

Abstract:

Jewelry is most commonly understood as a small decorative item worn for personal adornment. Elaborate, artistic, hand-made jewelry is historically and culturally relevant in telling us about the beliefs and traditions of different cultures and civilizations. Jewelry is often thought of as an identity object, but I suggest that amulet and talisman jewelry are not identity objects. Amulets and talismans are objects that interact with the wearer and they do not aim to communicate with others about ones identity. My artwork has begun with the quest of making forward-thinking objects or contemporary amulets. Amulets and talismans were once created to protect us and we put our faith into them in order to answer the unsolved mysteries of the universe. Illness, luck, wealth, evil, death, birth, all provided (and still provide) uncertainty. However, with modern advances in technology, we might assume that the need for such magical objects becomes absolute.

Within contemporary Western society amulets and talisman might have become less popular and less widespread, but not extinct. I investigate how spiritual objects have been replaced by safety objects, like the bulletproof vest, the life preserver, and the helmet and I question whether these objects have any similarities or overlap with the traditional amulet or talisman. We may not recognize the existence of amulets in our daily lives, but many of the objects we keep close to us become more than functional or aesthetic objects. These objects can represent our faith and our trust in the ritual and routine in our lives.

Through research into historical and contemporary amulets, I have developed a body of artwork I have titled the Life Preserver. The Life Preserver is a series of necklaces in the form of life jackets that blend the idea of the contemporary safety object with a spiritual amulet. These amulet Life Preservers challenge the common understanding of jewelry through its use of material and its form. I hope to challenge both the jewelry field and myself to believe in the powers of these necklaces as a source of protection and spiritual strength.

**Investigation of Traditional Amulets,**  
**Contemporary Amulets, Theoretical Amulets, and the overlap with**  
**Contemporary Wearable Objects of Protection and Safety**

Outline:

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- II. Jewelry and Identity
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## I. Perspective

I have a distinct childhood memory of me sitting in a small canoe looking out across the river at three brown bears, one mamma bear and two baby bears. The mamma bear screamed out to me in my green canoe threatening me not to come any closer. As I clutched my life jacket closer to my body, I was both dangerously curious and frightened. My adult-self is aware that my parents were probably in that canoe with me, but the memory does not include them. It was just me, wearing my life vest, and those angry bears. My life vest was my immediate source of comfort, which stemmed from my childhood living aboard a boat. At the time of the bear-incident, my parents and I were living in a canoe while we paddled 1,000 miles up the Mackenzie River in Canada. After this two-month trip, we returned to our 30-foot sailboat and continued our life at sea until I was about 10 years old when we permanently moved on land.

This upbringing impacted me in two very distinct ways. The first is that I was raised with the understanding that my entertainment and learning relied heavily upon my creativity. Without a consistent group of friends or a plethora of toys, I was often left to either drawing or painting. While we ventured on land, I was able to use the sticks, sand, mud and found objects to add to my medium of play, but these “toys” were never allowed to follow me back to our small boat. I found a loophole when I decided that my found objects were actually jewelry, and I was able to wear it back to the boat without much disagreement. The second impact was my keen awareness of the important survival and safety objects that we used on a daily basis. With the limited items that can be taken on a small sailboat, most of the items we had onboard were essential items. And so even my life vest became my blank canvas. My name and age were clearly written on the inside and I added some drawings of fish and a small self-portrait. No one would ever confuse to whom this life jacket belonged!

Last year, I was working on a painting with my partner Randall Mosman. The painting depicted a sinking ferry with all the rescued passengers floating in inflatable rafts near by. The rescued passengers all wore distinctive orange life vests on their bodies. This painting led me to make several realistic looking life vests. Without knowingly connecting this action to any of my memories living aboard the sailboat, I continued to make more life vests. My research and my



Playing Hop-Scotch along the Mackenzie river with my father

continued time working in the studio has helped unfold my connection with the life vest and its connection with jewelry. This essay is an investigation into my thoughts about the structure of a life vest becoming a jewelry object. I will also investigate the contemporary amulet and the overlap between our safety objects and spiritual objects.

## **II. Jewelry and Identity**

A commonly discussed quality of jewelry is its role as an identity object within society. A simple language of symbols are communicated when someone wears a political button, a large expensive-looking diamond ring, badge, football paraphernalia, and branded clothing. In Parvu Mazumdar's lecture he states "Identity is usually regarded as something that is rare and easily lost, only to be regained after long and dramatic struggles. However, a careful look shows that identity is in fact being constantly generated in our daily lives and thrust on us as a task that we sense as a kind of subtle and barely perceptible imperative." (Parvu Mazumdar 2015) Identity seems to be something we are trying to construct and project through the clothes we wear, the CVs we write, and the affiliations we proclaim. This way of reading these objects and judging one another based on their assumed meaning is widespread and too often understood as truth. But identity can be full of stereotypes and ignore the realities of perspectivism.

Mazumdar continues his discussion by describing jewelry as functioning in two opposing models. "It can strengthen the drift towards identity; or it can break up the shell of existing identities to make place for new identities." (Mazumdar 2015) Mazumdar goes on to ask his thesis question "Is contemporary jewelry capable of resisting the politics of identity rampant in modern societies? Can the jewelry of our time help us stand our ground against the dispositives of identity holding sway over entire populations around the globe?" (Mazumdar 2015) In this vein of thinking, I would like to propose another way of looking at or reading jewelry. It is possible that the jewelry is not meant for anyone to read or interpret except the wearer themselves. If the jewelry is hidden from view or not being worn it is simply communicating about itself to the viewer. One type of jewelry that practices this type of communication is the amulet or talisman.

### **III. The Amulet and Talisman as a Forward-Thinking Object**

“From the beginning of time, armor and amulets have been used for protection and are found in cultures across the globe, and those who crafted them have been esteemed as artists by their communities.” (Suzanne Ramljak 2014 page 5)

Cultures have a history of putting their faith and trust into amulets and talisman as a solution to the obstacles and challenges of humanity. An amulet is defined as any object whose most important characteristic is its alleged power to protect its owner from danger or harm. (Sheila Paine 2004 page 10) Similarly, a talisman is something thought to be imbued with some magical property, which can both protect and radiate power. Amulets are different from talismans, as a talisman is believed to bring luck or some other benefit, though it can offer protection as well. There is always some overlap in the meaning of amulet and talisman and they are often used indiscriminately. They are worn on the body to bring luck, heal, enhance fertility, protect against injury (during travel, hunting, or from bites and stings) or ward off evil depending on the wearers beliefs and intentions. The amulet and talisman are objects that are to be used preventatively, with the present and future in mind. Objects that speak about identity rely on the past and what has already occurred. A forward thinking object, therefore, requires faith and can only function with the future in mind.

Identity objects and attributes are identified in Mazumdar’s lecture, “Then there is the passport, functioning as a document of national identity, seen by most of us as an unshakable, God given destiny; or the football club, the favorite band, the designer clothes and gadgets or the intellectual, artistic, religious trends we would like to be part of.” These allegiances can be marked as part of our identity or misinterpreted as our identity by others according to what we wear on our bodies, how we speak, our mannerisms, and through other mediums. When we get dressed in the morning and style (or not style) our hair, we are often aware of the projecting identity our visual past tells others. Therefore, I will argue that identity objects rely on the past. For example, the “I voted” sticker that is commonly worn after voting in a United States election tells others what I have already done or completed. The sticker lumps me into a grouping of people that appear to care about our politics and took an active participatory roll that election day. But the sticker does not tell others if they will vote in the next election. The sticker is strictly stuck in the past; it is even written in the past tense.

When we wear a t-shirt from a past event we could be subtly telling others “I was part of this event.” And this can categorize you into a grouping of people who participated in the same event. But this could be a false message as well. You could have borrowed this t-shirt and simply not cared about its identifying qualities. Therefore, it is not a fact that this event is part of your identity. And when we wear an expensive gold necklace with a large set of diamonds adorning our neck, this could also identify us as wealthy. This necklace can refer to the past by showing others how hard you worked to earn its weight in gold and stones, or how much you were valued by someone else. So what is the purpose of wearing and using these identity objects? They do not necessarily communicate truth. The necklace could be on loan, stolen, or fake! They refer to an imagined past that is supposed to communicate something to others at the present. The present message could be a power message or a signal that shows my likes and dislikes.

The CV is one of these objects that is a list of past accomplishments that is supposed to communicate to employers your worth based on your past. This document does not directly communicate about the future; we have to make inferences and assumptions based on this document. In the 1940’s the resume was similar to Facebook profiles, including weight, age, height, marital status, and religion. This information doesn’t give the employer any information on the merit of their work ethic; it simply provides room for creating assumptions based on these identifying traits. I would like to bring to light the flaws of past-thinking objects simply to create room for consideration.

The amulet or talisman is a forward and present-thinking object because it is meant to prepare us for the future against harm or provide luck in the present. The main difference between the identity object and the amulet/talisman is that they are communicating to different audiences. The identity object communicates to the on-looker or a specific audience. The amulet communicates with the self. Sheila Paine states, “The most common way for an amulet to be worn on the body is as a pendent around the neck, preferably next to the skin and often concealed. It can be hidden inside clothing, tucked in a turban, hung on a key ring. There is an almost worldwide shame in the wearing of amulets.” (Sheila Paine 2004 p.31) This jewelry or object that is hidden from view functions hand in hand with the spiritual beliefs of the owner and it is not meant to communicate with the onlooker.

I think this is a powerful difference when thinking about the objects we care about. The connection with ourselves is something I think we are lacking. Before the Enlightenment in the Western world, it was generally understood and accepted that God would be the only one to judge a person. Today, we too often take on the responsibility of passing judgment when it is unnecessary and we miss opportunities to self-reflect. Therefore, I am making forward-thinking objects that connect with the individual and their faith.

#### **IV. The Historical Amulet and Talisman**

The deep history of amulets and talismans as a type of jewelry is a vital connection my artwork has followed. The historical examples of cultures' use of amulets and talismans are prevalent and endless. Therefore, the goals for my artistic research had to be crudely generalized and narrowed. Without following a specific culture, historical time period, or specific use for an amulet (i.e. amulets for disease, warfare, fertility, etc) I was left with a swirling pool of information. This part of my research is ongoing and continues to be a bottomless well of inspiration. The research I have selected to include is the foundation for my artistic work, but by no means exhaustive. This has led me to question whether historical traditional amulets have the same strength and meaning today as they did to the creators and believers of these objects.

Sheila Paines' book Amulets: A World of Secret Powers, Charms and Magic is divided into sections of research based on materials used and the uses of the amulets and talismans. I have adopted a similar division of research, which means that I have not focused on following a specific culture's practice. Paine describes a common understanding of amulets, "there was a widespread belief that all things in the natural world have a spirit and a power that link them, including man, together." (SP 2004 p.108) An amulet was part of such a system of natural and magical force. The origins of amulets in Western culture date back millennia to Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures. Paine describes amulets that can be worn on the body, hung on an animal, placed at a threshold, used whenever disaster or pestilence threatened people's lives.

In many cultures, high mortality rates were often understood as the work of evil spirits and the remedy came in the form of bead, stones, and bags of herbs worn around the neck. Stones and beads of Jade have been in use since the stone ages. Dubin and Togashi describe the uses of several of these natural materials as beads in many different cultures. For example, jade

has been used a symbol of power, magic, masculinity, virtue, and immortality. To the Aztecs, jade was a symbol of the heart and of the blood, and it was their most valued bead. Crystal quartz has been used to symbolize the notion of passing or looking beyond the material world and the fact that light could penetrate this solid material gave it its supernatural powers. To the aboriginals of Australia, the crystal quartz symbolized the Great Spirit, and when worn was thought to promote health. (Dubin and Togashi 1987 p.118) I have noticed that each of these cultures develop their own connections to the natural materials found near them and the magical forces which dictate and mold human life. The spiritual powers of each these stones are overlapping and sometimes opposing when looking at different cultures.

Shapes and symbols are also known to have specific powers and meanings. Paine discusses that the shape of a circle has given reason to the format of the necklace around the neck and belts around the waist, since the circle is known to protect from invasion.

This was particularly interesting for me, as a jeweler, to note. A necklace is a common form of jewelry that encircles the throat and can easily fit many different people, unlike a ring. The sense of protection encircling the vulnerable parts of our bodies is an important element I decided to use in my work. Paine discusses the circle's powers by its virtue of having no beginning or end and therefore represent the eternal whole. A circle has been the archetypical form representing the sun, the earth, the moon, the universe, and other celestial objects between. Circles confine what is within and keep things out. I have identified the Amulet as an inward speaking object, relating to the wearer or viewer in a tight circular conversation that does not openly invite others. A professor once discussed, but I have not specifically sited, that for the Hopi Indians, an open circle or incomplete circle was particularly important because it allowed for the spirit to enter and escape the shape without getting trapped.

Katie O' Sullivan discusses circles in her research and sites the Ouroboros, which is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent eating its own tail, which symbolizes self-reflexivity or cyclicity, the eternal return and other things such as the phoenix, which operate in cycles that begin anew as soon as they end. This cyclical pattern can be related to the cycles of life and the daily rising of the sun and moon; a universal truth that cannot be disputed. O'Sullivan also discusses the equilateral triangle, which is also a powerful geometric symbol; in Early European cultures the number three was the basic number in which all things could be categorized: birth - life - death, start - middle - end, past - present - future, heaven - earth - water, and the Holy



Trinity. The upward facing triangle symbolizes the sun, fire, life, mountain, divinity, ascent, and masculine energy. The downward facing triangle symbolizes the moon, water, rain, fruitfulness, heavenly grace, and female energy. (O'Sullivan, Katie 2010)

Baby boys, menstruating girls, brides to be, a woman giving birth to a child were all seen as dangerous times of life. Babies are seen as very precious and therefore at great risk. In southern China children wear hats which fool the evil spirits, looking from above, into thinking the child is a flower or an owl. (SP 2004 p. 18) Sheila Paine describes, "Specific childhood illnesses are often targeted, especially teething problems – usually confronted by coral – and whopping cough, against which, for example in Egypt, a folded strip of palm-leaf, inscribed with a charm, is put round the child's neck." For every ailment there was a solution in the form of an amulet or talisman. O'Sullivan describes that in medieval times it was believed that the only way to cross a river was to carry a piece of red or white coral. Worn as a talisman it also had the power to shield against the weather, cure madness, and imbue the wearer with wisdom. Coral is associated with female energy; the Greek word for coral – korallion – means the doll of the sea. (O.K. 2010) Using this information, I tried to think about what dangers contemporary Western peoples had on their minds. We still fret over the safety of our children, but our solutions have been modified based on our environment and the knowledge we have gained. Therefore, the use of coral as a material in contemporary jewelry and amulets do not have the same life saving power connections. In a material studies course, the general opinion of artists and crafts people in the room associated coral as an endangered material that should be regulated to avoid extinction and destruction of our oceans.

Amulets and talismans were once created to protect us and we put our faith into them in order to answer the unsolved mysteries of the universe. Illness, luck, wealth, evil, death, birth, all provided (and still provide) uncertainty. During the sixth century, the plague swept across Europe and people began responding by creating amulets called "Plague cushions." (SP 2004 p.15) These amulets were pieces of paper printed with pictures of saints folded into small packets, wrapped in fabric and tied off with red ribbon. When analyzing the materials of this particular historical amulet it is not the magic of the paper, the ink or the red ribbon. I have concluded that the strength of the amulets is the combination of these materials that hold the messages of faith, the images of the saints, and the preciousness of the entire object. The

Catholic Church distributed these plague cushions; therefore the source could also be interpreted as the power that infused the materials.

Many of the historical amulets that I researched used certain materials as amulets depending on what was available and precious to them. When thinking about the materials I would use for my own work, I did not want to copy a particular historical culture's traditional materials for my amulets. Materials such as coral, jade, and crystal have different meanings to contemporary Western society. Using specific shapes, found material, and imagery has become a more relevant way for me to communicate with my audience while still connecting my work with historical traditional amulets.

### **V. Amulets and Talismans Today**

With modern advances in technology, one might assume that the need for such magical objects becomes obsolete. Within contemporary Western society amulets and talismans might have become less popular and less widespread, but not extinct. Objects still hold sentimental meaning, but where can we find amulet-like wearable objects being used? If the majority of jewelry and clothing/objects worn today are mass-produced, can we assume there is no belief in their spiritual protective powers? Can we assume that the amulet that protected the soldier with mystical powers has been completely replaced by the bulletproof vest, and where can we find overlap between the two?

Society has simultaneously become more aware of the risks that surround us while being offered solutions. Safety has become a fundamental value of our times and in our attempt to gain control of our surroundings and the dangers that lurk around the corner we have pursued investigations into the sciences in order to provide an answer to the mysteries of our universe. The modern human enjoys the achievements made in medicine, space travel, transportation, and technology. One might assume that the penicillin has replaced the hand made Plague Cushion amulet that once protected someone against disease in the 1800's. However, I have found that amulets tend to reflect the belief structures and relevant materials based on a culture's understandings of safety and protection. Contemporary Western society no longer uses coral as material for protection to cross rivers; we have now turned to life jackets and life preservers. Therefore, I would like to question whether there is a connection to our use of the life jack as an amulet?

According to Shiela Paine, commercially traded amulets do not have the force of those made individually. (SP 2004 p. 51) Each amulet is made for a specific purpose and person. People will usually refuse to sell or part with an amulet, whether traded or personal. It is difficult to measure the value of an amulet or talisman except to the individual who has either made it or uses it. There are certain pieces of artwork or inherited objects that I find priceless and irreplaceable. These sentimental objects are particularly difficult to put a price on.

The material used to make the amulet is important for its function. Plants, tree bark, animal parts, herbs, precious metals and stones, fabric, specific imagery, numbers and letters, salt, garlic, incense, water and hair are a few examples of the materials that can make up an amulet. Today we might see amulets that have been passed down as heirlooms through the family. For example, a photograph of an ancestor or relative, a hand written letter, a locket with a lock of hair, a gun that was used in battle, or plaque that was earned for a grand achievement. Based on my own observations living in the U.S. and Scandinavia, it is no longer culturally common for Scandinavians and North Americans to sit at home and make amulets for themselves and their children. A common amulet object might include CDs dangling from the rear-view mirror of a taxi flashing in the sun, believed to distract the evil eye as well as deflecting the rays of the speed cameras. Sheila Paine also describes, “And the newest of all is a circular silver pendant, available by mail order and priced at \$320, which protects the wearer from the electromagnetic fields of his or her cell phone.” (S.P. 2004 p.11)



Protects wearer from electromagnetic fields and stress

In a post-modern, neo-enlightenment, post-industrial revolution era we can visit the local Wal-Mart (or equivalent) and find an object that provides function or remedies an ailment. At first glance, we no longer seem to trust in or rely on mystical solutions for everyday obstacles. A helmet, life preserver, seatbelt, kneepads, respirators, goggles, and bulletproof vests are all objects that we rely on to provide safety to our fragile bodies. But if we analyze our practices from an outsider’s perspective I will argue that we can find a connection to ritual or magical belief in these everyday objects. For my artwork I have decided to select the life jacket as a symbol and structure for my contemporary amulet jewelry. The life jacket simultaneously provides a reassuring symbolic presence just as much as it provides a physical function. I would also

categorize the life jacket as a forward thinking object that is used as a preventative precaution; you must put on the life jacket before you get into the water.

Thinking back to my relationship to the objects on board our sailboat, I begin to see the overlap between a safety object and an amulet. As a child I did not want to use just any life jacket, I had to use mine, the one that had protected me before and proven its worth. My name written in Sharpie on the inside of the vest communicated that it could only protect me and no one else. As adults we treat these situations with more logic and less superstition, but there are still a few lingering areas of uncertainty that might provoke us into trusting our faith and beliefs over fact.

When we board an airplane everyone feels a bit better because it is equipped with enough life vests and respirators for everyone on board. We put a small bit of faith into these objects. If the captain announced over the loudspeaker that the plane did not have life vests, but instead everyone was given an amulet to help them float, the average person would probably disembark the plane. Magical pendants are not a common currency of safety aboard an airplane when compared to oxygen masks and life preservers. However, it is a combination of protection, spiritual and tangible or physical and faith-related that we act on. Even though we have the life vest, it doesn't mean that no one will drown. We must still hope that the life vest is within reach and functioning properly. Or that Mother Nature doesn't feed us to the sharks as we wait for our rescue. It would be helpful for everyone to have a life preserver on a plane if the plane carefully lands at sea. But if the plane is shot out of the sky by an act of violence we cannot count on the life vests. It is a combination of faith in our safety objects and for some faith in a higher being. It would be illogical to reason that it is only in the functional object that we should trust.

Shiela Paine states, "If carrying a bear's jaw is expected to protect from the attacking animal, or a carved ivory sea-otter to save a boat from thrashing whales, how much more fragile is the belief that amulets will protect a man in war." (SP 2004 p. 26) Objects such as printed amulets with passages from the bible and waist cords of cotton have all been worn for safety in times of war. Carved wooden shields with protective decoration seems a bit more practical but it is the combination of the decorative patterns and the shield itself that protects the soldier. The trust and faith in these objects may seem naïve but there must be some power in an object that has been trusted and instills courage in a soldier.

George Gmelch states in *Baseball Magic*, “During World War II, American soldiers used fetishes in much the same way. Social psychologist Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues found that in the face of great danger and uncertainty, soldiers developed magical practices, particularly the use of protective amulets and good luck charms (crosses, Bibles, rabbits’ feet, medals), and jealously guarded articles of clothing they associated with past experiences of escape from danger. Stouffer also found that pre-battle preparations were carried out in fixed ritual-like order, similar to ballplayers preparing for a game.” I would identify the element of the uniform that is not standard issue becomes the amulet. A soldier may carry pictures of loved ones or letters tucked away in their uniform. Over time one might develop a relationship with the object that transcends it into the amulet. The belief in the powers of the paper with scripture written on it transcends the paper and elevates it from an ordinary piece of paper. Scripture, quotes, poems, personal letters, and drawings are relevant material used in amulet today. The materials that surround contemporary Western society reflect our rituals and beliefs. Jade is not a relevant material to the described soldiers as a powerful material. My work has been influenced by the idea of altered mass-produced objects.

Some might think that in times of war and danger we might be more prone to believe in amulets and magical objects. When a child is sick, their parents and family members do everything possible to help that child recover quickly. A study was preformed in 2000, investigating the use of talismans and amulets in the pediatric intensive care unit. Parents of every child admitted to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit over a two-month period were asked to complete a questionnaire on their use of talismans. The study states, “The results showed that thirty percent of families used amulets and talismans in the ICU...The estimated frequency of amulet use by the children’s families, as perceived by the staff, was significantly higher than actual use reported by the parents.” The conclusion of the study explained that, “The use of talismans in a technologically advanced western society is more frequent than may have thought.” This example clearly demonstrates how these types of objects are not meant to communicate with others. In other words, they are not identity objects. These objects are also clearly acting as forward-thinking and present-thinking objects meant to protect the sick child from here forward. Many staff workers reported that after the ritual had been preformed on the child, the parents themselves seemed more relaxed and at ease. Objects brought to the hospital

included holy books, photographs, written notes, holy water, medallions, and red threads tied around the patients wrist or ankle.

If we look at an everyday situation in Western culture, apart from war and illness, we might be hard-pressed to find amulets and talisman being used. However, athletes and performers often speak about wearing a specific shirt or socks on game day. Baseball is often regarded as a sport full of superstition and taboos. But even in baseball, these superstitions change over time. George Gmelch writes about one baseball player who did not allow for other bats to be placed on top of his. “In his view, bats contained a finite number of hits, a sort of baseball ‘image of limited good.’ It was once commonly believed that when the hits in a bat were used up no amount of good hitting would produce any more. Hall of Famer Honus Wagner believed each bat contained only 100 hits. Regardless of the quality of the bat, he would discard it after its 100th hit. This belief would have little relevance today, in the era of light bats with thin handles—so thin that the typical modern bat is lucky to survive a dozen hits without being broken.” Today we can see new superstitions around the baseball bat that have emerged and are taken just as seriously. The objects that are regarded as important usually need to stand the test of time. After realizing you have performed flawlessly after wearing a certain new pair of shoes, the shoes seem hold that power. But if we are not a performer or athlete and we do not face danger on a daily basis, do we ever have a need for such objects? I definitely think we do.

When we look at the market for new dietary solutions we can be offered anything from caffeinated underwear to an extreme surgery. There has been no proven instant-fix for those suffering from obesity, however this doesn't stop people from investing in herbal remedies, following strange diet plans, surgeries, and even weight-loss “amulet-objects”. As an outsider, we could look at these practices and make many comparisons to ancient rituals that aim to improve or protect the body. Traditional amulets can be worn under the clothing, hidden away from view. Similarly a contemporary woman or man might wear Spanks or Maidenform's caffeine-laced Shapewear that promise to help them lose weight or appear thinner. Even though these objects are unproved and costly, we still invest our time and faith into them in hopes of achieving weight-loss. If we stretch our conceptual minds a bit further, we could even see the Gastric bypass surgery as a type of amulet jewelry. This risky procedure can lead to weight loss through the use of a small ring around your stomach. The added “stomach jewelry” is often successful and might even be a combination of the patient's belief in the process and the

physical effect of shrinking the stomach. This might be a far-reaching comparison, but it illustrates our pursuit into the unknown based on beliefs that our bodies will be protected and better off.

Children might even be the most prolific makers of amulet-like objects today. Hand made objects made by a child are usually kept for many years and cherished by the parents. My mother took pride in all the small drawings and sculptures I made as a child and she proudly hung them on the wall in our home. When Hurricane Ike destroyed our home in Kemah, Texas, the first things packed into our car for evacuation were the irreplaceable items such as artwork, heirlooms, and photographs. Evacuees typically have one to two days to decide what they will save from their homes before the impending storm hits shore. I am not sure we would all call these irreplaceable items “amulets” but they do follow a similar role in our society as a historical amulet might. Other objects I would propose as an example of a contemporary amulet or talisman is a friendship bracelet. It follows the traditional model of being hand made and given to another friend or family member to protect and represent the friendship. This hand made gift is more of a pre-teen activity, fading out of style through the teenage years. Amulets and talisman often take the form of jewelry because it can be carried around with the person at all times.

Handmade gifts are regarded as more meaningful and sentimental, but they seem to be rare. The mix tape was a cherished gift given between friends and lovers. This home made gift often included a voice recording from the giver and included specifically chosen songs that aimed to provide a musical cure for the receiver. The importance of the handmade is evident in my artwork. I have used the idea of the altered mass-produced material or life jacket, but the fact that the object is handmade gives the artwork a unique, irreplaceable quality.

Daniel Miller states in his book “The reason we make things is because they potentially extend us as people. It is human labor that transforms nature into objects, creating this mirror in which we can come to understand who we are. So labor produces culture in the form of stuff.” (DM 2010 p.58) But what happens when the objects we make the computers and robots then turn around and create new objects that no longer have a human connection. We cannot trace all the ingredients to its origins and therefore have lost the connections between nature and object. We cannot imagine how these objects came to being, so we just accept them as a matter of fact. And then we also expect to turn around and have the ability to acquire a new “one.” We can attempt

to purchase an art object or amulet-like object made by a factory, but we will only find mass-produced copies of paintings, toy dream-catchers, and rabbit-foot charms by the hundreds. Traditionally, an amulet should be hand made by the owner or someone close to the user of the amulet and the amulet is traditionally made for a specific purpose. When we purchase a mass-produced amulet-like object, do we actually trust in the power of the object or is it simply a symbol of the mystical?

My father became the first man in the world to travel through the Northwest Passage alone in 1999. He often explains the preparation involved and the precautions he took by consulting charts and weather patterns. He built a specially designed canoe that would enable him to weave around icebergs and possibly walk across the ice if it is necessary. When my father reached the halfway point in the trip, he found a polar bear skeleton. Half way was not necessarily a point for celebration; it was the point at which there was no turning back. Both directions, forward towards the completion of the trip and backwards, back toward the starting point, provided equal amounts of danger and threat to the explorer. It was the polar bear skeleton that laid down its bones for him that could have either been interpreted as a bad omen or a gift of his powers. The teeth of the polar bear were carefully collected and became one of the primary survival objects for the remainder of the trip. The knowledge and faith that these teeth were imbued with the powers of the arctic power bear helped his moral as he stretched onto the next several months of solitude in the arctic. These polar bear teeth were given to me upon the completion of his trip. I have used several of the teeth and handmade tools from his trip in my artwork for their strength and proven powers.

Ultimately it is a combination of preparation and protection with safety objects and amulets that gets us through the day. Our belief in the magical powers of the objects we use may not be obvious or discussed but it is intrinsically part of our routine. We tend to be attracted to certain objects and we put faith into them to protect our bodies and feed our souls. The overlap between safety object and amulet can be seen when the object transcends through extended use or alteration by the owner or someone close to the owner. The added time or embellishment can add sentimental value to the owner. The life vest I owned for five years while living at sea become more to me than just foam and neon orange fabric. The hand crafted whistle and written note in the breast pocket transcended the entire object as well as the additions that were not



visible. The powers of the salty sea had spared my life thus far and therefore kept me safe as long as I kept this object close if not wrapped around me.

When we make decisions on which objects to purchase and inhabit our home I hope that we aim to make meaningful decisions. Daniel Miller explains, “The quantity of things is not necessarily intrinsically oppressive, but it has the capacity to become so. If we try and relate to too many things, but have no substantial relationship to any one of them, we can become largely indifferent to the world and to ourselves... We are then being reduced, rather than expanded, by the sheer quantity of things.” (DM 2010 p. 62)

## **VI. The Life Preserver as Jewelry**

In a lecture titled “Affirmation of Chaos: Some Remarks on Art and Philosophy,” Marcus Steinweg discussed ways that artists and philosophers work to affirm chaos through a combination of affirmation and resistance to generally understood truths. For example, when Marcel Duchamp invented the Ready Made, he broke up the established concept of art by declaring an object of ordinary life an artwork. He ignored the established facts of the art world and sought out to disprove them. By knowingly resisting the imperialism of understood facts, the established facts could be disproved as universal truths. Steinweg explains, in order to affirm chaos one must resist reality, and build up a resistance to universal truths. An artist should try to break up the field within the field. If they were to flee the field it would be an act of idealistic escapism, or a refusal of all established facts. I do not aim to flee reality; my goal is to define a certain distance to the territory to intensify it and confront it by over flying it.

Over the course of a year, the Life Preserver became a stubborn object that continued to reappear in my head, first as an idea and eventually as an obsession. At first, I tried to flick it away and place it into the corner of my mind in order to concentrate on “real jewelry.” Its form and orange color seemed to seduce me and all my work slowly emerged as abstracted life preservers. Eventually I decided that I needed to figure out why the Life Preserver, as an object and as a piece of jewelry, was nagging me. To put aside my past living aboard a sailboat was a way for me to dig deeper into the idea of the Life Preserver as a jewelry object. By calling my Life Preservers “jewelry,” I am simultaneously affirming my connection with the wearable art field, while challenging the field to accept these objects as jewelry. I would like to resist the universal understanding of jewelry and break up the field within the field. Sometimes we need

to find a distance from universal truths to get a better impression of the world we are living in and of ourselves.

After my research into the historical amulet, I have realized that the contemporary amulet must take the form of a commonly understood safety object. I want to utilize the material language contemporary society understands and expand the awareness possibility of thinking of safety objects as amulets. The circle has become a relevant symbol in my work because while the object is not being worn it can be described as a rectangle with a cut out circle. The inner circle is not trapped inside the rectangle; it is open, which allows the wearer to easily slip their neck within the protective holds of the Life Preserver. The soft inner filling of the Life Preserver is a physical comfort around our vulnerable chests and necks. The shape of the life jacket has been used consistently and it continuously refers to the body and wearability. The hole is a specific size that mimics the size of the neck. It cannot be confused for being a ring, bracelet, anklet or crown. The format of the life jacket has been both challenging and exciting. By using a universally understood shape/object, I challenged myself to refer to its origin without allowing it to be confused. My father, an experienced sailor, first reacted with shock when he first heard my idea. He was extremely worried that others would confuse my Life Preservers for the real object and try to use them in the water. Once he saw some of the first pieces I had completed, his fears had vanished. This shape also allowed me to challenge the typical format of having a pendant on a chain, wire, string, or ribbon, thus challenging the jewelry field.

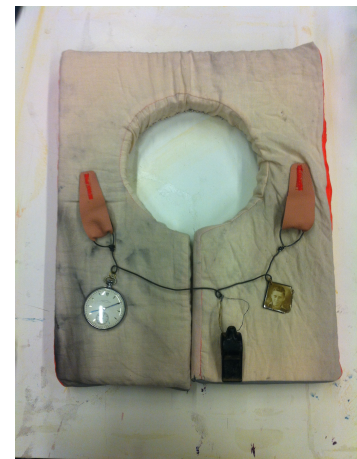
As my work continued to develop, my home slowly filled up with these wearable objects. I would wear the Life Preservers around my neck as I watched television, laid on the couch listening to music, walked to the grocery store, and road the subway. For me, this is an important test I give to all of my work. I ask myself if I feel comfortable with the objects on my body at home or in public. Each piece had its own energy and I discovered that some of the Life Preservers were not meant to be worn so casually. Others had a playfulness about them that easily translated to a public sphere. This playfulness was interesting, but it was not the direction I hoped to go in. The bright orange color I originally started with was so bright and alarming it screamed toy or alarm! I turned to more neutral calm colors with hints of orange and blue as my pallet to reflect a more comforting object that invited reflecting thoughtfulness.

Researching the history of the life vest has also been inspirational information. A bloodstained lifejacket from the Titanic was sold in 2008 for £ 34,000 at a Christie's New York Auction. Journalists Barry Wigmore and Duncan Roberston wrote in their article "Titanic expert Gregg Dietrich said that the cork-filled jackets were so heavy and hard that many people - both survivors and victims of the disaster - were found to have broken their jaws on them when they hit the water after jumping from the ship." According to the article only six lifejackets still exist today.



This example was an exciting find for me because it introduced the idea of this historical object, a lifejacket, as a piece of art. Since the life jacket was being sold at a well known art institution, Christie's, the object was proven to be a sought after artifact. The historical connection to the tragic sinking of the Titanic proved to be its grand value.

In addition to proposing a life jacket as jewelry, working in Sweden with this spiritual topic has proven to be an extra challenge for me. I am keenly aware that my pursuit into faith-based jewelry and artwork is not a common topic in an overwhelmingly secular society. My work might have stemmed from an inner resistance against the highly logical and scientific minded Swedish culture. However, I have experienced that Swedes are known for being some of the most safety conscious people in the world. The bridge between the safety object and the spiritual object became cemented after this realization. My cultural experiences stem from being raised by an Argentinian mother, a Swedish father in a Texan culture. The highly superstitious Quechan Indian culture contrasts dramatically to my Swedish roots. My end result has led me to creating "amuletic" safety objects. For me, my Life Preservers have become a symbol of protecting my soul and my beliefs.



One of my frustrations with jewelry as art is the life of the jewelry piece when it is not being worn on the body. Too often, the jewelry object gets placed in a box or drawer hidden from view. Without a model or structure to display the work, it is often forgotten and loses its power. The clear physical connection jewelry objects have with the body allows it to still communicate a lot of its conceptual information without having to be worn. Our brains can

excitedly imagine the textures, weight, and obstacles of wearing different objects when it is suggested as jewelry. Therefore, the Life Preserver shape appealed to me because it easily became a sculptural object referencing the body without it needing to be worn. The life jacket shape is a commonly understood wearable object and I have stayed true to the original shape and size. When it is off the body it has its own structure and form that transcends the work without letting it fall flat as a dead object. However, the large size and imposing nature of the life preservers does not allow the wearer to use them in a secretive way. The Life Preserver is not meant to be an identity object; therefore, these should be seen as private objects. They can be worn, but they do not have to be. The life vest shape is a strong enough reference to the body.

As I researched the symbolic and the historical use of different materials in amulets I was completely overwhelmed. Each stone, shape, and natural product had an endless list of uses and meanings that accompanied them. Each culture developed their own understanding for the world and belief systems. When it came to working on my own amulets, I did not want to choose one culture to base my belief system on. To truly mirror my interpretation of contemporary society's obsession with safety, I stayed true to the shape of the life vest. Some of the objects are made using the fabric of real life jackets; others are used from found material. The narrative of the amulet is upheld through the imagery and treatment of the work. One Life Preserver references the gun culture in Texas. In Texas, the gun is a symbol of safety and for some people it can be understood as an amulet. This controversial safety object has been embroidered on the front of the Life Preserver challenging the viewer to question and consider the gun as a safety object, amulet, and even jewelry. In Texas, the gun is a commonly worn object that can simultaneously act as a decorative, expensive piece of metal jewelry attached the hip holster and it is a commonly understood safety object. Other narratives are more elusive and open for the viewer to insert their own idea of safety and beliefs. In order to engage the viewer a bit more, I have created drawings that depict Life Preserver instructions, much like the format given the airplane passengers. These placards are graphically similar to safety cards that tell passengers how and when to use their life jackets. This will act as a key for participants to enter the work with clear instructions.



The depictions of the gun and other imagery directly on the life jacket has finally led me to painting and drawing on paper and turning the paper into a material used to create the life jackets. Paper, writing, photographs, and drawings are all common amulet material, which I have used to create the façade of several of my pieces. This has opened a new door of exploration for my work. I am now playfully balancing on the edge between drawing and jewelry. Jewelry has often included small drawings with etching or engraving, but the life vest has become a three dimensional canvas that has allowed me to explore pen drawings as amulet. The value of the objects is refocused on the narrative and imagery rather than the material. Visually, the biggest different between these Life Preservers and paintings on canvas is the gaping hole in the middle.

The final result is my own version of a contemporary amulet. I have made strong connections with our safety enthusiasm and my experiences using the life preserver as a safety and comfort object. My experiences living on a sailboat bleed through the work, but it still provides room for people to see their own stories and beliefs intertwined in the work. The Life Preserver as jewelry was my first act of resistance. But I believe that the Life Preserver as amulet is an affirmation to general understandings about amulets and spiritual objects. To call the Life Preserver an amulet according to my belief system is not a far-fetched idea. But to ask others to accept the Life Preserver as an amulet within their own belief system is another task completely, a task I do not wish to complete. Each person must find his or her own connections to certain objects, if any. And if someone can relate to my Life Preservers as amulets, I will welcome it. I have created these Life Preservers with the intention to spark conversation and deep thought around contemporary amulets. I do not expect everyone to think the life preservers are inviting to wear or to use. For some, these objects might be scary, for others they might be comforting, it is a matter of perspective. It is more important that we can relate these pieces to the amulet-jewelry history and to their own experience with contemporary amulets and safety objects.

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