



Mementos

Matthew Patterson

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By Matthew Patterson

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Forward

Titled "Mementos", the artwork presented by Matthew Patterson is more than a grouping of seemingly unrelated objects; it is an opportunity for us to see how Matthew thinks about and recalls his past. Using oddities collected over a lifetime of rural upbringing combined with his exquisitely crafted glass objects, Matthew pieces together an elegant narrative trail that winds from his memory of days with "Uncle Trapper" to beautiful compositions and reliquaries honoring the mementoes of his youthful collections. The beauty of Matthew Patterson's art lies not only in the unique and compelling nature of the objects we see in his "collections", but also in our ability to make our own personal associations with them.

David Keens

Professor

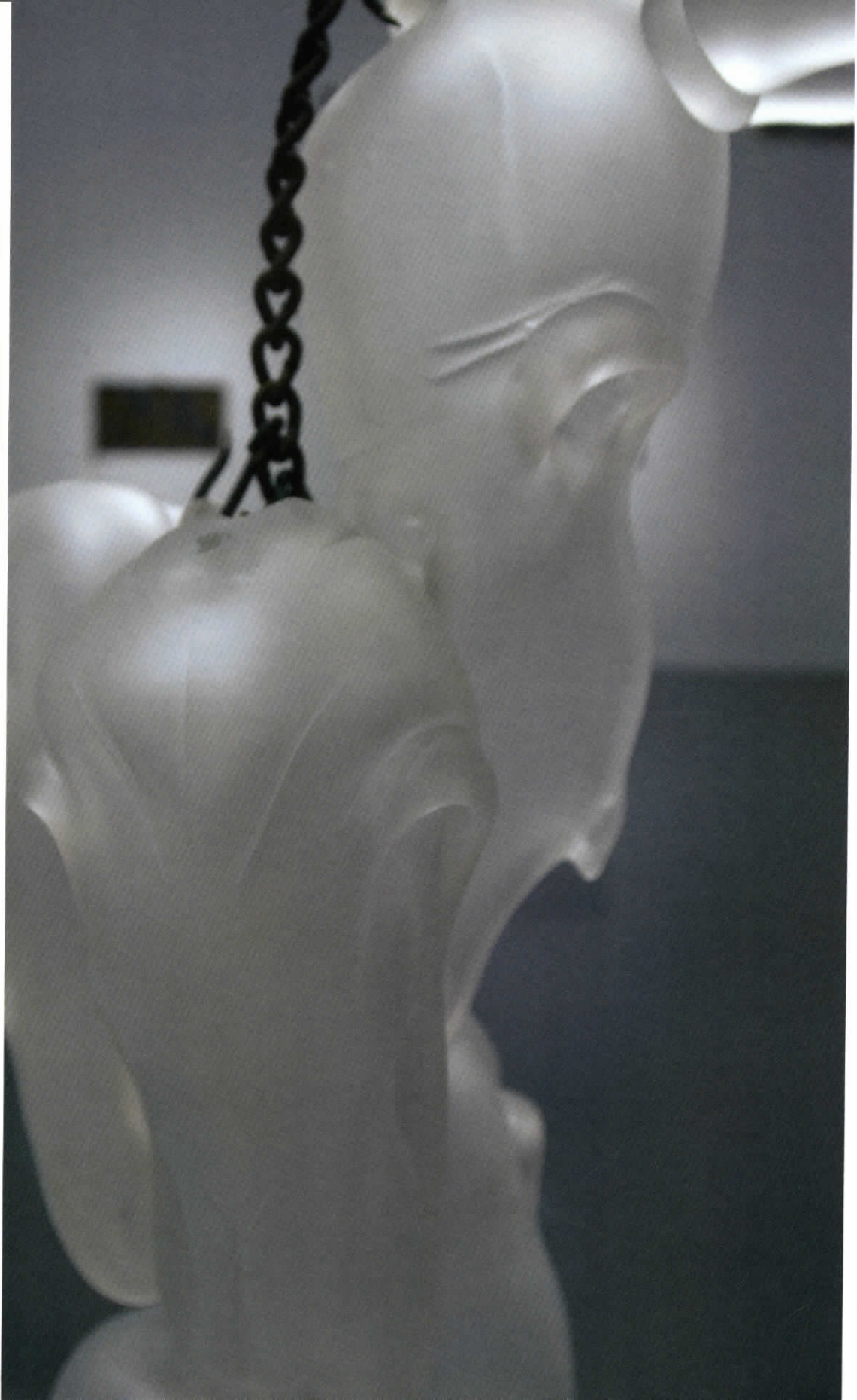
The Department of Art and Art History



Artist Statement

This body of work represents my deep fascination with objects. People tend to form emotional attachments to things that convey unique and individual meaning beyond their objective content. They become a source of reflection for a person, place or time. Mementos focuses on the way we identify with objects as memories. I incorporate both found and crafted materials, specifically using glass to draw parallels between the preciousness of objects and memories. The thematic content can be characterized as an archive of impressions and recollections in a style that is conspicuously rural. Conceptually based on my experiences growing up, the works reflect not only a personal narrative but invite the viewer to contemplate broader relationships between objects and identity, visual forms and memory.

Matthew Patterson



Our choice of the "history of things" is more than a euphemism to replace the bristling ugliness of "material culture." This term is used by anthropologists to distinguish ideas, or "mental culture," from artifacts. But the "history of things" is intended to reunite ideas and objects under the rubric of visual forms: the term includes both artifacts and works of art, both replicas and unique examples, both tools and expressions – in short all materials worked by human hands under the guidance of connected ideas developed in temporal sequence. From all these things a shape in time emerges. A visible portrait of the collective identity, whether tribe, class, or nation, comes into being. This self-image reflected in things is a guide and a point of reference to the group for the future, and it eventually becomes the portrait given to posterity.¹

George Kubler

Mementos is a body of work that focuses on the associations drawn between objects and memories. Objects are often defined by their intended functions; however, from a subjective standpoint, people tend to form emotional attachments to things that convey unique and individual meaning beyond their objective content. The works are to be viewed as a type of time capsule, a preservation of past articles and records, on display or recreated for the perusal of the audience. They are deliberately personal and ambiguous.

Glass is the main vehicle of artistic expression throughout the exhibition. Certain intrinsic qualities, namely its transparency and fragility, naturally serve to add depth and meaning to the work. The glass is physically manipulated to capture, reflect, and distort light and is used as either the object itself or a vessel to house objects. Metaphorically, glass is similarly manipulated to express the way in which memories of people, places and things are recalled. Certain objects are triggers for individual memories; and glass in this context serves as the manifestation and realization of that conscious reflection.

The works in the exhibition incorporate both found and crafted objects, often portraying common or mundane articles as beautiful or otherwise desirable. The thematic content can be characterized as an archive of the impressions and recollections by the artist in a style that is conspicuously rural. Conceptually based on the my experiences growing up, the works reflect not only a personal narrative but invite the viewer to contemplate broader relationships between objects and identity, visual forms and memory.

¹ George Kubler. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (Yale University Press, 1962) p. 9

Conceptual Origins of the Work

At the beginning of my graduate career I was interested in manipulating glass in such a way as to imitate the physical appearances of aged bone and wood. This desire was based on my early interests in archeology and the rural aesthetics I cultivated as a part of my upbringing. Raised in the country, I developed a keen interest in and appreciation of the natural world. My family had a history in ranching and farming so I had some exposure to the working lifestyle this entailed. I was additionally involved in a number of outdoor activities including camping, hiking, and fishing. The idea of sculpting bones was a natural starting point for me and as I developed mastery in the technical challenges this presented, I began to consider the conceptual possibilities an exploration of my childhood might present.

Hunting for relics appealed to my imagination as a child. Relics typically included things such as arrowheads and fossils, but my expanded definition included any object or remnant that had some physical connection to the past. Ranch and farm detritus such as old rusted machinery, hardware and tools, as well as the rocks, minerals, and decaying matter of plants and animals fit this description. These items were all held to the scrutiny of my developing aesthetic. I collected relics based on their value which I determined by condition, size and rarity.

As a way of recapturing that childhood innocence, I began bringing these relics to the studio. I was interested in their power to engage and inspire my imagination. Rather than focusing on the fabrication of relics, I began concentrating on the process of collecting: the selecting, gathering and the possession of objects of some subjective value. The essence of an object is not what it is, but what we make of it.

I began to place actual relics in vessels that would be viewed as art objects. The parameters of how objects are organized and displayed creates "the museum effect – the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art."² This invites a way of seeing an object, be it natural or crafted, outside its environment that may potentially enhance or otherwise alter its meaning. I began to conceive a body of work that explored my desire to collect objects and how these objects might evoke a sense of history, personal attachment, and memory.

² Alpers, Svetlana. "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Smithsonian Press, 1991) p.25-26

Beauty in the Mundane

In choosing the objects that relate to my work I am often drawing particular attention to subjects that might otherwise be dismissed as common or mundane. These would be the detritus of ranch life: mineral, animal and plant remnants collected from the landscape; and the various souvenirs, mementos, and collectables from popular culture. I have been seduced by the beauty that resides in these objects, not because they are precious, but because they reflect aspects of our culture. Because they are not often classified as beautiful, I have deliberately removed them from the context of their natural surroundings and placed them on display. I believe one of my responsibilities as an artist is to question conventional standards that attempt to quantify the value or beauty of something, and create a situation in which an audience may see beauty in a different light.

Reminders of Death



Death often crops up in my work. There are many actual bones and crafted representations of bones throughout the work. There is also a mummified cat, a cast of a dead hawk and any number of references to death both crafted and natural. In contemplating the past I cannot escape death – the death of animals and people, but also of times, places, customs and ways. The occurrence of death in the work is intended to symbolize the transience of life, the shifting presence and passage of time.

It has been my intent to choose and craft objects in a way that negates any interpretations of the subject as overtly perverse or morbid. Rather it has been my aim to invite the audience to contemplate the alluring visage of death. There is a beauty in life that would not be fully realized if we did not anticipate death. I am reminded of this with the changing of the seasons every year.

Material and Personal History

With the exception of the glass, bronze and certain hardware, all of the works that went into the exhibition have some type of history attached to them. They were reclaimed from

structures, acquired from private collections, salvage yards and junk stores; or collected from places of personal relevance.

The timbers I used in *Memento Mori* were reclaimed lumber from a barn my brothers and I dismantled in Iowa. The table in *Vanitas* was salvaged from the ashes of a fire that consumed my grandmother's house. The cabinet in *Curios* was acquired from my father-in-law, who in turn acquired it from a Carnegie Library some twenty years ago. All of the found and acquired objects are tied in some way to an event, person or place. This history of where the objects and materials originated is not necessarily relevant to the audience, but it is of personal significance. The work is strengthened by these layers of history, that are not seen but none-the-less sewn into the work.

Glass

Glass plays an instrumental role in relating my conceptual ideas, but what initially drew my attention to glass was the sheer seduction of the material and process. There is something innately beautiful about molten glass; like a camp fire, it is strangely hypnotic.

My initial attraction was to glass blowing, as opposed to casting or cold working. It is both a physically and mentally demanding art form. When I begin a piece, I am committed to see it through from beginning to end. I cannot stop because I am tired, or I have encountered a problem I need to consider. It is like a sport in that sense akin perhaps to dance. There is a fluidity of motion that must be developed to meet the demands of the glass. I must be constantly turning the pipe in order to keep the glass from dripping to the floor.

I enjoy working with other people, depending and relying upon them to succeed. I have developed partnerships with people in such a way that they either anticipate my needs or read it by the way I move my head or hands. It is a very gratifying and intimate type of relationship to cultivate with other members of my profession.

Every time I blow glass I feel I am part of a rich and an intimate tradition stretching back thousands of years. Surprisingly, not much has changed in application of the tools and techniques. Materials and technology have been much improved, but glass making today is essentially as it was in Roman times.

These physical and mental seductions only enhance the innate properties that make glass instrumental to my work. Glass is extremely elastic in its molten form and offers a feeling of limitless possibility as a sculptural medium. It is extremely challenging from a technical standpoint, but most pieces sculpted in the studio are usually completed within 1-3 hours. There is simply no comparison to other materials in terms of time. It could take days or even weeks to complete the same forms in clay, wood or steel.

Glass captures, reflects and distorts light unlike any other material. This offers a broad range of compositional and conceptual possibilities. It can be made to look completely transparent or formed in such a way as to be opaque. The transparency of the glass is especially important to this body of work.

I see glass as a natural metaphor to memory. The way it captures and reflects light invites a type of conscious reflection on whatever it contains or represents. Conceptually, the pieces throughout the body of work contain aspects in which the glass acts as memory or window to the past. It can magnify, blur or enhance an object depending on its application.

Perspectives in Art History

There are a number of artists whose work has informed and inspired my development as an artist. Many of them were instrumental by their sheer mastery of a medium, or in the way they introduced unconventional works that have challenged and broadened my perceptions of art.

The glass artist William Morris, known for his sculptural virtuosity and large scale installations based on archeology and primitive cultures, was an early source of inspiration in my graduate studies. His masterful handling and manipulation of the glass helped me realize the sculptural possibilities of the material.

Studying the work of Marcel Duchamp, associated with the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, broadened my understanding of the use of object in art to challenge and convey ideas. His use of manufactured objects that became art by simple modifications in the way they were arranged pioneered a new way of considering the object that contemporary artists are continuing to explore. His famous and controversial work of a urinal, which he signed and titled *Fountain*, epitomizes the subversive methods by which he challenged artistic thought and processes.

Andy Warhol has been a source of reference in terms of the way he challenged the notion of museum display and what we perceive as being beautiful. Warhol's "Raid the Icebox" installation at Rice University, for example, presented unconventional methods of display such as a closet full of shoes, paintings and frames stacked against the wall, and hat boxes piled on the floor. These objects and others were borrowed from the basement storerooms of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.³ The original concept of the installation was to bring into the open some of the lesser known works of museums that were stored in basements and inaccessible to the public. Warhol's selections challenge traditional perceptions of beauty based on the context of how something is displayed.

Perhaps the artist most influential to my work is Joseph Cornell, known for his Surrealist-inspired boxes containing enigmatic assemblies that juxtapose natural and man-made objects. There was an unmistakable degree of ambiguity to his work that critics have discussed for years. Cornell was a "compulsive collector of evocative objects, together with books and music, he ordered and classified large numbers of found objects thinking of their usefulness in making boxes."⁴ The source material he collected became artistic creations about his inner thoughts, desires, and imagination. His evocative application of materials served as source and model to the methodologies and conceptual content of my art.

Collectors and Collecting

I am a collector. In the broadest sense of the word we are all collectors of both material and intellectual culture to some degree. Collecting may be viewed as a means to a deeper comprehension of the essential nature and the emotional content of the human experience. Simply defined, collecting is the selecting, gathering and the organization of objects of some subjective value.

In terms of organization and display I am particularly inspired by the cabinets of curiosity from the early 14th and 15th centuries. These encyclopedic cabinets were the precursor of the modern day museum. Before the categorical boundaries that serve as organizing principles today (science, art and religion) objects were allocated by wealthy patrons. "Very different things found their way into these collections: antique objects such as figurines and coins, artistically crafted artifacts, scientific instruments, books, pictures, items from far away lands, and for the first

³ Robbins, Daniel. *Raid the Icebox Iwith Andy Warhol* (Eastern Press, Inc. 1969) p17

⁴ Brink, Andrew *Desire and Avoidance in Art* (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2007) p147

time on a larger scale, natural specimens.”⁵ The cabinets were the private collections of affluent individuals who took great pride in allocating objects based on popular trends, aesthetic qualities, scarcity or uniqueness.

The collector – dedicated, serious, passionate, infatuated has a need to possess, search, hold, touch and discover the object(s) of his or her fancy. The collection will invariably reflect aspects of the collector such as his personality, taste, sophistication or ignorance, his independence of choice, or conversely, his reliance on the judgment of others.

It is interesting to note that, in the acquisition of objects, collectors have commonly made reference to a kind of emotional involvement that creates both excitement and duress in the individual. The exhilaration of the thrill of the hunt or the possession of a long sought piece may be coupled with a sense of tension, doubt, restlessness, or guilt. This type of obsession/infatuation with objects is sated only temporarily by the acquisition of the latest object. Sooner or later the inner longings of the collector demand a new object to be added to the collection. This is not to generalize the disparity of private incentives that motivate collectors, but it might suggest that the values attached to one’s holdings follow an earlier prototype of yearning.

Analysis of the Work

Early Yearnings

Early Yearnings consists of a weathered blue chest containing a writhing mass of blown glass forms in long, graceful curves to resemble the horns or tusks of some mysterious animal. The surfaces are accentuated to physically resemble both texturally and visually aged bones. The forms themselves, however, are very abstract – alluding to no particular animal. Due to their shape, density and arrangement within the box, they appear to be alive and writhing. Pushing at the confines, they threaten to leave the box and spill onto the floor.

In *Early Yearnings* I wanted to create a work that expressed the, at times, overwhelming desire to explore, gather and accumulate relics. Collecting rarely has a finite end. The collector finds himself always looking to acquire the next piece to add to the collection. This perpetual cycle of explore, discover and acquire can be taxing to the point of being neurotic. There is a

⁵ Munch, Irmgard. “Albertus Seba’s Collection of Natural Specimens and its Pictorial Inventory” Ute Kieseyer, ed. *Cabinet of Natural Curiosities: The Complete Color Plates 1734-1765* (Taschen, 2005) p. 8



need to fill something that is only temporarily sated by the acquisition of a new piece to the collection. The need to acquire more is always on the horizon.

In considering the work as a commentary on the nature of collecting, it is my intent to convey a sense of covetable beauty. The objects are intended to evoke a desire to possess them. The bones are both the objects of desire and the expression of that desire. In this sense the chest acts as the receptacle that the collector uses to contain his collection and sate his desires. However, there is neither room for more objects, nor is there a way to adequately contain the objects that are present. The desire for more cannot be sated and is further confounded by the limitations of the box. The quality of them appearing animal and unruly alludes to the obsessive and uncontrollable nature collecting can inflict. Objects offer a sense of protection and comfort; for example, consider the classic teddy bear of childhood. The stuffed animal acts as a comforting companion that can assist in soothing or pacifying a child when coping with stress. “To the child an object may transform feelings of loss and anxiety into

wellsprings of activity and imagination and provide some sense of control and dominance.”⁶ In fact, the emotional comfort of an object often outlasts its functionality. As we mature to adolescents and adults, objects can also offer a degree of prestige or sense of belonging to a group, which similarly offers a sense of protection and comfort.

The box is the actual box of my childhood – where I kept my treasures such as toys, bones and other relics. There is an inherent innocence and mystery to a child’s toy box. It is a home for the child’s imagination – a place where the child both puts to bed and awakens the instruments of his fantasy. A toy box is like a treasure chest in that it is constantly being rediscovered. In terms of collecting it is the instrument used to house the collection.

Bones play a fitting role in attributing meaning to the work. Bones allude to the futility of earthly pursuits and to our mortality. This contrasts with the inferred meaning of a child’s toy box. The idea of youth and innocence is coupled with the associations of death and decay that are epitomized in bones. Yet the fluctuations of form suggest a movement and life. That sense of movement also corresponds to the boundless imagination of the child.

Compulsions

Compulsions is a small wall-mounted box with five wooden shelves containing various objects: pieces of a crystal, a glass cast of mangled teeth, a desiccated lizard, a wooden spool, a tangled piece of wire and the arm from an old doll. The objects have the qualities of being old, fragmented, broken and disturbing.

The piece focuses on the irrational act of collection. As a collector I am compelled to gather and display various objects. The whole process: finding a piece, acquiring a piece, living with a piece and ultimately displaying or storing the piece can be a very taxing and stressful ordeal. There is often an impulsive quality to finding and acquiring a piece. I have often been drawn to an object for no other reason than visual appeal, which is fine, but from a personal standpoint my rational side always seeks a justification for adding yet another thing to the junk heap. Sometimes I do rationalize it and for whatever reason the piece comes home or it remains where I found it. But other times, the “hard times,” I can think of no singular good reason to justify the acquisition of the object in question. Yet, the neurotic aspect of me cannot for

⁶ Muensterberger, Werner. *Collecting: An Unruly Passion * Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton University Press, 2005) p28

whatever reason let it go. The more rational and reasonable it seems to just walk away the more feverish my neurosis becomes unto the point of making me physically ill. It’s a situation with no short-term gains. I’ll go home with the piece suffering the whole while from buyer’s remorse, or I’ll berate myself when I get home for not ‘following my gut’. Either way, I will be dissatisfied.



Collecting is like that, the dark side, at any rate. I gave up collecting in my early adulthood; it is only in recent years I’ve begun to revisit it. For this body of work, I had to acquire more things than I am comfortable with. I felt like an undercover cop trying to infiltrate the drug scene. But I am an artist navigating the junk stores, revisiting an old habit and remembering some of the things I was uncomfortable experiencing.

Finding a home for all this junk is not fun, especially since I advocate tidiness. How do I organize nostalgic treasures with the more eclectic bags of dirt, rusted machinery and animal remains? Should I alphabetize or use a numbering system? Organizing and displaying those precious items as a collector with an artists’ sensibility is a nightmare in its own special way.

What if I moved the piece a couple of inches to the right? Maybe just an inch and a quarter? Are these the right pieces? I knew I should have picked up that one thing. Yeah, that one thing would have made it all right.

The constant second guessing that accompanies the sheer volume of materials can be pure torture.

This piece, for me, summarizes those feelings of inadequacy, tension and distress that accompany the more rewarding aspects of collecting.

Reliquaries

The reliquaries are a series of ornate vessels housing shards of old glass, rusted chains, dried rosebuds, bullet casings and pieces of the iron wood tree. The objects carry that quality of being mundane or ordinary; yet are displayed in such a manner as to suggest awe. These

objects are contained within glass vessels deliberately crafted to accentuate the idea of beauty and reverence.

In beginning the body of work I collected objects that were of aesthetic value to me and because they represented a physical connection to places, people, and times that were important to me. I gathered and stored them on shelves and boxes in my studio with the intent that they would become components to works. One day, I began placing them in vessels I had created



and suddenly they became more than just a curiosity. Contained and displayed, they conveyed the sense of being important relics of distinction and veneration without revealing how or why. As a way to further distinguish the works, I began referring to them as reliquaries.

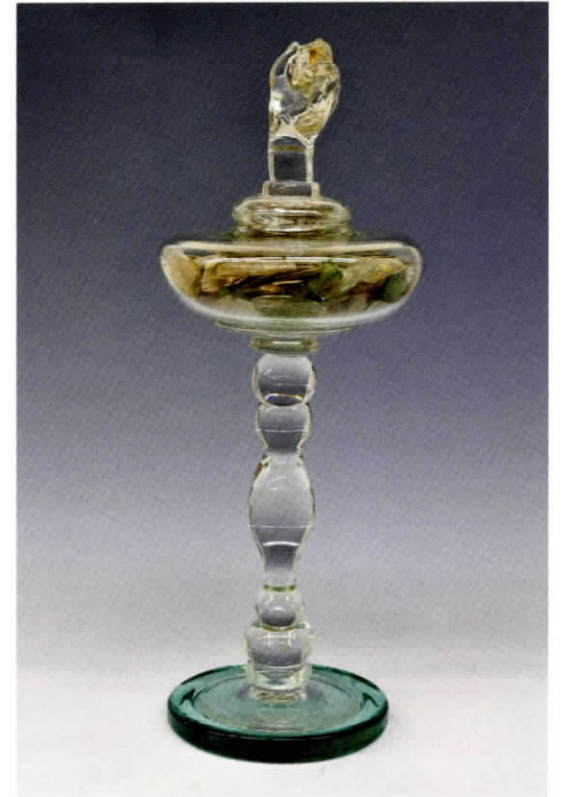
Reliquaries are containers meant to house relics. Traditionally these relics are the physical remains of a saint: pieces of bone, clothing, or some other object associated with a religious figure. They have long been important in many faiths (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity) and range in size from small and intricate vessels to large coffin sized boxes. They are preserved in stupas, temples, cathedrals and other religious structures to which the faithful make pilgrimages. They are a tangible, physical connection to a time, place, person and meaning.

It is the object that embodies the person. It is the ability of an object to represent this kind of intangible power, this emotional weight that interest me and was a determining factor in describing the works as reliquaries. The objects I chose to display were based on a relevance to my personal interests. They played a symbolic role at important times in my life that I've chosen to venerate and contain. They are also iconic symbols that resonate throughout history.

For example, the chain reliquary invites very specific connotations. To me, they are a symbol of power that was especially significant during the course of my youth. In my early

imaginings they were a device employed in the saga of heroism and violence - as in the villain's use of the chain for imprisonment and the hero's display of strength in breaking those chains of oppression. This is part of the history of the chain that many people have related to me in similar terms, often making reference to the chains of slavery or the imprisonment of criminals, as well. There is an inherent power to the chain and a significant history behind it that support a more defined symbolic meaning to a broader audience.

Conversely, the glass reliquary invites the audience to speculate a meaning that is not so obvious. Shards of broken glass were items I would collect as a child. I liked the colors of the glass, how even the clear glass took on a light hue of green or purple. I liked the way they captured light, the way the edges would often be smoothed like glass that had been tumbled in the ocean. I liked to contemplate the age of the glass and consider the time that they were from - like little glittering pieces of the past. That innocent curiosity was the innocence of my childhood. Much of that innocence is lost as we age, and there is sadness in that loss and even regret. To me the piece is about the gripping frustration I've sometimes experienced in trying to recapture that simple innocence of youth - metaphorically digging deep and retrieving these broken bits of the past.



I make no specific allusions as to why the individual pieces are important. To title the works *Reliquaries* is to give them the sense of being historically significance or sacred. I had considered individual titles to the works that might give the viewer a clearer indication of why the objects are so prominently displayed, or to possibly fabricate a story that would suggest the works are tied to a specific historical person or event, real or imagined. However, like the cabinets, the simplicity of allowing the viewers to draw their own conclusions and associations to objects is more in keeping with the content of the show. The simple denotation as a reliquary is sufficient to suggest that the objects and the vessels that

contain them are important; the objects are part of a meaning that goes beyond their physical substance.

Vanitas

Vanitas is a dense arrangement of sculpted glass vessels containing various materials set atop a vanity table. The table is small with gracefully crafted legs of turned wood that are complemented by the delicacy and lightness of intricate clear vessels above. The vessels contain remnants of plant, mineral and animal material including shells, tree bark, soil, dried flowers, seeds, snake and insect skins.

The term *vanitas* refers to a genre of Dutch still life painting popular in the 16th century. Like *memento mori* they serve as a reminder of death, the futility of earthy pursuits and the transience of vanity. Dutch still lifes from this period often referenced death with a skull motif, but also included other symbolic articles that alluded to life's transient nature such as a timepiece, fallen petals from a flower, or rotting fruit. Conceptually they freed the artist to arrange and paint

a variety of aesthetically pleasing objects that had basis in symbolizing earthly pleasures.

The work began as a simple arrangement of formal elements. The table, which was salvaged from a fire at my grandparent's home, served as a pedestal for many of glass pieces that were originally intended to be part of the *Reliquaries*. Its potential as a separate work evolved as I began playing with the formal arrangement and adding more pieces to the table. Density became an important factor as the piece progressed. I wanted an abundance of information that would cause the viewer to pause, inventory the contents and contemplate thematically how they might fit



together.

Slowly, I began filling the vessels with remnants collected from my hometown and other areas of personal significance: mesquite beans from the mountain laurel bush, pieces of iron wood collected from the California desert, husks of the cicada nymph, discarded snake skin found in my grandfather's studio, shells from Coyote Creek, and bark from the Madrone tree to name a few.

It was not until the piece neared completion and I began giving thought to titles, that the work unveiled its meaning to me. I had come to consider the work as a still life, as a study of objects formally arranged according to their aesthetic qualities. Thematically the content speaks of the transience of life, dried and fallen flowers and the skeletal remains of a cactus for example. Additionally, an emergence of life and rebirth is symbolized in the mesquite beans, and shed skins of both the snake and cicada nymph. Even the emergence of the table from the ashes conforms to this idea of a renewed existence. I learned of the *vanitas* genre when studying *memento mori* and it seemed both a fitting description to address the content and another layer of history to add dimension to the work.

Memento Mori

Memento Mori is a large, wooden "L" shaped structure with hanging glass skulls that relates to a time in my early childhood when I began to develop a fascination with bones and their relation to the cycle of life and death. The glass skulls hang from the wooden beams in three distinct clusters. Stylized and expressive, the skulls are the representations of the various animals I knew and imagined as a child. The structure is a representation of the country landscape in which I was raised. The wood members –old, weather beaten, and rustic – define a time and place for my memory.

The phrase *memento mori* is defined as a reminder of death. *Memento mori* date back to antiquity but were popular in early Christian art of the 14th and 15th centuries. In funeral art, on effigies, tombstones and paintings the *memento mori* was generally represented as a skull, or skeleton that served as a symbolic reminder of one's fleeting mortality and the inevitability of death. Suggesting the futility of earthly pleasures or achievement, they encourage one to meditate on the afterlife.

The rural backdrop of my childhood was the place of my earliest ruminations of life and death. I had some basis for understanding death as was taught by my parents and the church.



However, the physical remnants of death certainly made a strong impression in shaping that understanding. These remnants were the bones of my youth, the physical evidence of animals that played out their lives on the land. The evidence suggested a struggle and hardship that was violent - as when I witnessed the death of a sick animal, or an animal taking the life of another, or when I was occasionally asked or expected to take the life of an animal. Yet there was serenity, however sad, in the stillness of a prone corpse or a skull found in the pasture.

One of the memories from which this piece was inspired took place on a Sunday visit to my grandparents. I was a child between five and eight years old and was playing outside my grandfather's workshop. On this particular Sunday, I remember the sun high and warm in the sky as my uncle emerged from the woods with his latest kill, a possum trailing blood behind him.

My uncle ran several hundred head of sheep on the property and as part of protocol was in the business of trapping animals – what he and my family would refer to as “varmits”. Varmits are typically categorized as those animals that are a general nuisance or liability to ranch operations. These would include opossums, skunks, armadillos, raccoons, bobcats, hogs and coyotes.

Unceremoniously, but with great deliberateness and expedience, my uncle tied the opossum by its haunches from one of the timbers running between the workshop and garage, cut around the corpse with a pocket knife, and with a few powerful pulls he removed the entire animal hide— exposing the slick muscular system beneath. I still remember the sight of that animal swinging slightly under the sun, while I stared wide-eyed in my Sunday best. It was a sight both horrifying and deeply engaging.

The animal skulls reference my childhood contemplations of life and death. I sculpted these skulls larger and more animated than a strictly realistic rendering would necessitate. I wanted to capture the memory of these skulls as I perceived them as a child – with this feeling of being creepy, larger than life, and yet beautiful in their way. I chose to sculpt them in clear glass specifically to capture this idea of memory and to create juxtaposition between life and death. In contrast, I felt the use of color would render the skulls lifeless and static. The play of light inherent in glass creates a luminance which reflects the idea of conscious memory, the transience of earthly pursuits, and the contemplation not only of death, but of an afterlife.

The Taxonomy of Memory I, II, and III



The Taxonomy of memory consists of three printers drawers, mounted on the wall. Each drawer contains individual blocks of glass that capture the negative images of particular objects. The objects are the mementos and souvenirs of the past taken from my personal collections and those of friends and family. They are a snapshot of individual memories juxtaposed together in a seemingly indiscriminate way.

Taxonomy is the practice and science of classification, as in the 'taxonomy of organisms'. Almost anything may be classified under a taxonomic scheme: places, people, objects, time, and even concepts. After coming across a printer's drawer in a thrift store, I came upon the idea to create a taxonomic scheme based on the way memories are attached to personal mementos. Historically, the printer's trays were used to hold type set letters, numbers and symbols. Today they are popular with collectors who like to display their curios.

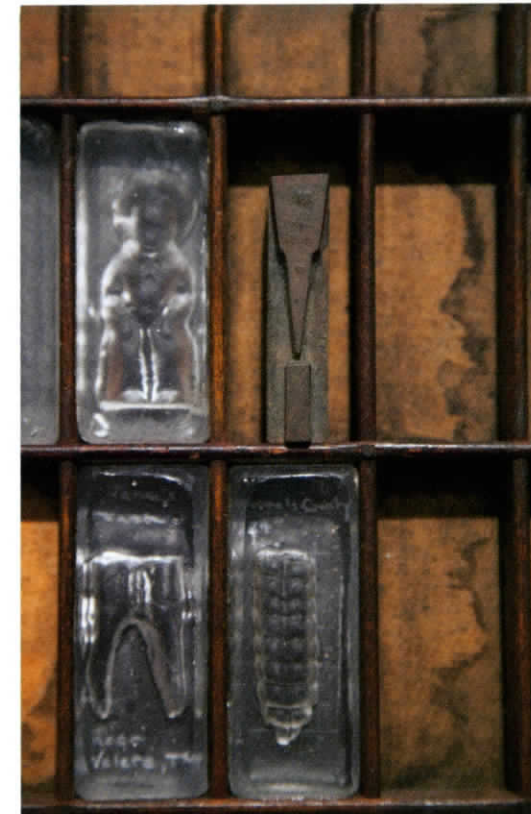
I have always been interested in the domestic collection – that of the collector who has an affinity for small objects that are readily displayed on the wall, mantle, shelf, window sill or table. They are grouped according to the individual's tastes, sometimes apparent to an outsider, but often appearing as unpremeditated assortment of objects. I like to think of the domestic collectors in this sense as the curators of their home museum. I exclude paintings and sculpture from the home exhibition only because these may be more overtly influenced by the tastes of society whereas the small object (bought, found or made) seems to ring more true to the tastes of the individual.

For these pieces, I wanted to recreate the feel of personal objects that individuals juxtapose against one another. Because objects often convey unique and specific information to the individual, it stands to reason that there must be some principle, conscious or subconscious, to organizing the data. In organizing my own pieces, I originally thought I would be able to treat them as insertions that I could base on entirely compositional terms – what looked good together. In practice however, it was conceptually impossible for me to put the pieces I had so painstakingly acquired, transferred, and cast into a random pattern. It became of the utmost importance to place the pieces in a way that related their meaning.

I am interested in the way we correlate objects to memory and how arranging those objects relates to the way we memorialize our memories. Objects can relate to a memory by direct association of event, by indirect association of relating memories, or by association of invention.

Usually objects become attached to specific memory by direct association. If I am on the beach and I pick up a shell, it becomes a keepsake for my memory of my time on the beach. I may collect other items such as a vial of sand and a piece of driftwood and they directly relate to my specific memory of the beach. As a group they are all a part of the time and place of my memory.

I can add to that group objects that are indirectly associated such as a bullet casing and magnifying glass. The new objects remind me of my father. He loved target practice and I have memories of shooting with him as a child. The magnifying glass belonged to my father and reminds me of him, but also conjures memories of my own experiences with the glass. These objects become the carriers of not one specific memory, but tie themselves to a multitude of times and experiences. My father loved the sea and so they find a place alongside my memories of the beach by indirect association. Together, the memories become entwined flowing from one to the other.

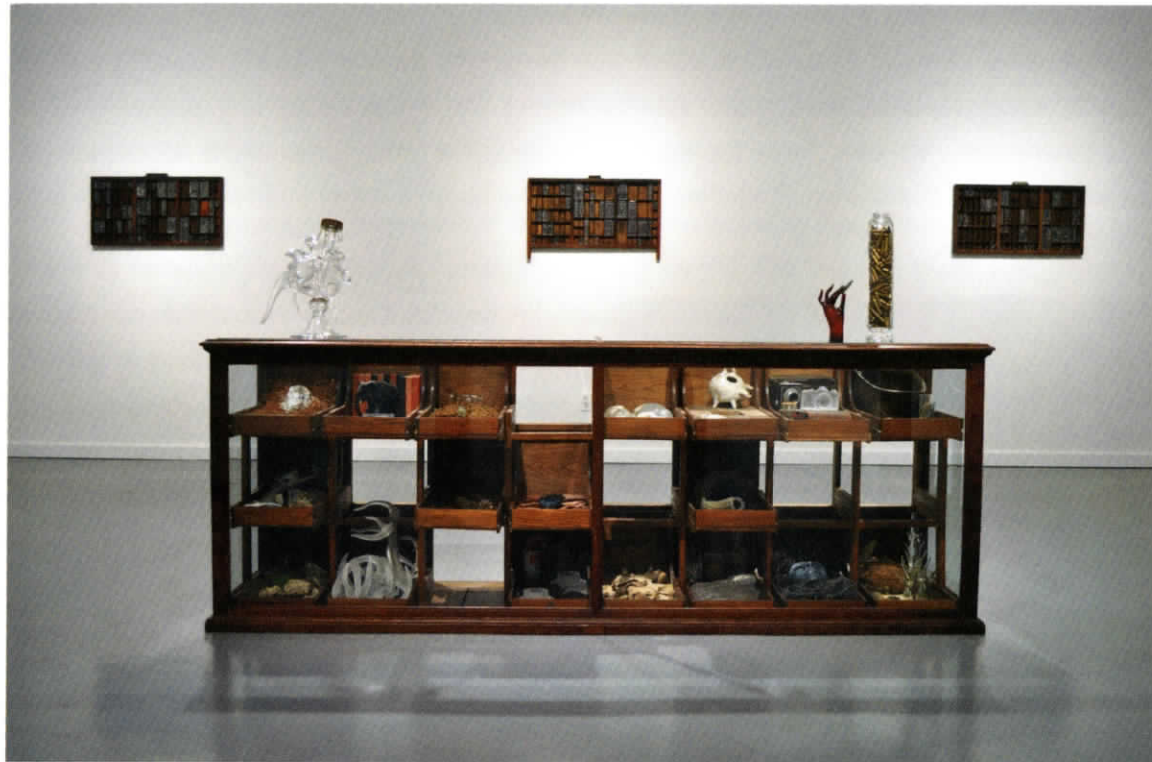


Objects also are associated with memory by invention. The grouping of objects in the detail includes a small figurine of a cowboy. The cowboy was originally a wax candle that was part of my 30th birthday celebration. It has become a personification of me which is symbolic of my time growing up in the country. This also pertains to the idea we have the ability to shape our memories. As a receptacle that holds my memory, the cowboy is a far more romantic version of what I like remember than what is factual. Far from being a permanent fixture in time and place, memories continue to evolve. Some things are forgotten, lose their context, ultimately die or are recovered from the cobwebs of our mind, resurrected, given new life. Sometimes they are completely reconstructed or misconstrued dependent upon our interpretation

of people, places, and events.

Are they entirely accurate - the ways we remember things? Or do they continue to change, alongside our attitudes and aging bodies? Memories are a reflection of an individual's ability to store, retain, and recall information. As such they are subject to the interpretation of the individual.

Curios



Curios is a large turn of the century display cabinet containing 18 individual drawers that can be viewed from the top, front and both sides through large panes of glass. Originally the cabinet would have held 24 drawers on three levels with eight drawers per level. Six drawers have been removed, creating negative spaces that compositionally break up the density of the piece and further reveal contents of the drawers that would otherwise be obscured. Copper plates on the backs of the drawers, denoted alphabetically in descending order, indicate an organizing principle behind the work. Each drawer is a separate composition that contains various objects.

The work was inspired by the early Cabinets of Curiosity of the 14th and 15th centuries. These cabinets displayed great varieties of subjects in an organization that was dictated by the tastes of the individual. As such, classical Greek sculpture might be displayed next to rare marine specimens. Entire rooms might be devoted to this collecting behavior and available for display to certain audiences and to a broader public at certain events.

There is a great juxtaposition between the objects in both what is found versus what is crafted, and in how the objects relate to one another conceptually, as separate drawers and as a whole. Some of the drawers have an underlying order and economy of information, while others are clustered, busy and seemingly chaotic. The basis of the work is an exploration of the appeal, organization, and display of objects and how the various objects conjure associations to memories, thoughts and ideas - both personal and collective, by their relationship with other objects.

The cabinet, in terms of its organization and display, is analogous to memory in the way it is archived and perceived. The drawers become individual compositions, all in some way relating to my personal past thereby containing various stories. Some of the drawers refer to specific memories, others are less defined - juxtaposed against a backdrop of densely populated objects referring to different memories, or simple fragments of thought or ideas that seem to blur together.

The "P" drawer for example is compositionally quite simple. The drawer is filled to capacity with hundreds of nails. Their rusty patina indicates that it is an old memory. On top of the nails, front and center, is a delicate and crystal clear hammer sculpted from glass. The personal memory references my frustrations and inadequacies as a carpenter. Most of my



childhood and adolescence I persisted in constructing things that I lacked the basic knowledge and resources to accomplish in a competent manner. The hammer came to represent all my intensions which were innocent, sincere, and ambitious, but were otherwise tragically weak in execution. Both the tree house and bridge were fun to build, but they never met with my expectations and required more maintenance than was worth the effort. Other projects, such as the two story clubhouse, collapsed before I made real headway, and the dam, though beautiful to behold, washed away with the first autumn rains.

Drawer "A" provides a context for a multitude of individual memories and layered symbolic associations. The drawer contains stereoscope cards, a jar full of bullets, a cast glass model of an army issue .45 semi-automatic pistol, a first-aid manual, an old family letter, and a

world war one helmet containing a birds nest with a glass egg. Thematically, everything relates to war and the various objects allow any number of associations for viewers to study, analyze and draw their own conclusions. Many personal mementos are included, each conjuring their own string of thoughts.

The helmet, a family heirloom that long resided in our backyard, was a device of many childhood games. The birds nest in the helmet reminds me of how time glazes over our past, how a relic such as this helmet defining a specific historical moment in time can be lost, forgotten or otherwise stripped of its original meaning and become simply a plaything for children. In a broader context the birds nest and egg could come to symbolize the continued march of life even in the uncertainties and despair of war, the end of war, the birth of peace, birth of freedom, or rising of a new era.

In finding, creating and arranging the



objects into individual compositions I endeavored to exercise judgments that satisfied my personal history and invited various symbolic interpretations from individual viewers. All the nuances of the personal memory I relate in drawer "P" are not intended to be grasped by the audience. The hammer is iconic, however, in that it is known the world over and carries with it certain universal implications. A glass hammer brings a good deal of irony and degrees of nuance to the subject that alters those implications. In this sense, all of the works are deliberately ambiguous.

I have not been interested in relating a personal narrative that clearly defines a story or provides answers to specific questions so much as I am in creating an atmosphere in which the audience relates to the manipulation of objects, and draws their own associations. If this invites a broad range of meaning and speculation to the exact meaning of the work, then all the better. I believe in providing information that engages the viewer to reach their own conclusions. As Mark Dion stated in regards to museum exhibitions, "A museum should provoke questions, not spoon feed answers and experiences."⁷ It then transcends a strictly static personal reading, and hopefully, invites conscious reflection, dialogue, and pertains to a broader collective identity.

Concluding Thoughts

The process of conceptualizing, creating and finally analyzing the body of work was an immense challenge that forced me to reconsider the way I approach making art. The original paper I wrote to outline my intensions and document my research helped me lay the foundation to base the work upon. However, in writing an analytical paper that preceded the work, I negatively impacted my creative process by stipulating a criterion it needed to fit. In consequence, I suffered from a kind of creative impotence. In overcoming this I had to essentially disregard the analytical constraints I had put in place.

It was best for me to simply address the materials I had accumulated, meditate on what they meant to me and react. As an artist, this means letting go of any preconceived notion of what the work has to be. Many of the creative decisions I make are a reaction to a thought, material, color, place, time or simply to my frame of mind, uninhibited and detached from the constraints of analytical thought. The rationalizations and justifications come later. The meaning slowly unfolds, revealing itself over time. I am still unraveling the meaning behind my work. It

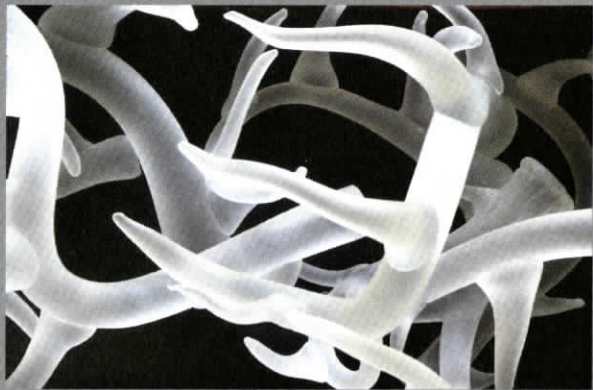
⁷ Kwon, Miwon and Mark Dion. *Press Play: Contemporary Artists in Conversation* (Phaidon Press Inc., 2005) p127.

reveals itself in large chunks and small bits here and there. Like so much history sewn into the work, there are many nuances to uncover, and lessons that will ultimately direct me to the next work.

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7. Kwon, Miwon and Mark Dion. *Press Play: Contemporary Artists in Conversation*. Phaidon Press Inc. 2005.

Exhibition Images





Early Yearnings, 2009
30" x 36" x 24"



Compulsions, 2010
16" x 5" x 2"



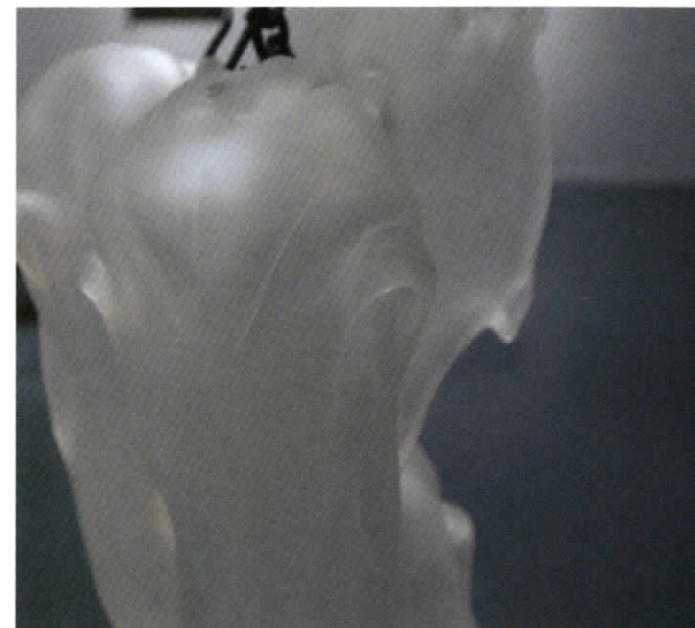


Reliquaries, 2009 - 2010
66" x 84" x 16"





Vanitas, 2010
60" x 36" x 24"







Memento Mori, 2010
78" x 108" x 96"





The Taxonomy of Memory II, 2009
32" x 20" x 2"



Proceeding Page:

The Taxonomy of Memory I, 2010
32" x 17" x 2"

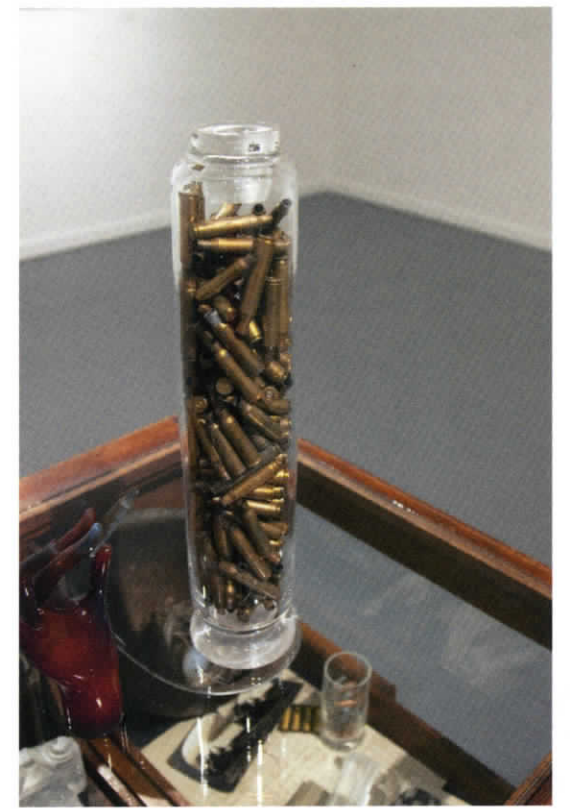
The Taxonomy of Memory III, 2010
32" x 17" x 2"

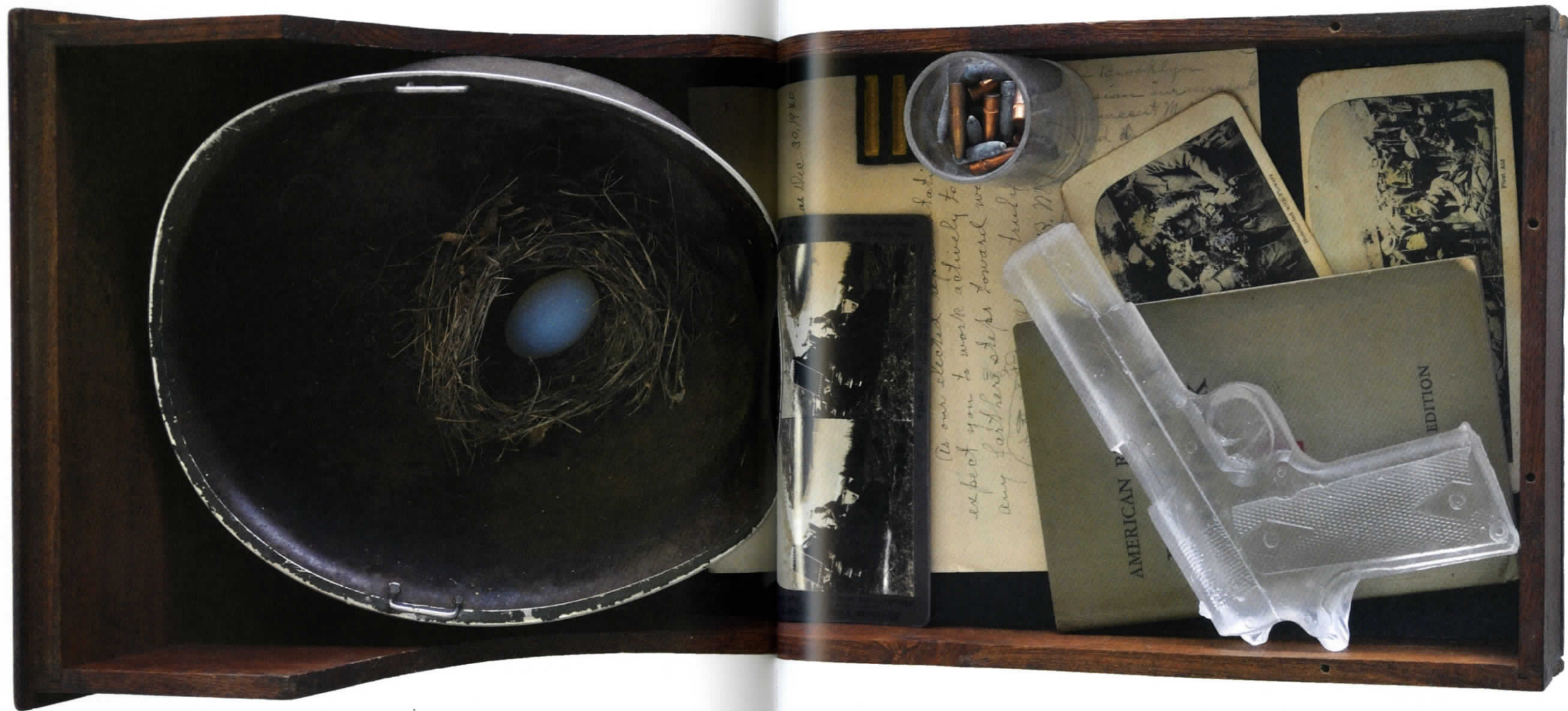






Curio, 2010
36" X 96" x 26"





Drawer A



Drawer C

Drawer D





Drawer F

Drawer G





Drawer H



Drawer I

Drawer J





Drawer L

Drawer N





Drawer P



Drawer O

Drawer Q





Drawer S

Drawer U





Drawer W



Drawer V

Drawer X





Acknowledgements

This body of work is the culmination of three years of graduate study. It has been a distinct honor to be the first to exhibit and graduate in the master of fine arts program which began in the fall of 2007. I owe a debt of gratitude to a number of people that contributed to my success.

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Finally, I would like to thank my lovely wife Amy whose love and patience are as vast and mysterious as the ocean. I could not have done this without you.

Thank you.

Matthew Patterson, 2010





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