

Peter McKay

b.1951

Apprenticeship in Jewellery: Kobi Bosshard, Akaroa

Peter McKay's title is basically a literal description of the work. This is indeed *30 Pieces Of Silver*, each one of them a disc with a hole in the centre and markings chased into the surface. (Chasing is a jewellery term for a process of making lines on metal. It's like etching, but cruder, a bit more brutal. As you'll see if you look closely, the metal gets forced aside rather than being removed entirely, as with etching.)

But McKay wants to connect his work to something – to someone – else. McKay's *30 Pieces Of Silver* is about the biblical story of Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus to the temple priests for 30 pieces of silver. The story doesn't end well. Depending on which part of the Bible you read, Judas returned the money to the priests and then committed suicide, or he tried to buy a field and his stomach burst open, his guts falling on the ground. Either way he dies, as punishment for his actions.

Judas would have been paid with shekels of Tyre, a silver coin that was the only one accepted by the temple for paying annual taxes because it had a high silver content. On one side, shekels have an eagle standing on the prow of a ship (representing trade), and on the other side a portrait of Melqart, who was the god of Tyre, where the coins were minted.

This historical information adds to our understanding of *30 Pieces Of Silver*. Like coins, McKay has made discs, and they are decorated with various signs and markings on each side. Like shekels, McKay's work is silver, with a bit of copper for decoration. And the way McKay has treated his silver discs, creating corroded and pitted surfaces covered with crudely drawn patterns, seems to resonate with Judas as a symbol of evil.

But then there is a sense in which this is too literal. *30 Pieces Of Silver* doesn't represent real coins. McKay hasn't done historical research and found out what shekels of Tyre looked like, as if reconstructing the 30 pieces of silver given to Judas by the priests. Connecting McKay's jewellery to Judas and his payment is one aspect of meaning but it doesn't exhaust what this work means.

30 Pieces Of Silver is a revisiting of a series called *Concerning Miracles* that McKay did in 1992. These brooches were all about biblical narratives, especially ones dealing with faith, doubt and miracles. McKay calls these "public myths", and he is fascinated by the place they have in the wider culture. In this sense, Judas is an attractive subject for McKay. How true is the story? Did Judas really do all the things he is accused of? Might it be a myth? (In this sense, it's interesting that McKay has 'distressed' his silver pieces, making them look tarnished and old, as if they have passed through history. The look of *30 Pieces Of Silver* is like a nod to the ancient art of faking antiques.)

Of course, returning to something 15 years later is going to involve some differences. *30 Pieces Of Silver* is a lot less literal than the earlier work – it's really only the title, and the coin shape, which connects this piece to Judas. The narrative pictures of the earlier work aren't present here. Instead, McKay gives us strange chased patterns, which hint at meaning – as if they could be read, if only we knew how to interpret them – but which remain enigmatic and stubbornly mute.

Damian Skinner

Galleries and museums:

www.avidgallery.co.nz

www.fingers.co.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

Books:

Skinner, D. (2007). *Metaphysical Heart: Jewellery By Peter McKay*, Auckland, Rim Books.

Web search:

Judas Iscariot

