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January/February 2015

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# OPEN HOUSE

## A PORTRAIT OF COLLECTING

People collect everything! Really! Everything! Pokémon. Famous peoples' autographs. Bars of soap from all over the world. Historical peoples' hair. Toasters. Happy-Meal toys. Penises (honestly, a man in Iceland has a museum). Dalmation-spotted items. Coca-Cola cans (8,000 different cans).

The collections included in the "Open House: A Portrait of Collecting" at the Lamont Gallery on the Phillips Exeter Academy campus are fascinating. Director-curator Lauren O'Neal said that over 10 private collections are part of this exhibition that includes hand-carved sculptures, antique radios, African artifacts, prints from the gallery's archives, photos of "crowdspotting," paint-by-number pieces and a site-specific installation that engages multiple senses.

As a psychology undergrad, I must admit the psychological profile of collectors has always intrigued me. I, being more of a minimalist – well, we do have a dozen or so occasion-related wine glasses, and yes I have way too many t-shirts from road races I've participated in spanning three decades – fall into the "less is more" camp. But to understand why people collect is half the fun of enjoying what they're collecting.

### WHY DO THEY COLLECT THAT?

People usually collect for emotional value rather than monetary reasons. Collections may be associated with a meaningful aspect of their child-

hood. Or the connection to a period in history with which they feel an affinity. Maybe they're endeavoring to keep the past present – or ease insecurity and anxiety about losing a part of themselves. Some collect for the thrill of the hunt. Many collect for a multitude of reasons, but it's often the intrigue of the chase, the drive to have the "best" collection and the connection to others who do the same thing. Typically, people who collect are quite fastidious about cataloguing what they bought when, where and for how much.

I encountered all of those themes with this exhibition. I must say it was one of the more challenging exhibitions I've written about – and I've been writing about art and design for over 15 years. I struggled with the "art" piece. Yes, some objects were more obviously "art" than others, but some confronted my definition.

Melissa Mischke, Phillips Exeter's dean of students, a chemist and an avid collector of a variety of objects, collects with and apart from her husband. She has a substantial collection of push puppets – those little critters that have a round base you push upward and the animal or figure collapses into a limp heap. She and her husband, Erick, both

collect Anri figures – and have accumulated nearly a thousand of them. Also hand-carved of wood, the figurines represent characters from Italian



villages. Erick also collects antique lighting and fireplace tools.

"It's kind of an illness," Melissa said, smiling. "It's visceral. Like when you meet the love of your life." She admits she's driven. Her home in Raymond and her apartment on campus are overrun with shelves and tabletops strewn with the collections they've amassed.

Concert pianists and trans-disciplinary artisans, as well as instructors at Phillips Exeter, husband-wife team

Jeff Phillips, *Edna in Orange Life Vest* (from the *Lost & Found: The Search for Harry & Edna* collection), 2014, digital print from Kodachrome, 44" x 30".



Push Puppets, wood, paint, string, 2 1/2" x 1" x 1.5" (from the collection of Melissa & Erick Mischke).



**LAMONT GALLERY  
PHILLIPS EXETER  
ACADEMY**

**11 TAN LANE  
EXETER,  
NEW HAMPSHIRE**

**JANUARY 19  
THROUGH  
FEBRUARY 28**

Jung Mi Lee and Jon Sakata will create a multi-sensory, site-specific installation for the show. Sakata said that of the 21 senses (What? Where have I been? I'm still back at five...), this exhibition will touch upon many. Lee explains that the installation, which will be composed of Mylar and a flickering candle in a glass jar, will touch upon smell, sight, a sense of feeling

your body in space as you see yourself reflected in the Mylar, the memory of the experience and the concept of time associated with the remembrance. Sakata added that like music, this interactive exhibit will allow you to perceive, deconstruct and re-construct. Abstract. Avant Garde. Cool.

Another participant, Jeff Phillips, a photographer who focuses on a

series he calls Crowdspeaking, uses a wide-format camera to capture people where they gather in public spaces. Then he prints the photographs about six feet wide.

The collections in this show are so widely divergent that they deserve a look, if only to satisfy your curiosity about, "Why do they collect that?"

**| Linda Chestney**

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