kiel MEAD

Mead's jewelry collection includes belt buckles for John Bartlett, cuffs for Carla Knapp of Mischen, and his popular Forget-Me-Not rings (with little bows).

MARK WEISS

"If I weren't a designer," says Kiel Mead, 25, "I'd probably be an American-history teacher." Which makes sense: Mead's obsession with the past has informed most of the jewelry and furniture coming out of his studio in Brooklyn's Navy Yard, a few blocks from Pratt, where he studied industrial design and now coaches the cross-country team. From the Catholic iconography of his Sebastian's Stake coat tree to the awkward adolescent memories sparked by his gold-plated Retainer necklace, Mead's designs ask us to reconsider our associations.

Although he studied process and technique at school, his best lessons came from the North Brooklyn design community, where he learned how to turn scrapwood into furniture through an internship with Scrapile and encountered the repurposed conceptual designs of Tobias Wong. The Scrapile guys encouraged Mead to follow through on his idea of turning car and house keys into rings, pointing him to a mold maker. Mead had never considered making jewelry, but when people bought the rings in droves, he looked around for other small objects to cast. He soon found himself "recycling the idea of nostalgia," turning matchsticks and drill bits and chewed gum into jewelry.

The pieces' success at stores like Areaware caused the fashion world to take notice. Last year, he created belt buckles for John Bartlett and '30s-inspired jewelry for Carla Knapp of Mischen. Knapp, Mead says, helped him realize that "given the right spotlight and the right venue, anything can work" in design. "Sometimes it depends on who you are and how big a party you can throw."

He wants to share that insight with fellow young designers, nurturing the kind of community that helped him get started. He recently founded the American Design Club, a mutual-improvement society modeled after Benjamin Franklin's Junto club (there's the history thing again). The club's inaugural show took place at a small Soho shop last September, but it's not meant to be just a New York thing. "We're trying to get awareness for all American designers," Mead says. "We want to be a presence."

www.kielmead.com — JESSE ASHLOCK

LOCATION: Brooklyn, New York / BEST-KNOWN PROJECT: Forget-Me-Not ring / BIGGEST CREATIVE INSPIRATION: Sarah Boatright / TITLE OF IMAGINARY MONOGRAPH: *What To Do to Clear a Room* / WOULD RATHER DIE THAN DESIGN: A time machine