University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
December 2019

Objects of Significance: Sacred Qualities of Personal Belongings

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Abstract

Objects that we are given and collect throughout our lives play an important role- not only do we adorn ourselves and our homes with them, they serve to inspire, hold memories, and create a sense of place and time. Found objects, gifts, and collections are both commonplace and venerated in our homes and workplaces; belongings we thoughtlessly pass by every day also stand as tangible placeholders for some of our fondest intangible experiences. In the exhibition *Objects of Significance: An Adoration of Home Through Personal Belongings*, the artist visually explores these links as they relate to artworks and writings relevant to mundane objects and sacrality. Sources investigating themes such as models of the sacred and religious, ordinary belongings, and pertinent artists and art history are used to inform the work.

1. Introduction

The human compulsion to collect objects and place value in them is universal and ancient. Some cultures and societies find and keep objects more than others, however, and the variance of what we find valuable fluctuates greatly depending on material contexts as we understand them. Lewis Hyde describes in his book, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* the ways in which cultures around the world value objects. For instance, those of First Peoples' differ greatly than cultures of mass production and consumption; Hyde points out that, to the former, objects are more valuable and meaningful when shared and circulated, thus becoming gifts and not kept in collections.[1] Keeping these differing global ideas about individual properties in mind, I will expand on a culture of collections through the influenced lens of an American living in the Southern Appalachian mountains. In my work I address the sacredness and spiritual qualities that I find in certain personal belongings that I have taken the time to collect, and give value to the spaces they exist within.

My experiences with collecting began much the same as most everyone else's: as a child I relentlessly collected small bits and pieces of the natural world, as well as tiny manufactured objects that I came across that captured my interest. Storing collections in small containers, giving secret hiding places to favorite objects, and reveling in the joys of a tangible found object are all subset activities of collecting that are certainly not unique among children. My relationship with collecting grew and changed, however, into one that mimicked my dad's compulsive need to collect as a coping mechanism. Adopting his habitual need to gather and keep often worthless or broken items has shaped my worldview and the ways in which I understand and confront my realities. He has often referred to himself as "just a bad scavenger"-- and although my dad's collecting (and hence, mine) was born as a response to the abundant throes of life, I place value in what these behaviors have taught me. The turtle shell-shaped piece *Terrapine Carolina (Hillbilly Armor)* by Mel Chin illustrates well what I've gleaned from objects and collecting— Chin writes that the

piece is “custom-fit, handmade armor, from North Carolina and Tennessee junk,” and accompanies an image of it with a quote from Donald Rumsfeld: “You go to war with the army you have.”[2]

Figure 1. Mel Chin, *Terrapine Carolina (Hillbilly Armor).*
http://melchin.org/oeuvre/terrapine-carolina-hillbilly-armor/

This emphasis on regular objects (or those that are well-worn or found and collected from a previously discarded state) that exist within our daily rituals provides an accessible and relatable lense through which to see the cherished or the spiritual. Interacting with the objects that I have impressed meaning upon through my own associations with collecting helps to show an acquired history and a sense of each object’s unlikely and chance importance. By creating spatial environment and context that shows both this human use and personal sacrality and significance, these objects become elements of visual memory and experience. Collections and allowing ourselves to play with and balance what we understand as mundane or sacred (or both) through them can help lend vital information about our personal narratives and what we find important, act as spaces of worship, ritual, or veneration, and serve as tools to better comprehend our lives day to day.

2. Models of The Sacred: Religious and Secular

When we think of things that have sacred qualities in our lives, we often quickly jump to religion and the institutions that uphold it. Prayer, places of worship, ancient texts and artifacts, and people in positions of power are associations with sacrality that we make as Westerners, regardless of our religious alignments. We have been molded by these concepts, and their frequency of use has adhered us to them in our daily actions and interactions. Further, sacredness relating to objects is not new or coincidental; an entire history of interconnectedness between specifically Christian denominations and consumerism in the United States is present in our current society. It would be a difficult task to mention one without the other in a discussion about property, material wealth, gain, and objects in the home. In Chris Lehmann’s *The Money Cult,* he explains, “the tale of how the ‘Protestant Ethic’ gave birth to the capitalist market economy...begins with the Puritan believers who settled the colonies, and their obsessive quest for any sign of salvation from an unfathomably remote and imperious God...this high-stakes spiritual anxiety had to find an outlet somewhere.” That outlet came in the form of money, power, and possessions, or the “baubles of wealth.”[3] Regardless of the

incredibly rich blend of cultures in America, the Protestant origins and overtones of capitalism are nonetheless present, and are vital in understanding shifts into more secular forms of spirituality and sacredness.

In his article "Sacred Order" in the journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion,* William Paden asserts that although "sacred" is a term often used synonymously with "supernatural" or an intangible "mysterious other power," there exists multidimensional and purposeful meanings of the word as it applies to both religious and secular worldviews.[4] Despite our cultural saturation with sacrality, we know it more closely in the form of personal doctrine and ritual. Paden explains that there are two "formulas" of sacrality: the "classical" or "mana model" and the second, simply the "sacred order."[5] He clarifies:

> The mana model of sacrality certainly has much descriptive importance, especially if it can be weaned from its quasi-theological context and used to identify those structured ways in which empowered objects (empowered by society) present themselves to religious subjects and vice-versa...The second template, based on the notion of sacred order, I understand broadly as the constraint of upholding the integrity of one's world system against violation. Notably, such order is a potential factor in the constitution of all social worlds, whether religiously legitimated or not. Sacred order is then not a unique, privileged invention of religious cultures. It is linked with common human needs for self-maintenance, including the defense of territory, tradition, honor, authority, social bonds and roles, and other forms of status. Religious order, which is that kind explicitly grounded in terms of supposed superhuman endowment, as well as secular order, both in fact maintain worlds which operate through these same structuring force fields. [6]

The first existing model informs the other, more contemporary and accessible one. Our actions within the "sacred order" are primed by our cultural saturation of the more theological "mana." According to the second formula, anyone can find and experience sacrality; through this sacred order we can find personal narrative and solace in objects and surroundings that are not necessarily religiously affiliated. These two formulas of sacrality, especially the second, further encourage an understanding of collected objects as sacred or spiritual, and strengthen the connection between the places in which we keep and admire our possessions with places of worship or altars.

3. Conceptual and Visual Influences: Familiar Objects

Applying William Paden's structure of both the mana model and the sacred order formulas of sacrality to artists' work and my own helps to further investigate an often inexplicable, intangible subject. An artist who has perhaps been influenced by the first model of sacrality yet follows the second is Catherine Murphy. Originating from a Catholic and formally-trained background, she was raised and educated in a world of formalism and religion.This stringent and structured upbringing stylistically informs her work: intricately detailed and realistic drawings and paintings of ordinary objects, settings, and scenarios. In an interview between Catherine Murphy and writer Francine Prose for a journal article in *BOMB* magazine, Murphy responds to Prose regarding the topic of visionary qualities in her work and how it relates to her Catholic and formally-trained background, "We all loved Renaissance painting. And we had to make paintings that had subject and did not have subject at the same time...the great religious paintings had great subjects," she continues, "That is, they had a subject that one could believe in, desperately, above all else. God. The Holy Ghost... So they could make paintings that were not illustrative, because they were depicting something that was sacred. But life is sacred.[7]" Murphy seamlessly blends the two thoughts in her work— both a subject that one can believe in and the sacredness of life. Her focus on moments in time and the minutiae of life are vital themes that can be seen in her work over several decades. The intention that she gives to each piece and her relentless practice of the art of observation prove to the viewer the power and transcendence of the everyday or the mundane. Below is a painting by Murphy entitled *Helium Balloon* that depicts these qualities.[8]

Figure 2. Catherine Murphy, *Helium Balloon*.
https://library-artstor-org.proxy177.nclive.org/#/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_10311716196

An example of the two formulas of sacrality at play in a three-dimensional work is Mark Graham's "The Meditation Space." Graham describes this piece comprised of collected objects as "magical," "ephemeral," and reminiscent of a display of sacred relics.[9] Assuming these roles, objects are allowed their own integrity as parts of the whole and in accordance together, and create a space for one (particularly the collector of the objects) to venerate and reflect. Graham comments on material items as possible reflections or denials of our very material Western culture, and adds that collections can reveal and conceal in other ways as well— revealing our truest child-like nature and concealing our subconscious impulses.[10] Graham further illustrates many significant qualities of collecting and collections:

> A collection can be a form of memory, veneration, or knowledge. Collections can be a way to put in order or come to terms with the strangeness, randomness, and complexities of the world. A collection can represent the mundane, trivial obsessions of popular visual culture, a record of natural history, or the transcendent and mysterious beauty of the ordinary...The possession of the collection can fend off the chaos of the infinite material world, the loss of memory, the passage of time and the passing of objects into oblivion. Collecting can also be an act of defining identity, a self-defense against the spectacle of commercial consumerism, and a nostalgic gathering of the familiar to reassure or shore up a sense of place and value.[11]

Graham asks of the viewers of his piece *The Meditation Space* to consider the transcendent qualities of the mundane or ordinary parts of the piece that make the whole.

Figure 3. Mark Graham, *The Meditation Space*
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/visuartsrese.40.1.0049?seq=1

Scott Herring, author of the journal article "Material Deviance:Theorizing Queer Objecthood" offers another perspective of material studies and collecting. In accordance with Graham, Herring explains that objects can be social tools, used to construct worlds of stability that uphold social norms and standards, and can be elevated as sacred placeholders of language and creation/restoration of the self. Concurrently, he asserts that material goods can also become destabilized, turning quickly towards a place of deviance and non-normativity— but these traits are not inherently "bad" simply because they are deemed so by the social structures we work in and around. Destabilized objects are those that are collected outside of the framework of societal order and design— objects that represent "the unpleasant prospects of personal, communal, and natural disorganization, epistemological crisis, unnatural acts, mental illness, even social apocalypse (an "undone" modern world)."[12]

Stefania Benini explores ideas of the ordinary object in the chapter "The Sense of the Sacred" of her book *The Sacred Flesh.* Benini is interested in humankind's fascination with the powers of attraction and repulsion that sacrality exhibits in our lives, and the ways that sacrality is manifested.[13] She further investigates Mircea Eliade's definition of sacred in his 1956 book *The Sacred and the Profane,* which explores elements of sacrality through "hierophanies," or profane objects, which then in turn transcend their ordinary planes of existence. From the book *Art in Boxes,* authors Alex Mogelon and Norman Laliberte broaden an argument toward artists' use of familiar or everyday items in their work:

> Familiarity serves to disarm our ordinary set of perceptions, and leaves us free to experience the artist's unusual treatment of materials. Cigar boxes, tables, desks, drawers, filing cabinets are not merely isolated, forcing us to see new value in them as Marcel Duchamp's Ready-mades did, but are manipulated or recreated to confront us with a brand new set of symbols.[14]

In an excerpt of an interview featured in the same book, artist David McManaway expands on the sacred qualities of what one could consider the hierophanies present in his works. Many of his pieces feature carefully arranged, familiar found objects in constructed wooden boxes. He explains, "'I seem to have an eye that is forever finding things. My source is simply going out through the front door...I bring the things I find into the studio and hang them on the wall or stand them on shelves...they become objects with extended meanings over and above their obvious intent.'"[15] McManaway's 1978 mixed-media sculpture "Cross," employs abundant religious imagery, both by the use of a cross-shaped container and by the plethora of its contents. These found objects within the cross vary widely, and each prompts the viewer to wonder about its origins, usage, and life before it was carefully organized and contained.[16] This altar-like piece successfully uses both of William Paden's modes of sacrality: it harkens the viewer to a religious environment and time, while still protecting each item's individual sacred integrity as a part of the whole.

Figure 4. David McManaway, *Cross*
https://library-artstor-org.proxy177.nclive.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000378305

4. Studio Practice and Work

I choose to draw belongings that surround me in my day to day movements— objects that I have arranged in places around my home that I pass by as I'm coming or going. These items each hold personal stories and experiences as well as histories of their own. By drawing them, this engages me in both a meditative, ritualistic practice and one that allows me to admire and observe them more fully. Referring to Catherine Murphy's style of tight rendering, my studio practice and focus is often based on intentionality with the subject matter and in mark-making. This tightness is balanced with the use of bright colors and more abstracted shape and line to invoke each object's significance and sacred qualities, as in the piece *Cream and Sugar Roosters.* David McManaway and others from the book *Art in Boxes* are inspirations in the way that objects are arranged in a container or space, and I further use my own arrangements in the pieces *Never Leave Home Without 'Em* and *Wards Off Evil I.*

Figure 5. Sydney Levitt, *Cream and Sugar Roosters (Detail)*

Figure 6. Sydney Levitt, *Never Leave Home Without 'Em*

Figure 7. Sydney Levitt, *Wards Off Evil I*

To pronounce the importance and presence of objects further, I have made individual items much larger in scale. These pieces, like *Wallet* and *Glass Bunny*, have wood backings so that the objects stand off of the wall and cast a shadow.

Figure 8. Sydney Levitt, Installation photo of *Wards Off Evil I, Cream and Sugar Roosters, Never Leave Home Without Em,* and *Wallet*

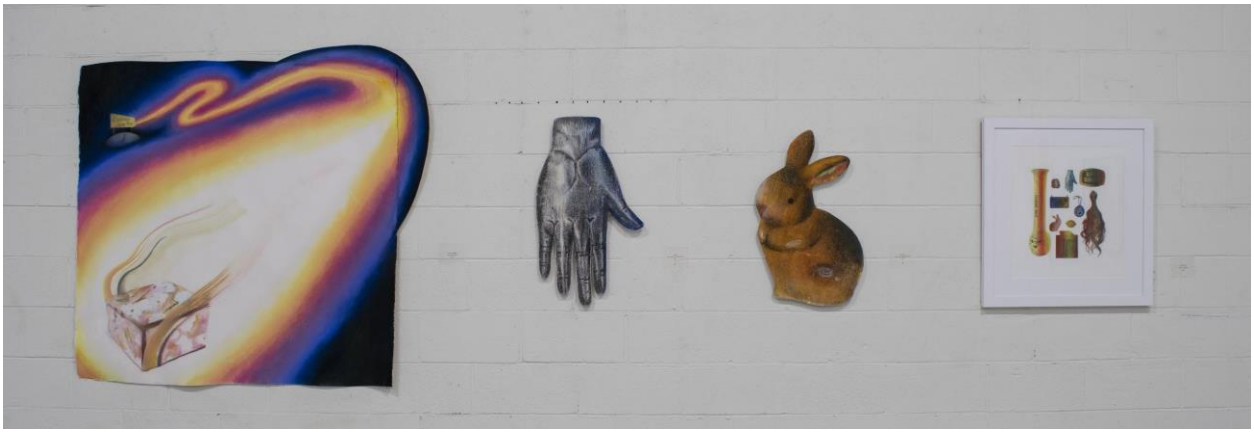

Figure 9. Sydney Levitt, Installation photo of *The Sewing Box Comet, Tin Hand, Glass Bunny,* and *Wards Off Evil II*

5. Conclusion

This body of work has allowed me a productive outlet to make sense of my experiences and learned behaviors. The more work I made about objects of significance, the more I understood where I come from, and I hope to use these pieces to reflect and process. Making sense of sacredness is both a personal and universal quest— what is truly important and special in our lives, and why do we value what we do? Although research regarding material studies and the sacred will always be investigated and contested, we can look to our own homes for an accessible point of entry into both.

6. Acknowledgements

The solo drawing exhibition *Objects of Significance: An Adoration of Home Through Personal Belongings* would not have been possible without the creative guidance of the incredible faculty of the Art and Art History Department at UNCA, as well as my thoughtful and supportive peers in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program. Many thanks to Tamie Beldue, Robert Dunning, and Suzanne Dittenber for holding space for my concept and research.

7. Endnotes

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