of the hare, developed thousands of miles apart, may be based on common observations of rabbit populations being hardy and rebounding, even as they may suffer the largest decline.

Contemporary Ceramic artist Laurent Esquerre taps into the ideas of universal myth and understanding to create works that transcend language and

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cultural bounds. In *Body and Soul; New International Ceramics* at the Museum of Art and Design in New York Esquerre presented an earthenware piece that draws directly from universal myths. *Le Calvaire* (2010) is a totemic column-cross hybrid, crowned with two black magpies and adorned with figures of men, women, animals, and religious icons. Laurent describes the piece as “a structure that reflects the conflict between good and evil … love and sex. The cowboy on the cross shooting the devil is an obvious internal battle doomed to failure because one cannot kill the devil … The donkey and the woman represent love and sex … the key figures are the mother and child, who represent the essence of life.” The narrative in the piece is readable, at least at the basic level of iconic relationships, without even Esquerre’s explanation, because it is rooted in universal myths.

The way in which we tell and interpret tales through objects is akin to the way stories pass through word of mouth. Jewelry in particular has a direct and inherent relationship to storytelling, as it functions to facilitate conversations. In her piece, *The Story Necklace*, Julia Cowie explores the concept of jewelry and storytelling through a study of the storytelling traditions of Scottish Travelers. The piece consists of found objects and fragments of natural material, strung as a rosary. It is accompanied by a “story purse”, a pouch filled with small items to aid in the telling and retelling of specific stories. These pieces can be added or removed to the necklace, depending on the story, adding authenticity and believability. Cowie’s story purse is essentially a recreation of the pouch in the story and of similar objects traditionally used by Scottish Travelers, and one story in particular tells of the importance of objects in the creation of myth.7

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7 Cowie, Julia. *Undiscovered Landscape: The Scottish Travelers, Pearl Fishing and the*
In Timothy Neat's *The Summer Walkers: Travelling People and Pearl-fishers in the Highlands of Scotland*, Neat tells of Duncan Willamson's grandmother, a traveling storyteller. His grandmother kept a story pouch filled with trinkets to remind her of the stories. One day Duncan and his younger sister stole the pouch while his grandmother was sleeping, hoping to find the stories she kept hidden inside. Upon opening the pouch they found bangles, rings, tobacco, brooches, buttons, and pieces of pipe, among other things, but were dismayed to find no stories inside. They quickly returned the pouch and when their grandmother awakened they asked for a story. Their grandmother looked into the pouch and exclaimed: “Duncan, somebody’s been in my pocket! While I was asleep somebody’s come in and my stories have gone – every one.” His grandmother never told another story.8

The anecdote of the story pocket, and Cowie’s *Story Necklace* illustrate the power of adornment in the sharing of story and myth. Physical objects and adornments function to authenticate mythologies. As evidence grows, so does faith. Belief in mythic structures does not depend on the physicality of objects or rituals, but it is strengthened by it. The propagation and dissemination of story can be vastly influenced by the power of adorning objects. Through their ability to move into and through the world they are able to facilitate conversations based on curiosity, pride, and wonder.

In the worlds of jewelry and adornment, the maker, wearer, and viewer are all necessary collaborators in the completion and authentication of the piece, through the sharing of its story. Liesbeth den Besten speaks of the inability to wear jewelry naively in *On Jewelry*: “[Jewelry] can never be worn naively … It will always

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demand some understanding, involvement and commitment.”⁹ She speaks of jewelry's ability to enter the world and facilitate conversation as a force that must be responsibly addressed. The assumption that jewelry can never be worn naively is not necessarily true, as most commercial jewelry is not given more than an aesthetic thought. In the case of tribal jewelry, however, the object serves as an access to the myth; its talismanic properties draw the viewer into the realm of mythic being.

Walter Benjamin, in writing about storytelling lamented the loss of storytelling ability in our modern culture. He attributed this loss to the trauma wrought by the inhumanity of war. Benjamin mourned in particular the inability to lose yourself from brutal reality and engage in free and organic forms of shared story.¹⁰ The attribution of inhumanity to the onslaught of reality is apt, as reality leaves little room for belief, imagination, or myth. The trauma that Benjamin cites and its effect on storytelling can be compared to the instant fact checking afforded by our devices in our contemporary times. The inability to imagine possibility or suspend disbelief is resulting in the continual loss of contemporary myth in our “cultured society”. As a result we yearn for something imagined, something not entirely graspable.

Robert McLiam Wilson discusses the onslaught of electronic devices, and Internet culture and its effects on our minds in Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage:

The modern world is becoming a kind of poison. A data-stream, a global network. I feel like I am living in a factory, actual and virtual – alimentary, sanitary, moral and philosophical … And we are

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becoming strange to each other. We are surrounded by, and part of, the first-world torpor of a networked billion slumped over their computers in a festival of onanistic status, a riot of inertia … Our dissatisfaction with our mental or spiritual diet is expressing itself despite us. It leaps out … Our souls are crying out for the roughage of the primal.11

Wilson speaks about the disappearance of tribal, shamanistic culture and its downfall at the hands of the Internet. He then turns his attention to a yearning that we, as “tame” men have for the “actual, the primal, the old”, stating that essential we are all, deep inside of us, “seeking the past, the genuine, the individual.”12 The internet and our continually digitalized world play a large role in the culling of story and mythic belief, from photographic evidence that disproves big buck stories to google maps, which made final the boundaries of our world. This rift from the past, from myth, and from suspended belief, results in a renewed interest in these cultural pastimes.

The Tribe still subscribes to these myths, as evidenced in the telling of “big buck” or “the one that got away” stories. The Tribe retains its ability to remember and rely on their ancestral legends, their allegorical inheritance, even in a world where they might be proven wrong. An example of this ability, to believe fully in myth and illusion while living in a world of science an investigation is illustrated in an experience David Abram writes about in The Spell of the Sensuous.

Abram was once staying for a short time in the home of a “balian,” a magic practitioner, in the interior of Bali. Early each morning the balian’s wife would bring...
Abram a bowl of fruit, and he would eat it as he watched her go about her morning routine. He noticed that each morning she took several small bowls of rice around the backside of the huts and returned without them. Later in the day he noticed her retrieve the bowls, now empty. He asked what she was doing and she told him she was leaving the rice for the “household spirits”. The next morning Abram took a vantage point where he could see the bowls the balian’s wife had left. He was curious as to where the rice was actually going. He watched, very carefully, and after a few moments the rice began to move, lifting grain by grain from the bowl and dancing across the ground. The rice was being taken by the ants from a nearby colony.

Abram considered asking the family if they knew that was the fate of their offering, but suspected that to some extent they knew. The offering at the edge of the huts each day kept the ants busy long enough to keep them from raiding the balian’s home. The reality of the ants and the need for survival had become interlaced with the mythologies and beliefs of the people. Appeasing the ants was the same as appeasing the household spirits, ensuring the protection of the family’s precious resources.13

Although the story of the ants is somewhat removed from the rituals of hunting, there is a distinct connection between the relationship with reality, community, and nature, and faith. There is a balance between believing in myths and living realistically, the two are not mutually exclusive.

THE TRIBE:

I create ritualistic, totemic adornment for *The Tribe*, talismans, amulets, and objects of remembrance, all artifacts of a culture rooted deeply in tradition. My aim is to blur the lines between contemporary and archaic, redneck and pop culture. There is something that happens when new and old worlds collide, when myths, ritual, and reality become one, and that junction is where *The Tribe* resides. I utilize and transform “raw” materials from the west, stones, antlers, potatoes, bone, and taxidermy, juxtaposing them with the tools and forms of contemporary hunting. The resulting pieces are imbued with material history, mythic and symbolic meaning, and of course, story.

Most of my works are conceived as neckpieces, a format lending itself to both narrative and ritual, and follow the lines of the fetish objects. These pieces vacillate between brutish and elegant, vital and cold. The body of work also includes badges, animal head trophies, and costuming objects, rooted in utility. Small details are scattered through the work, sewn hair, carved rabbits, tattooed images, all building up the myth and rewarding those who care to look closer. Through carving, sewing, drying, braiding, I begin to make in a way that is emulative of storytelling. In piecing, preparing, and joining, I build pieces that can be read as artifacts, through the mining of the technique, materials, and traditions, employed.

These works engage your senses, making an attempt at sincerity and authenticity through material investment. They are a genuine exploration of a culture that isn’t often celebrated, a foray into my upbringing and my understanding of the world as experienced by *The Tribe*. 
IV.

Works Cited


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<td>Coyote Trophy Brooch</td>
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<td>Crow Trophy Brooch</td>
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<td>Winter Ghillie Story Suit</td>
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<td>Geode Monoliths</td>
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VI.

SELECTED IMAGES